

# Victory or Defeat?

Gencor, Gold Fields and Anglovaal did not increase their offer during their strike. In that sense it was not a victory. Because only 28 000 went strike, out of 70 000 expected, has been seen by many a failure. But it is clear that even at a mine such as Marievale Gold Mine, where the strike was well organised and supported, it did not prevent bosses from sacking the workers.

Also, the way the bosses and police acted at some mines prevented the strike from even starting.

But this has not broken the spirit of the workers. They remain strong union members. This is clear from their stories. They may have lost the wage battle this year at some of the mines, but has certainly not lost the war to improve overall conditions in the mining industry.

But even the bosses' press admit that the union's demands were reasonable and that the strike was conducted in a disciplined manner shows that Gencor, Anglovaal and Gold Fields want to destroy the union on their mines.

"The fact that employers of well over half the gold and coal miners working on chamber mines were ultimately able to come to terms with the union shows that the final demand of the NUM was far from outrageous."

## The workers' story

Beatrix Gold Mine is owned by Gencor. It is in the Orange Free State. There are about 7 000 mine-workers working there. The NUM started organising the mine at the beginning of this year. More than 4 000 workers joined. There is an interim shaft stewards' committee of 12 workers.

On August 24, the union decided to postpone the strike. But the mine bosses only gave the shaft stewards and union organiser, comrade Bohlale Citha, ten minutes to explain to the workers what was happening.

"At the meeting we told the workers that the negotiations with the Chamber were still going on, and that we will report back to them on Wednesday, August 28," said comrade Citha the Orange Free State organiser.

Although the shaft stewards tried to get a meeting to inform the members of the strike rules, the bosses were reluctant. So they decided to go ahead without the bosses' permission.

## Strike meeting

On Sunday, September 1, at about 1pm, the workers started to get together at the arena. More than 4 000 workers came to the meeting.

"We wanted to explain the strike rules to the members. But before we could say much the compound security arrived. Without any warning they threw teargas amongst the workers," said comrade John Mohoang, the vice-chairman of the shaft stewards' committee.

The workers did not fight back. Instead they replied with their songs which gave them courage. One of the songs said:

"Sisakusuka Siyinyonve  
Ayaxoka Amabhulu Athi  
Umhlabangowabo"  
(We'll just make a mess now  
The boers are telling lies, when they  
say the land is theirs  
We'll just make a mess now  
Because the land is ours.)

Many more security police arrived. Comrade Sekeo Matana explained what he saw:

"They came from all sides. They threw more teargas and they started to shoot with rubber bullets. The workers started to run. A few of the shaft stewards stayed behind to look after those who were injured. The security police started to hit the workers and everything went mad."

"The workers ran back to their rooms. They stayed there. Nobody

went to work that evening. At 4 pm, the hostel manager and the security drove around in vans shouting over the loudhailer that we should go to work. Very few took notice of them. I only saw about 20 workers go to the crush station (clocking station)," said Comrade Mohoang.

Another shaft steward explained what he saw:

"About 50 hippos with 'soldiers' arrived. They surrounded the hostels and went from room to room looking for shaft stewards. All the workers living with shaft stewards were taken from their rooms and told to go the training centre. 74 workers were taken and they came mainly from block 9 in hostel A. The next day four of the hippos were still patrolling the compound.

"At the training centre they did not want me to mix with the other workers. A railway bus came and we were taken to Welkom station."

But ten workers refused to board the bus. Instead they went to the union's regional office to get help.

When asked how the bosses broke the strike, he replied:

"Monday for the whole day nobody went to work. The wheel was not spinning. All the reports we got said the security went from room to room with dogs and guns and forced the workers underground. They could only break the strike with violence."

## Kloof Gold Mine

Strike action at Kloof Gold Mine started on August 25 when management refused to allow shaft stewards to report back to workers about the postponement of the strike until September 1.

The majority of the workers gathered at the hostel gates at 12 pm singing freedom songs. They marched around with the union's banners and chanted.



Delegates at the Special Annual Congress vote to strike



Hostel conditions at Marievale

## Police arrive

At 5 pm, about 80 members of the South African police arrived. They started baton-charging and sjambokking workers. One shaft steward explained what happened:

"They came into the compound and started hitting wildly. They got very angry when the workers refused to run."

The workers were, however, forced back inside the compound. Some of the workers and shaft stewards were trapped outside by the police. Ephraim Mosalemane, a shaft steward, was one.

"When they charged us they slowly got the majority of the workers into the compound, but 25 of us were left behind. We were arrested and taken to Westonaria police station where we were charged for demonstrating," he said.

The police tried to enter the compound with their trucks, but the workers stopped them.

## No negotiations with hirelings

"The security and police kept on wanting to know why we don't want to go back to work. We told them that we only negotiate with management and not their hirelings," said comrade Richard Madange, a shaft steward.

Repeated calls to return to work were made over the loudhailer, but they were ignored by the workers.

At 8.30 pm the police and security prepared their attack. They stormed the gates. Workers ran in all directions. A shaft steward recalls:

"They started shooting with rubber bullets. They swore at us and called us names. They rounded up some of the workers and at gun point forced some of them to go to work. They then moved into the hostel rooms. They started with Shangaan-speaking workers and forced them to go to work. They wanted to start a 'tribal' fight. Many hostel windows were broken during their raid of the rooms. Teargas clouds were hanging over the hostel area. It was like a war. But only one side was armed. The workers were not armed."

The four hour operation successfully smashed the strike.

"The police and mine security came to fetch me from my mine office," said comrade Mdange. "They told me that management wanted to see me. I was cross-questioned about the strike. I told the manager that we only wanted to tell the workers that the strike was off. Because they did not allow this, the workers thought the strike was still on."

A few other union activists were also questioned.

"I told the manager that over 100 workers were injured. I asked him how many police were injured. He said none. I asked him how does he explain this situation. He just looked at me and said nothing," said comrade Mdange.

The arrested members were bailed out by the union.

## September

The strike on September 1 started at 5pm. It lasted four hours before it was crushed. A well planned raid, sjambokking and escort of workers back to work, which was carried out with military precision, broke the strike.

By 10.30 pm, workers were back at work. But according to some workers, production was not normal at some of the stopes.

"Two of the workers were arrested by mine security. During the early hours of the strike, nobody went to work. But management was well prepared for this. They seemed to have learnt from earlier strikes, how to break the workers," said a worker.

"If we were allowed to conduct the strike without police interference, there will be support from all the workers," said comrade Mdange.

"The bosses think they can solve their labour disputes with the help of the police and mine security violence. They will soon see that the school of violence will not make the workers toe the line," he added.

Kloof workers remain strong, in

spite of the bosses' action. They are confident that the union will not be broken at the mine.

## Marievale Gold Mine

Marievale Gold Mine is owned by Gencor. It is in Nigel. It employs about 1 600 workers and the majority of them are union members. There is a shaft stewards' committee of 17.

The strike at Marievale was legal, well organised and disciplined. But this did not stop bosses from sacking the workers. They then bussed them out very quickly. The union was forced to take the matter to court.

## Hardline

This hardline attitude existed long before the strike. Meeting places were not given to the workers and the union office was closed by management. Workers were also threatened with arrest if they held any mass meetings.

"This made communication very difficult. We had to pass messages individually. But we were well prepared for the strike," said comrade Ferguson Nofotyela, a shaft steward.

## Strike starts...

The strike started on Sunday night at 8 pm. All the workers stayed in their rooms. The morning shift started at 4 am, but very few workers went to work.

"Only about 20 scabs went underground. They were not stopped. Many of them were escorted by the mine security. When the security went to the rooms to take workers to work, they refused," said a shaft steward.

On Monday morning the security were patrolling the hostels.

"40 Shangaan-speaking workers were forced to go to work. They were taken to the other side of the hostel. And, the manager threatened the workers that they would be dismissed," said a worker.

Nobody went to work during the day shift.

"The strike was very disciplined. On Tuesday, the morning shift did not go to work. The mine security went from room to room chasing workers out. The management had decided to fire us," said another shaft steward.

Hundreds of workers were bussed out. As they left, the security and management teased and mocked the workers.

"They kept on telling us to say 'Amandla! Where is the union now?', they asked. It was part of their strategy to demoralise us," said comrade Nofotyela.

## Strike suspended

The sacking of the workers forced the union to suspend the strike. Comrade Lulamile Khinyana explains what happened:

"Management paid off the workers and put them on the buses. The workers were escorted from their rooms to the pay desk and then taken to the bus at gun point. Because of this we told the rest of the workers to go back to work."

Although workers started to go back to work, the mine management continued to evict workers from hostels and bus them home.

## Interdict

On September 3, an agreement was reached in the Industrial Court, where Marievale accepted not to evict workers. But this did not happen.

The union, then brought an urgent application before the Supreme Court restraining Marievale from evicting workers. This was granted on September 4.

On September 5, another application was made requesting Marievale to return the workers back to the hostel from which they were bussed out.

On September 12, Marievale applied to the Supreme Court to evict the workers because they had broken their contracts.

On September 25, the workers were evicted from their hostels.

The union has applied to the Industrial Court seeking the reinstatement



Mine security searching a dismissed Deelkraal workers' bag

ment of the workers, because they were unfairly dismissed.

Even management admits that the strike was peaceful. But they chose to dismiss the workers, instead of negotiating a settlement.

But the workers remain optimistic that the union would start up again at the mine.

## Matla Coal Colliery

Matla Coal is owned by Gencor. It is in the Eastern Transvaal, 20 km from the town of Kinross. There are about 2 500 workers. Over 1 600 have joined the union.

"Unionisation of the coal miners started as an 'underground movement', before an access agreement was granted," said one of the first union members.

Recognition was gained in April this year. There are eight shaft stewards recognised.

Before the strike there were regular meetings to tell the workers about the progress of the negotiations.

## Management hostile

"But as the time for the strike grew nearer, management started to be very difficult. They refused the

halls," said comrade Gumede Mantashe, the branch chairman.

To counter this, the shaft stewards set up information tables to keep workers informed of negotiations and union decisions.

## Pamphlets

On Sunday, late evening, the shaft stewards distributed their strike pamphlets. Management, in turn, sent out their notices telling workers that they should go to work.

Comrade Patrick Nkarala, a shaft steward, was threatened with dismissal. The management backed down when the other shaft stewards insisted that they also be dismissed.

"Management changed their mind because with all the shaft stewards gone, a situation could develop which they could not control," said a worker.

Mine security were all over the mine. Comrade Mantashe explains what happened:

"The strike committee woke up at 3 am to see who was going to work the morning shift. We counted about 178 people."

On Monday 9 am, management sent around a notice saying that they

will not negotiate with the workers and that they should return to work.

At a meeting this was explained to the workers. But the mood was militant and the workers were confident. Instead, they replied with their song: "Asiy' emsebenzini Kulevek' izayo Sokhe Sobon' AmaBhula Azosenzani"

(We are not going to work next week We will see what the boers do)

According to the shaft stewards, management continued to change their ultimatum times.

"We told management what the workers were saying. This made them very angry. They said they will pay the workers for the day, but they must return to work. If they don't then it will go on their record. The final warning was then sent. It was clear that management was moving very fast. We were worried about division creeping in among the workers," said comrade Mantashe.

## Workers return

"At 6 pm we advised the workers to return to work. We heard of the mass dismissals at other mines. Because we have little protection, we thought it best to return," added Mantashe.



Deelkraal workers dismissed