

LOW PAY increases were the immediate cause of the strike by at least 70,000 miners in the first week of July.

The strikers were the biggest labour action to hit the mining industry since 1946, and with at least ten miners dead by the end of the week of striking, the most costly in human lives since the Carltonville shootings of 1973.

In most previous mine unrest management and the police have pointed to tribal animosity and agitators at the source of the trouble.

The latest unrest was no exception although these comments took a few days to emerge. The reason for this was that the July unrest strikes were clearly not tribal but were a response to low pay increases.

The General Mining Corporation (Gencor) and Gold Fields of South Africa (GfSA) were the hardest hit because their increases were the lowest.

For some years, the Chamber of Mines (CoM) has announced wage increases for black workers at the beginning of July.

The workers have come to expect increases on that date, and the preceding weeks are filled with anticipation and speculation.

On the wage issue their demands are twofold.

Firstly, black workers want increases to compensate them for inflation to keep their wages at the same real level.

Secondly, they want an increase to a new level of earnings their present wages are still a pittance.

The increase announced at the beginning of July was disappointing in both respects. By awarding an increase of about 12 per cent, the Chamber was effectively telling black mineworkers to accept a drop in their real incomes.

The increases brought the minimum rate for underground workers to R129 per month and for surface workers to R100 per month.

Establishing the exact details of what has been happening in the mining industry is difficult. Mine management are notoriously defensive about labour conditions and will often give out half-truths or downright lies to the media.

Since media access to striking mineworkers is almost impossible, the Press tend to end up reproducing management and police versions of the events.

The few published interviews with mineworkers have revealed a totally different perception of their problems and grievances compared to the view expressed by management.

Industrial relations on the mines mirror these management attitudes. They are (with small variations between mining houses) paternalistic, racist, tribalist and repressive. The recent comments of the PRO of GfSA, Mr Moller, although later retracted, only serve to highlight this. He described rioting miners as 'savages dancing around a fire'.

There are two basic factors explaining why the CoM increases were so low.

Firstly, the economic conditions in the mining industry have been poor.

Gold has been particularly hard hit with the dramatic slump in the gold price. The falling uranium price has also meant that this by-product is no longer always profitable.

The point is being reached where it will be most profitable to close some of the more marginal gold mines, management argues.

However, the gold mines are still making large profits for their owners, even if the super-profits of recent years are no longer being matched.

The seven gold mines of the GfSA group are an example.

In the year ended June 30th 1982, the total profit from these mines (after tax and the state's share of profit) amounted to more than R602 million. From the workers' point of view, profits are still more than

Underground workers have no say on surface



Miners have many grievances — but they are not allowed to organise

South Africa's black mineworkers have no powerful union to articulate their demands. Pay is low, working conditions are bad and accommodation is cramped and uncomfortable. When looking at last month's massive strikes and unrest on the mines, all these factors have to be taken into account.

sufficient to allow for dramatic wage increases.

During the boom period workers received only the most minimal benefits out of the super-profits then being made.

Now, they are expected to pay for the less favourable economic conditions by accepting cuts in their real wages.

The second reason for the low CoM increases relates to the conflicts it has been having with the white employees who come together in the Council of Mining Unions (CMU). During wage negotiations which began earlier this year the mining unions unsurprisingly rejected a derisory offer by the Chamber. (It is believed that some Chamber members wanted to offer no increase at all).

Further attempts at negotiating failed and talks were deadlocked when the Chamber refused to go above 9 per cent 'the maximum the mines could afford'. While the CMU was demanding 15 per cent.

The unions began preparing to call a legal strike. The CMU, and particularly Arrie Paulus' Mine Workers' Union (MWU), had not wanted to settle until they had seen the extent of black wage increases.

The waiting tactics of the CMU paid off. An eleven-hour pre-strike settlement on July 6, saw the unions and the Chamber agreeing to a compromise increase of 12 per cent.

In addition to this racism lies a

deep-seated management fear of workers, as a confidential internal memorandum of the GfSA group shows.

After much hesitation, the memorandum reveals, the group decided to introduce ethnically based liaison committees in late 1975. But even these useless bodies were an adventurous step for them.

Although 'in the final event' they were to be 'the main means of management contact with employees', they were not intended to supersede the excellent relationship that our Compound Managers have with employees.

'We have had few problems in our communications with our employees', concludes General Manager P W J van Rensburg, 'and we do not wish to upset this state of affairs by introducing 'advanced methods' to which they are not yet attuned, provided we keep abreast of events'.

In 'keeping abreast of events' since then, new ways of channelling grievances have been introduced on most mines.

These have often accompanied high-powered Industrial Relations advisers. And yet, almost without exception, these bodies have not voiced major worker grievances nor have they given management forewarning of impending unrest.

For all the 'sophisticated' developments, the strategy remains the same — to keep workers powerless

and divided, to keep labour cheap, and to use extreme force when the workers get out of hand. To a greater or lesser extent, this holds for all mining groups.

The net effect of this strategy has been to turn legitimate worker strikes into illegitimate, violent riots.

With no channels to express their rejection of the wage offer, and without the right to refuse to go underground, the workers are left with few options.

Reports reveal that police (SAP or mine police) appear to form a substantial part of management's industrial relations arsenal.

At West Driefontein workers gathered at the compound gate on the evening of July 1.

They wanted to see the compound manager. They were militant (not surprisingly since they'd just heard about their low increases) but they were not violent.

Nevertheless the response was to call in the mine security and the crowd was dispersed with teargas. Then the helmeted, green overalled security men, carrying transparent shields and with dogs moved through the compound.

It was simply 'a show of force', one manager unofficially admitted. Overhead flew a helicopter equipped with a siren. After this response the worker violence began as windows were smashed and a new concession store was totally destroyed.

The very structure of the compounds is built in expectation of unrest.

Most compounds have only one tightly-controlled entrance. The newer ones are often built so that sections can be sealed off if necessary. Well-equipped riot-control rooms are common features.

Western Deep Levels mine is not unique in having numbers painted on the various rooms within the hostel. This is to facilitate security action from the air.

At Venterspost, the single entrance to the compound is topped by a military-style tower with searchlights and camera equipment. Access to the tower is possible only from the outside and is used for controlling unrest.

Although the strikes unrest were a result of low pay increases, there were other contributing factors.

The whole position of black miners affects their every action and demand.

They live in a highly oppressive environment. Unlike a worker who leaves the factory for home at 5pm, the miner has no such freedom.

Working underground must surely be one of the most unpleasant jobs possible — and one of the lowest paid. Imagine descending daily down a shaft and walking kilometres along steadily narrowing passages until you climb or slide into a small cavity where you will work for the day alongside, perhaps, 8 other men.

Above you lies up to three kilometres of rock, continually threatening to close down upon the metre-high cavity you have opened and in which you are working.

You work for 8 hours. The darkness is illuminated only by the battery-powered light attached to your helmet. The work is unhealthy, heavy and dangerous — loss of life and limb is frequent. Every day brings the fear that the worker will not ascend alive.

But mostly the work is tiring and the sweat pours in temperatures and humidity levels that make Durban in February feel like an Arctic winter.

Then there is the long trek back to the surface and the inevitable delays in getting a lift up — the white miners are invariably hoisted up first.

On a good day the black miner can expect to be back for a shower and a meal ten hours after he went underground.

Not that 'home' is an appealing prospect. The compounds are huge, single-sex complexes. Some of the newer hostels are more spacious and have 16 men per room, but it is not uncommon to find 20 men crowded into tiny rooms (the case at strike-hit Venterspost).

Rooms and sometimes whole sections of the compound are divided ethnically. One miner explained that in the old days the division was into broad Nguni and Sotho groups. Recently the division has become stricter as Pedi speakers are separated from Zulu and Sotho speakers and so on.

In brief, the miners live in the hostels without their families, and without privacy. Sport is encouraged as an outlet to frustration.

The unrest on the mines and the forms which it took cannot, therefore, be divorced from the total working and living environment of black miners.

The pay strikes of July '82 were enormous in their magnitude. Clearly the miners need a strong union to articulate their demands and discipline coordinate their actions. But in an industry where 'troublemakers' are blacklisted by the labour recruiting offices (those fired are unlikely to find a job in mining again), to establish a genuine union would be a daunting task.

The recently formed Black Mine Workers Union (BMWU), groomed by the TUCSA-affiliated Boiler-makers Society and with a constitution rumoured to have been written by the Chamber of Mines, clearly does not fit the bill.