

During the first six months of this year, more than 100 000 miners have taken strike action over wages, bad and unsafe working conditions and the harassment of shaft stewards.

In many of these strikes, violent action by police and mine security has left many workers dead and hundreds injured.

At the head of these struggles has been the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) — South Africa's biggest and fastest growing union.

In September last year more than 70 000 miners were involved in the country's first legal mine strike when workers rejected the Chamber of Mines' wage offer.

Although, there were eleventh hour attempts at a settlement this did not prevent a strike. This strike left 10 dead and hundreds injured.

Since then the union has grown rapidly and enjoys the support of over 150 000 workers in the gold, coal, copper and diamond mines of



rights,' said a shaft steward from Vaal Reefs Gold Mine.

Although wages remains the most emotive issue amongst mineworkers, job reservation and health and safety are priorities on the union's agenda.

'In the mines, health and safety is a top priority. You have got to be alive or uninjured to earn wages. Therefore for us health and safety comes first,' said NUM's general secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa.

The NUM has also launched a determined campaign to rid the industry of job reservation which has protected white miners for decades. At its January conference the NUM resolved to tackle all aspects of mine apartheid — its low wages, bad working conditions, as well as racism and white baaskap.

Although, the Chamber of Mines has refused to allow the union to be party to negoti-

Working on the mines is no picnic!

South Africa.

This year the NUM has again rejected the Chamber's final wage offer of between 14 and 19 percent.

Instead the union has demanded a 22 percent increase across-the-board, paid leave of 21 days, a 75 percent leave allowance, and a six hour reduction in the working time per fortnight.

In addition the union has demanded participation in the negotiations for the removal of job reservation and May Day as a paid holiday. These were, however, rejected by the Chamber.

The mining houses have made huge profits this year. Gold Fields, for example, showed a record aggregate after tax of R229 million despite the lower earnings caused by the decreased gold production.

However, workers underground are earning as little as R166 per month and workers above ground are earning even less than this. According to NUM's Manoko Nchwe some of these workers are earning only R135 a month.

Forewarning of workers militancy and dissatisfaction was given in the first week of July, the traditional increase date for miners, when a number of strikes broke out at six mines belonging to the General Mining Union Corporation (Gencor) and at the Western Platinum mines in the Western Transvaal.

Over 27 000 mineworkers were involved in these strikes. Three workers were killed in the unrest as mine security and police fired tear gas, rubber bullets and birdshot at workers. Mine property was destroyed, a concession store burnt and 560 workers were returned to the homelands.

Working and living conditions are very bad on the mines. In many of the hostels more than 20 workers share a room where ventilation is often very poor and there is little privacy.

At a special conference held at Welkom recently, delegates representing 29 gold and coal mines decided to take strike action on August 25 if the Chamber of Mines does not come up with a 'realistic' wage offer. This could be the biggest strike ever to hit the mining industry involving some 400 000 mineworkers. The last major strike by black miners in 1946 involved only 70 000 workers. In this article, FOSATU Worker News takes a look at the background to the planned strike and at some of the other issues which have been taken up by the National Union of Mineworkers — South Africa's biggest and fastest growing union.

are migrants who come from various parts of Southern Africa to look for work.

Besides accommodation, food is also a major grievance. At Kloof Gold Mine a worker complained of the quality of the food, 'We often have to eat raw porridge, fish with scales and vegetables that are not properly cooked. The pap is not properly done, it is either stiff or watery.'

Because the food is bad, workers eat at the local shops and buy from concession stores. But they soon discovered that the conditions there were no better so workers decided to boycott the shops until conditions were improved.

Salae Salae, regional organiser of the NUM in Klerksdorp, explained the reasons for the boycotts, 'Workers are being sold old and stale food. The prices were very high and the workers were taxed on items which were exempted. Workers were also given body searches and abused by the shop owners. Instead of giving workers change, shop owners would give them sweets.'

Mineworkers have organised boycott committees and alternative sources of getting food.

At many of the Transvaal mines these boycotts have been successful. At Western Deep Levels Gold Mine work-

ers won a major victory when the first recognition agreement between the union and shop owners was signed.

This agreement has given mineworkers new consumer rights. New prices will now be discussed by both workers and shop owners. The opening and closing times of the shops will also be negotiated. Customers can return anything they are not satisfied with. And shop owners have promised to make sure that all food is fresh and well cooked.

It is clear that mineworkers are tired of being exploited and have decided to wage their battle not only at the workplace but outside it as well.

As one shaft steward put it, 'We are already earning low wages. The increases are also very small. So why should we let these shop owners rob us. We must organise and fight them also.'

A new confidence has emerged amongst miners. The growth of the NUM has mainly been responsible for this. Mineworkers have begun to see the power in organised unity.

'For years mineworkers were thought to be stupid and inferior. They never went to the nearby township wearing their wrist bands because they were too shy to show that they were miners. But this has all changed. We have shown what we can do and are fighting for our

actions on the removal of job reservation, the struggles on the ground by workers have not stopped.

More than 17 000 mineworkers were dismissed in April this year at Vaal Reefs Gold Mine and the Hartbeesfontein Gold Mine when they refused to do 'charging up' — a task reserved for white miners.

'We were forced to do the work of white miners although we never received the wages,' said a dismissed worker.

Although the union suffered a major set back with the dismissals it did not destroy the spirit of the workers. All it did was demonstrate management's determination to protect white miners and stop the growing power and presence of the NUM.

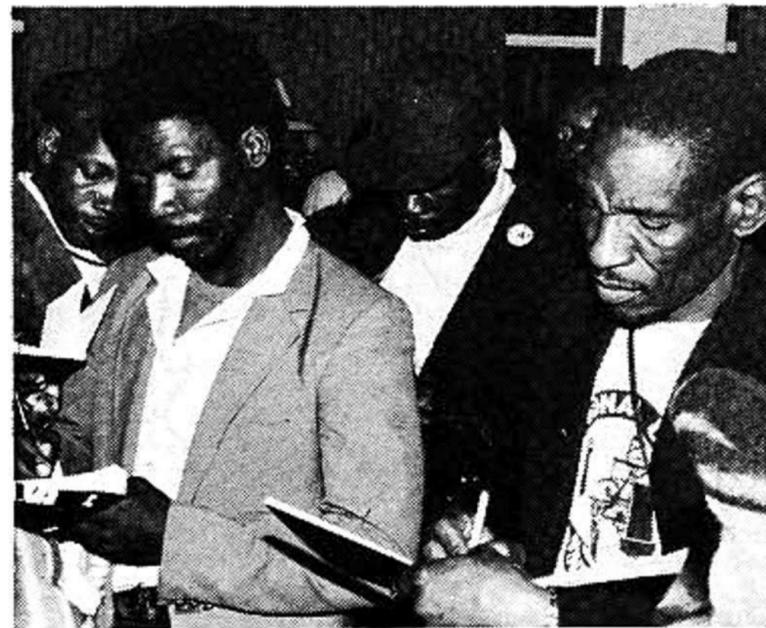
In the many safety disputes, the mining bosses have used union bashing and wide scale repression to get their way. Rietspruit coal miners and Vaal Reefs gold miners have the scars to prove it. They suffered badly at the hands of police and mine security in their attempts to get safer working conditions.

Forty-six thousand gold miners have died since the turn of the century. Six hundred die each year in occupational accidents in South Africa's gold mines. Clearly the blame for the present unsafe conditions must be laid at the door of the mining bosses.

The NUM has committed itself to fight for democratic safety rights at shaft floor level and at industry level.

The union has drawn up a Miners Bill of Rights. Its major demands are: the recognition of safety stewards, the right to refuse to work under conditions believed to be unsafe, the right to request a special inspection, the right to health and safety training, and the right to participate in the planning of mining operations.

'It is only when the Miners Bill of Rights is recognised in practice that we can confidently say we are on the way towards safer underground gold mining,' said Cyril Ramaphosa.



NUM delegates at the Welkom meeting