



## INTERVIEW:

### Cyril Ramaphosa

In December 1984 the South African Labour Bulletin interviewed Cyril Ramaphosa, general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers.

SALB: How did you get involved in trade unions?

Cyril Ramaphosa: I was working for a firm of attorneys, serving my articles. But I became disillusioned with law because it seemed to be a mercenary type of career, which I did not want to pursue. I always wanted to be involved in a career

where I could help people. Law, initially seemed the perfect choice, but as soon as I got involved in it, I realised apart from promoting capitalistic ideas for the individual, it did not serve to bring about a new order. Well, that's when I decided to get involved in trade unions.

SALB: Can you give a brief history of NUM?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We started in 1982, after CUSA passed a resolution to establish a union for mineworkers. We started organising on the gold mines, then went to the collieries and later to diamonds and copper mines. We are looking to 1985 as a year where asbestos mines and other base minerals will be tackled. Our membership is 90,000 [110,000 signed up by Jan 1985 - ed.] Our strongholds are in the Orange Free State, Western Transvaal, Carltonville area and Witbank, with Namaqualand growing rapidly.

SALB: How do you explain NUM's rapid growth?

- interview -

Cyril Ramaphosa: It has a lot to do with our recruiting strategies. Workers saw us as a union that fights for them. One of our strongest tactics is that we do not impose the union on workers. We do not look at a mine and say we must go and organise that mine. We wait for workers to approach us, then we get them to form themselves into an organising committee, so that, if they want the union they will have to work and organise themselves. And the union organisers will just be there as facilitators. Other unions look at plants and mines and just pick them up and organise, which means that unions are sometimes imposed on workers, who are not really unionised. We believe that workers should not only be organised but unionised as well. There is a big difference.

Organising workers means signing up workers to join the union. But they never really became unionised in terms of understanding what a union is all about, and what a union can achieve in the workplace, as well as in the immediate environment they live in. And, ultimately, the broader environment. So if workers have been unionised, you will see an impact not only in work related matters but also in the environment in which they live. [Hence NUM members have organised boycotts of concession stores and taxis in order to secure fair prices - ed.]

SALB: When organising do you concentrate on specific categories of workers?

Cyril Ramaphosa: No, initially we tried to do that and we realised that it was a mistake. There are, obviously, particularly in the mine situation, workers who are strategic, who are able to influence other workers. Initially we went for certain categories of workers (higher categories such as supervisors, team leaders). But now we are tending more and more to give more attention to the people right at the bottom because they don't have much to lose.

SALB: What is your relationship with other mine unions like BAMCWU? Is there any rivalry?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We are not hostile to them. We can only

be hostile if they try to get into mines where we have already organised. Their presence to us is not a threat because we know we are bigger, more effective and so we do not really regard them as competitors. At the moment we are dominant in mining. We have not come across any area where there is any form of rivalry. That may happen maybe in Natal where workers have asked us to come and where other unions have already started operating and where workers are not particularly pleased with what they have been doing.

SALB: Do you have any formal relations with other mine unions?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We have no formal relationship with the smaller unions. At our Congress we passed a resolution that there should be one union in one industry. So that's the goal we still want to pursue. We are open to unity talks with other mine workers.

SALB: Could you explain how NUM is structured?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We have shaft-committees composed of shaft-stewards, at shaft level. And then you get the branch which consists of all shaft steward committees on the mine. A branch is an individual mine. Several branches form a region. At present we have eight regions across the country. Then we have the National Congress which has 50 delegates from every region.

SALB: There have been rumours that NUM is not satisfied with practices in CUSA and walked out of the annual conference. Could you explain what the issues are?

Cyril Ramaphosa: It is very difficult to say right now because the problems have not yet been resolved. There are problems, some of the ones which came out in the newspaper were basically true and one can just go along these lines [these reports spoke of differences over the unity talks and on questions of worker control and organisation - ed.] We want to leave it there and see how the problems are resolved internally first. If it isn't resolved internally,

- interview -

obviously we will have to go more public.

SALB: What has been NUM's role in uniting Southern African mineworkers?

Cyril Ramaphosa: It started about a year ago when we got to meet the Zambian, Zimbabwean miners and the whole idea was brought up by ourselves - that we need to have some form of unity among Southern African miners' unions. Everybody took it up very seriously and was very excited about it. Then we had a further meeting where it was discussed and there is now another meeting in January to discuss certain principles further. The final idea might be to set up an office in Southern Africa - or as some unity or co-ordinating committee that will be formed to co-ordinate activities between unions in the Southern African countries and we might even look at countries like Angola where there are miners, as well as Mozambique. We initiated the idea and would like to believe that we are the leading force behind the concept.

SALB: Were any of the other mine unions involved in the discussions?

Cyril Ramaphosa: BAMCWU, the Tunnel Workers Union and other local union were not invited. Maybe they will be included later on because at that stage we did not even have a working relationship with them. It was a thing that we went out to do on our own. There might even be problems in that the outside unions would prefer to recognise one union in one country as they only have one union in their industries. Zambia has only one, Zimbabwe has one, Botswana has one and so forth. So, if we are going to deal with a number of unions there is going to be a problem.

Now the other important thing is in all this - the most important thing will be exchanging of information and ideas with regard to multinational corporations. None of the other unions have yet won a recognition agreement. One would ask oneself, do they have a legitimate status at discussions such as these because they don't negotiate with the bosses. Some of them have been around for three years

and there is no agreement that they can show. One of the problems we have with them is that they claim to be fighting for workers' rights but how do you fight for workers' rights when you don't negotiate for those workers you represent. We would have been a lot happier if some of them had agreements and we were jointly able to put the Chamber under pressure.

SALB: Is it true that NUM was initially favoured by the Chamber of Mines? Could you explain the history of this?

Cyril Ramaphosa: Initially when we started recruiting we thought we would not go and ask for access. We had not yet realised the problems inherent in organising miners. You do not just go out and recruit without access. It is just virtually impossible. So we had to go to the Chamber, the bosses. They gave us offices, recruiting facilities - the works. We took them. There was no other way we could have got started. That to many people was a new development in the country - where a union got access and such good treatment. It just doesn't sound right. We agree. But being the mining industry there was nothing else we could have done. The rest is an open record. Everyone has been able to see how the honeymoon came to an end and how the Chamber tried time and time again to put barriers in our way and was more and more resistant. They are clamping down on us. Access is being restricted. There is no longer a very easy relationship and it had to come to that.

The other unions thought they would do exactly what we did at the beginning. They thought we would not get access and they started pointing fingers at us which was good enough for them to do but later they realised they also needed access. So they also went for access, and the Chamber wanted to see their constitutions, and many unions were forced to amend their constitutions, to suit the Chamber.

SALB: Could you explain management's attitude at the early stages of NUM's organising?

Cyril Ramaphosa: It is important to note that while management gave offices there was a lot of resistance - they dis-

- interview -

suaded workers from joining our union. One of the reasons why workers started joining our union in large numbers is the resistance they saw from management. Management helped us a hell of a lot, unconsciously, because as soon as they gave us facilities and so forth, they hoped we would not succeed in organising these workers and they started doing a number of things to dissuade workers from joining the union. Now mine workers are not fools because - if management had not resisted the union, if they made everything easy workers would have been suspicious. But management then resisted the union which was a very stupid thing on their part. Only when they did this the workers saw this was a union that they should belong to. In one particular mine they had a number of doubts about our union but as soon as I was arrested they said this is the union we want to join. Its leader has been arrested. If the union was a management creation why would he have been arrested?

SALB: Could you talk briefly about the recent strike?

Cyril Ramaphosa: In events that led up to the strike management played a similar part. Management was resistant. They were trying to stop workers from going on strike. They went out of their way to say workers who went on strike at the call of the union would face dismissal and so on - which was a bloody stupid thing to do. Because all they did was to publicise to everybody that on the 17th there would be a strike. Everybody immediately realised that this was a union we should really belong to and membership during and just before the strike really zoomed. Workers saw that management was against it and everything that management is against, to workers, is something that they feel would be of benefit to them.

SALB: According to reports many workers who were not organised by NUM also supported the strike. How do you view this and how do you assess the effects of the strike?

Cyril Ramaphosa: It was significant, very much so. It has affected industrial relations on the mines. Before the strike management still had great doubts about a number of things like our membership strength, the level of support

that the NUM had amongst those workers who had not joined the union. Management still believed that we were just a pushover type of union. But after the strike a balance of power had been introduced. But it is not at equilibrium stage yet.

SALB: Were there any divisions among the employers in the way they handled the strike?

Cyril Ramaphosa: There were divisions. Companies like Goldfields were prepared to fire workers immediately they went on strike and Anglo American and Rand Mines were prepared to sit the strike out and see how far it would go. Some companies were more prepared to settle than others. We can exploit these divisions - and did do so successfully and will do so in the future.

SALB: What is NUM's position on the British miners' strike?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We support the British miners in their struggle and this has been discussed in our regional conferences. We have had a British mineworker visiting us. He went around meeting workers, addressing our regional conferences and so forth. We are squarely behind the British miners.

SALB: Can we turn to the recent stay-away where the mineworkers were visibly absent. Could you tell us why?

Cyril Ramaphosa: The stay-away was discussed extensively. But we had a number of problems. Firstly, we had just come out of a major strike, and we thought it would be too taxing to pull out our members again. Secondly, we believe for an event such as that to be effective, in the mining industry, all the mines must be brought to a standstill. Some of the mines are newly organised and they are in the process of being unionised. It was therefore premature for us to get involved in the stay-away. And, thirdly, it takes us 3 - 4 weeks to mobilise. Mineworkers are aware and some of them actually wanted to go out. But union leadership at branch and regional level thought that it was premature.

- interview -

But generally there was support for what took place.

SALB: What is your relationship with white mine unions?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We have contacts with the Federated Mining Union which is the Boilermakers Society's sister union. But otherwise we have no relation to the other white mine unions.

SALB: What is NUM's position on the national political struggle?

Cyrril Ramaphosa: We have chosen not to be closely allied to any organisation with political objectives. But do support any actions we feel warrants support from our membership. But we want to do it as an independent agent, if we have to support any organisation, but not as part of them. Our priority is to extend our organisation and build trade union unity, and take up issues that affect us as mineworkers, as well as other political issues.

SALB: What are NUM's views on worker unity?

Cyril Ramaphosa: We support worker unity and at our Special Congress, we passed a resolution that the moves for worker unity should be hastened. We believe that when workers are united they can achieve more than when they are not united. That is why we support the new federation.

SALB: What are your priorities for 1985?

Cyril Ramaphosa: On an organisational level, we want to consolidate our position and organise more workers. By next year's negotiations we will have 200,000 members.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### POSTSCRIPT

The Third National Congress of the NUM was held on 19 Jan at Thabong, Welkom. Despite severe criticism of CUSA over ICFTU links, worker control, and differences over the unit



talks - no decision was taken to leave the Council.

The Congress was attended by 350 delegates and 3000 members. Significant was the high proportion of young workers present and the large contingent of "coloured" workers who had travelled up from Namaqualand. Another interesting feature of the Congress was the Graduation Ceremony for shop stewards who had completed NUM's education course.

The NUM declared war on job reservation in the mining industry - the first bastion of white working class racism - giving notice that mining apartheid would be placed firmly on the bargaining table alongside wages.

The Congress resolved to register the union in terms of the Labour Relations Act in order to gain automatic stop-order facilities and to maximise the growth of NUM's paid-up membership. Registration also makes it possible for NUM to participate in any future industrial council which might be established for the industry.

The NUM also resolved to organise mineworkers in Namibia and to apply for registration there if necessary. In common with all 24 unions involved in the unity talks, NUM resolved to take industrial action if Sasol failed to reinstate all workers who were fired after last year's stay-away. The Congress noted with "disgust" Sasol's "cruel and cowardly harassment" of the 6,000 dismissed workers.

Cyril Ramaphosa warned that the union would be taking a tough stance in negotiations with the Chamber of Mines this year. He warned that if the Chamber did not negotiate in good faith as from the first meeting in 1985, workers would take action on July 1. Ramaphosa added that a lot of workers were asking themselves if it was worth while going on a legal strike, as they did in September last year, if workers were "still going to be shot down".

(SALB Correspondent January 1985)