

DOCUMENT: The Miners' Bill of Rights

The struggle for safety launched by the National Union of Mineworkers revolves around the following rights:

1. The right to recognition of Safety Stewards for Safety and Health purposes;
2. The right to protection from victimisation for exercising statutory rights;
3. The right to exercise rights on behalf of other's Safety and Health;
4. The right to refuse to work under conditions or practices believed to be unsafe, unhealthy or illegal;
5. The right to report suspected violations or dangers to the inspectorate;
6. The right to request a special inspection of suspected violations and imminent dangers;
7. The right to accompany inspectors during inspection without loss of pay;
8. The right to be informed and right of access to information;
9. The right to adequate Health and Safety training;
10. The right to participate in the development of mining operations plans.
11. The right to attend inquiries and to represent the interests of injured or deceased miners.
12. The right to conclude Safety Agreements with Mine Management.

Towards Safer Underground Gold Mining

In the mines, health and safety is the top priority...
You've got to be alive or uninjured to earn the wages.
Therefore to us, health and safety comes first.

Cyril Ramaphosa

Forty-six thousand gold miners have died in accidents since the turn of the century. Six hundred workers die each year in occupational accidents in South African gold mines. Concern about safety in the gold mines led the National Union of Mineworkers to commission an in-depth report by Jean Leger, a member of the Technical Advice Group and a research engineer attached to the Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand.



The report, entitled "Towards Safer Underground Gold Mining", unlike other studies, focuses on the way work is organised and the adequacy of safety precautions under the prevailing conditions of work. The trend in past studies was to assume that accidents occur as a result of errors on the part of the individual or because of uncontrollable

events. The vast majority of the fatalities result from the stoping operations, the key underground production activity. Teams of 8 to 12 black workers under direct supervision of the black "team leader" perform this production in the stopes. The team leaders in turn are supervised by the white miner. The white miner is charged with responsibility for safety, which is detailed in the Mines and Works Act and Regulations of 1956.

Ninety experienced black underground workers were interviewed. The study found that the actual practice in underground mining deviated grossly from that envisaged by the Mines and Works Act. In fact the role of the white miner has been reduced to exerting supervisory control underground through coercive measures. The situation is further compounded by the

- mine safety -

fact that the white miner is hardly involved in the actual productive functions of the mine, but is still granted huge production bonuses - which produces a conflict since he is also charged with responsibility for safety.

However, the conclusion that the National Union of Mineworkers draws from this report is that the blame for the present unsafe conditions in underground gold mining should be laid at the door of the mining houses. These mining houses have directly and intentionally shaped the productive relations that prevail today.

On 25 June the NUM delivered a letter to the Government Mining Engineer requesting him to hold an official inquiry in terms of the Mines of Works Act into:

1. breaches of the Mines and Works Act and Regulations;
2. breaches of the exemptions the mines have been granted in terms of the Act;
3. the manner in which inspections are conducted by the inspectorate.

The National Union of Mineworkers has taken this unprecedented step to request an inquiry because of the overwhelming evidence we have gathered from our members and some people in high positions in the mining industry, which evidence proves that violations of Mines and Works Act Regulations are the order of the day on virtually every mine.

The National Union of Mineworkers have resolved that they will fight for democratic safety rights at shaft floor level and industry level. 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.

(from NUM press release, 25.6.85)