

Sisulu on mine life

Comrade Sisulu, how did you become involved in the mining industry?

When I left school I was still too young to be accepted on the mines. I went to work at some dairy farms in Germiston. After some time I went to the mines. I started off working on the surface and did not go underground yet.

I had a relative at Rosedee Mine near Germiston who arranged work for me. I was sixteen or seventeen. At the beginning of 1930 I began working underground on the same mine.

Were you employed on a contract basis?

I was on a contract of 124 days, something like four months. At that time there were two types of contract on the mines. One was a contract of six or nine months if you were recruited through TEBA. The other type of contract depended on whether you came to the mines on your own money. This was my case. However, in order to go underground you took a contract.

Where did you live?

We lived in a compound. One of the main problems, in fact a constant complaint, was about the type of food.

The number of people in each compound at Rosedee and Glendee was something between 2000 and 2500. The rooms were divided according to tribes, or areas that you came from like Engcobo, Butterworth or areas of Shangaan speaking people, or Northern Sotho near Pieterburg. That is how they were divided.

How were the compounds run?

The administration was also completely divided along tribal lines. There would be clerks and indunas in charge of the Shangaan group. Every group would have somebody in charge of a particular section.

Then there was the induna, they all had to pay allegiance to the induna, he was the key man - bribing for jobs or anything. Then there was the manager for the compound, and an underground manager.

There were underground inspectors sometimes called fokis, responsible for checking the mine and checking the work. Then shift bosses and bass boys. The bass boy was a big man over all the others.

What do you think was the purpose of division

into different tribes and groups?

They did not distinguish between the tribes when you went underground, but only where you lived. It is the same mentality of the rulers in South Africa today. It was considered the way of things.

A Sotho must be with others, a Shangaan must be with others otherwise they will fight. Fundamentally, the idea is to divide the people. You know, stick to the tribal structure or the primitive method so that mineworkers will be manageable. In the end the bosses benefit from this system of keeping workers divided.

Could you describe working conditions underground at the time?

When you go deep underground, there are various stations, - first station, second station, third. Once you are at your station you drive and push the engolovane (cocoa pans). We would fill these trollies with stones from above. Then they would be tipped, and the rock lifted above ground by a lift. We used to call it a cage. Every station would have this type of a thing.

We used to go underground at about 2.30 or 3 o'clock.

In each section there was an area with a white man there, he had a piccannin who was always with him. They both had lamps.

They had the big jackboot drilling machines for opening up the holes for the dynamite.

What did you do?

I was a piccannin holding the jumper (spanner). We wore sacks because water came, and we got all wet. I worked in a development area, a tunnel.

How were working relationships?

Underground the boss boy would take his lamp off and shine it in our eyes. He would shout "lisher" to make us work harder. Work was hard: you could not stand up, you are wet, you are sweating.

Half an hour before they knocked off, the piccannin and the white man would go and ignite the dynamite. The rest would go up in the lift.

Did you get time to have lunch underground?

You don't get time. You carry phuzza mandla. In any event, you

Walter Sisulu (77) former ANC Secretary General, and the most senior of the recently released ANC leaders, granted a rare interview to NUM NEWS at his home in Soweto. A former mineworker himself, Comrade Sisulu spoke on conditions in the 1920s, his views on the future of the mining industry and the role of mineworkers in the struggle.

are told there is no time. I don't remember ever getting time off for lunch. But the driving force was the bass boy.

How did you manage to raise your grievances about wages and living conditions?

I remember on one occasion we called a meeting on a Saturday. The meeting was to discuss grievances. The most important item was food which was of very poor quality.

Do you still remember what was the food?

Yes, it was nyola. It was porridge and meat, sometimes mixed with onions. Then you had ntshayintshayi.

Then people made their own mageu, they mixed it in their rooms, proper mageu. That was the type of food that we ate. Now this mageu was really food, not anything else. Everybody was only interested in eating mageu.

What happened at the meeting?

In that meeting about food, I saw very old people. I saw orators among the red-blanketed men. They were putting forward their demands and stating what lines of action to take. An ultimatum was sent to the manager: if you do not intervene and improve this food situation, on Monday we shall march to the Mzilikazi (TEBA depot) in Johannesburg from Germiston. You can imagine how powerful the march would have been.

What was the response of mine management?

He realised that there was a lot of determination on the part of the workers. His indunas and police had informed them. He gave an undertaking that as from Monday there would be a complete change. Through united action at the meeting and by listening to each other we won



WALTER SISULU (left) with JB MARKS, president of the African Mine Workers Union in the 1950s

certain changes.

What were some of the other problems faced by workers?

Health and safety. Another incident happened when the shaft hanging fell. I took two or three chaps and went to the compound manager early in the morning and said we were refusing to go down in that situation. We put a very powerful case that we were not going down in that situation where four or five people had been killed in that shaft. And fortunately he accepted our presentation. We never went down from that day. We were transferred to the surface.

What were wages like?

We were getting two pounds

per month underground. We were still getting paid gold in those days, not paper.

During your times on the mines were you ever subject to racism? How did this influence your future political development?

In those days black workers were subjected to extreme cases of racism to the extent where they were regarded as part of the tools used by white miners. An example would be the piccannin system. This attitude, and working conditions on the mines and in the compounds fashioned my whole attitude against injustice and oppression.

When I left the mining industry

I already had a definite attitude against racism. I found it easy to get involved in the ANC Youth League where my political understanding matured. It was in this way one can say my attitude against apartheid was shaped by conditions on the mines.

How do you view the role of the mining industry in a post apartheid South Africa?

Well, the South African economy depends really on gold. And if we talk about monopolies, we talk about the mines. I have no precise formulation of what should be done but I am clear in my mind that gold mines and the founding industry will have to undergo radical changes in a post-apartheid period. This applies to conditions under which people live as well as in regard to wages.

What is the position of the ANC on this question?

At the moment the ANC specifically states its policy is a mixed economy. It seems to me the nearest thing will be nationalisation of monopoly industries. But in the present modern world you will have to examine the precise value and importance of each method of production. All I can say is that a radical change will be necessary to put things right.

A question that is very topical in the mining industry today is whether workers should take shares (ESOPs)?

The primary purpose is to make workers feel they are in fact owners. Now, I do not think that they are owners of mines at all. These shares are insignificant. But it seems as if they are giving these shares out free. It is a way of, in the course of time, getting workers to put their individual interests first.

There have got to be very well-organised trade unions. And workers are well-advised to join the trade union and to be guided by the trade union against the bosses.

The mining bosses have been very sensitive on the question of sanctions. Apparently they feel it will lead to a loss of jobs with the consequent suffering of many people, particularly blacks.

The campaign of sanctions and boycotts are intended to hit the economy, and we believe that although the people may be affected at the beginning that they will ultimately make the adjustment.

We are effective because we hit hard. That is why the bosses are worried about sanctions, for no other reason. The bosses do not care about the people. They know sanctions will be effective against the whole system of the government, against the employers. In a situation where you are fighting people suffer. But we are concerned, we do not want our people to have to suffer even one inch.

If it were possible to get our freedom without suffering, we would do it that way. Unfortunately, there is no alternative.

Do the gold mines benefit the apartheid system?

Apartheid was introduced and is now sustained by the gold mines. The people from the countryside were forced to come to the gold mines to pay taxes. The whole structure of the country is carried by capital, particularly the mining industry.

How do you relate the current Defiance Campaign to that of 1952?

Conditions are not so completely different. I have not studied the present Defiance Campaign, but the Defiance Campaign of 1952 in which we were engaged was a systematic campaign. We did not just defy everything. It was planned properly, and had a beginning, a middle course and then developing into mass action.

That is how it was planned. It was disciplined. Every volunteer had rules, and he knew he had to behave in a particular way and those methods are applicable today. Unless you apply them you are not going to make a success.

Mineworkers are the backbone of the working class but at the same time they are often isolated from community and mass democratic struggles because of factors such as the closed hostel system.

Mineworkers and other workers realise that there is a link between their low wages and local community issues and the migrant labour system. The attack on the migrant labour system should not be seen as the problem facing mineworkers only. It should be seen as an issue facing the entire mass democratic movement.

The apartheid state is not solely responsible for migrant labour - it is also the mineowners who benefit. The dismantling of the migrant labour system will enable mineworkers to be integrated into the broader community of the oppressed.



A campaign by the MDM should be launched to force the mineowners and the state to dismantle this system and enable mineworkers to become settled and lead normal family lives.

As a former mineworker yourself, do you have a special message for mineworkers in 1990?

Mineworkers have a crucial role to play in the liberation struggle. They have a proud history of struggle characterised by daring and courageous deeds in the battles they have been waging in the mines. They were amongst the first to adopt the Freedom Charter. Through their union, the NUM, they have consolidated their position to an extent where mine bosses can no longer treat them as they wish. The mining industry, as the backbone of the apartheid state has been challenged by united mineworkers under the NUM.

It is therefore important that mineworkers intensify their campaigns to consolidate the gains already made. They should take conscious steps in making preparations for strengthening the NUM and thus prepare themselves for the struggles that lie ahead.

SISULU: 'Mineworkers have a crucial role to play in the liberation struggle'