

THE KINROSS DISASTER

15 000 voices - all saying: Safety first



"SAFETY before profits" was the rallying cry at Secunda's Embalehle Stadium -- and it's a cry that's going to be carried kilometres underground by South African miners.

Thousands of them converged on the stadium to pay tribute to their fallen comrades, who died in the Kinross mine disaster on September 16.

Adorned in NUM stickers with the slogan "Safety First", they made clear how they feel about safety conditions on South Africa's mines.

Posters carried by fellow Kinross miners echoed the rallying cry. "Safety is our first priority" read one. Another said: "We want decent working conditions underground". Yet another said: "46 000 workers have died underground".

Speakers at the memorial didn't mince their words, either.

* NUM president Comrade James Motlatsi asked miners: "Are you prepared to continue filling graves with bodies?"

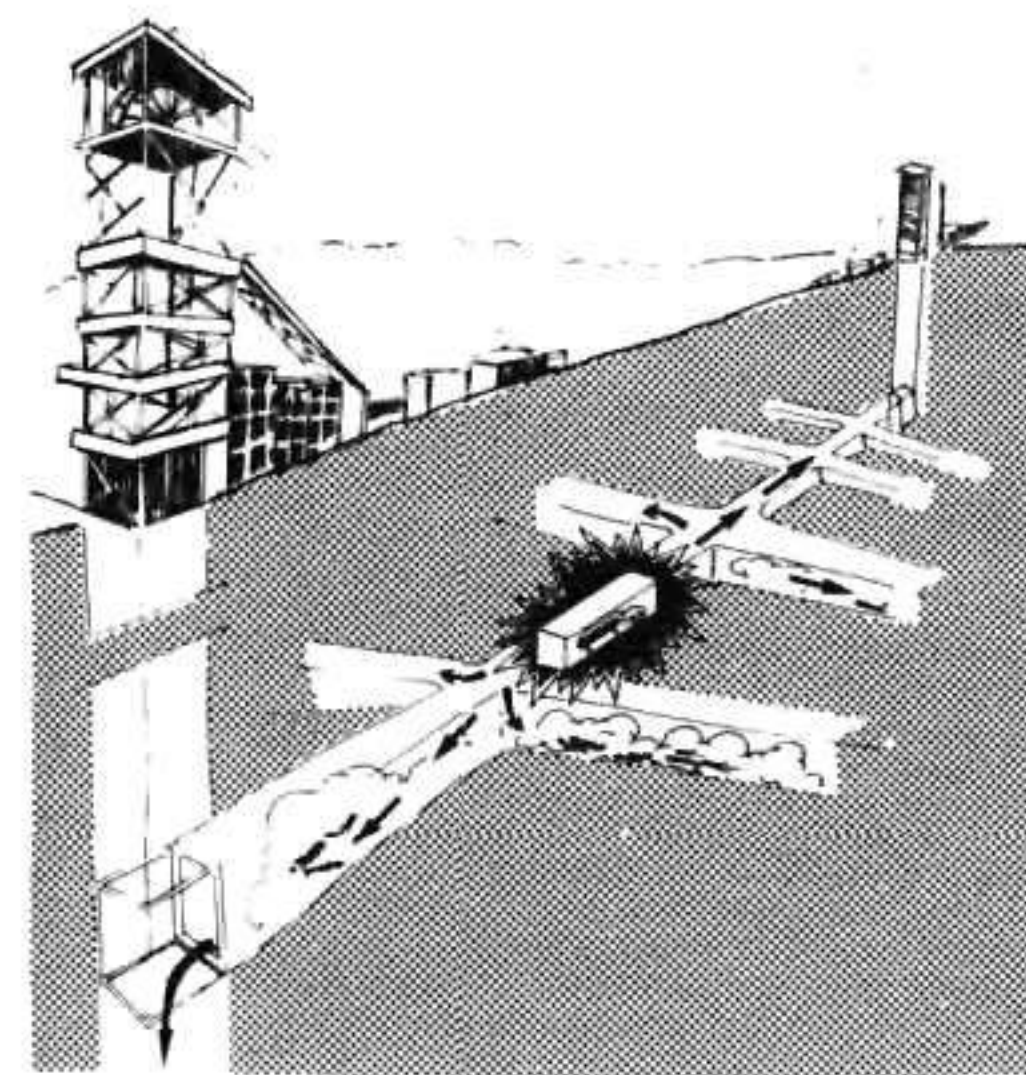
"Are you prepared to go underground to dig out the bullets they are going to shoot us with?"

Cde Motlatsi also said: "The mine bosses have shown a disregard for the lives of black miners. They have even refused to let some of our colleagues come here today to join us."

"But we will close the mines from Namaqualand to Messina on October 1 to show how we feel about mine safety."

* Cosatu general secretary Comrade Jay Naidoo said: "The mine bosses' profits have meant starvation wages

Fists and coffin held high, Cosatu and NUM members carry a coffin into the memorial service at Cosatu house for the Kinross dead.



The deadly foam

POLYURETHANE foam is so dangerous that when it burns it can literally kill a man twice in a few seconds.

Mineowners around the world have known this for 20 years. That's why polyurethane foam is banned in British and American mines.

South African mineowners also know this -- but that apparently doesn't stop them using the foam in their mines.

Burning polyurethane has been responsible for that it makes a gas called carbon monoxide, underground deaths on at least two earlier occasions -- at Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, a Gencor mine, in 1978 and at Vaal Reefs Gold Mine in 1983.

By all accounts the foam

which caught fire at Kinross and which led to 177 deaths was also polyurethane.

Dr Herbert Eisner, a world expert who has studied mine fires and explosions for more than 40 years, came to South Africa to help NUM investigate the fire at Kinross.

He said the main danger with polyurethane foam is Eisner said 0,1% of carbon monoxide in the air can kill. And tests in England have shown that a fire in a mine that uses the foam can fill 7% of the air with the deadly gas -- enough to kill a man in one breath.

The foam also makes other deadly gases like hydrogen cyanide, which can also kill people -- but not as quickly as carbon monoxide.

That's why we say the foam kills twice -- once with carbon monoxide and again with hydrogen cyanide.

If the foam at Kinross was polyurethane, why did Gencor allow it?

After the fire, Gencor and the Chamber of Mines first said they did not know of the dangers of polyurethane.

Then the Chamber was told they could walk into the public library in Johannesburg and pick up a book that tells of the dangers of the foam.

Dr Eisner says the dangers of polyurethane are so well known that "a safety officer for a mine who does not know the hazards of the foam does not know his job."

The Chamber of Mines admitted it knew how

THE full story of what happened underground at Kinross will only be known when the inquiry is held.

In the meantime, many messages have been received from all over the world on the Kinross disaster. The Miners' International Federation and all its affiliates sent messages of support to the NUM and the

families of the deceased. Other organisations which sent messages include: The British National Union of Mineworkers; Swedish Confederation of Labour (LO) United Mine-workers of America; the Australian Prime Minister; the Swedish Prime Minister; and the Trade Union Congress of Britain (TUC).