

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

**JB
Marks**

The giant who led the first miners' strike

TWO years ago an old lady from Eldorado Park near Johannesburg stood in the snow and ice covering the ground at Heroes' Acre in Moscow.

The woman was Mrs Gladys Marks, and she had come to see the grave of a man she had not seen for 20 years -- her husband, JB Marks, the man who had led the African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU) during the strike of 1946.

A few weeks ago, NUM visited Mrs Marks in Eldorado Park and she told us about JB and his life of struggle against apartheid.

JB was born in Ventersdorp in the Western Transvaal in 1903. His father was a worker on the railways and his mother was a nursing sister.

He studied to be a teacher at Kilnerton Training College -- and it was there that he organised his first strike. The food was bad at the school and students were treated very badly, so JB and his friends told the students not to go to classes until things got better.

Things never did get better -- but JB had his first taste of the struggle.

Soon after he finished studying, JB joined the Communist Party. At the time -- 1927 -- the Party was not banned.

He also got a job as a teacher at Vrededorft in the Orange Free State, where he taught the children of black miners.

That's where he first got to know miners' problems -- and also met the woman who became his wife.

Soon after they got married, JB left home. The

Communist Party sent him to study at the Lenin School in Moscow with other leaders like Albert Nzula and Moses Kotane.

But JB came back some time later -- and joined the ANC.

In the late 1930s he was elected to a committee to help revive the ANC, which had become weak. He remained a member of the Communist Party and helped organise many of the unions that joined CNETU.

In 1941 the ANC decided to establish a union for mineworkers and Marks was elected president because of his determination to fight for workers' rights. He was also elected chairman of CNETU.

JB was arrested during the great strike of 1946 but released on bail. When the AMWU was crushed after the strike, he continued to work for the ANC and the Communist Party.

In 1950 he became a member of the CP Central Committee and President of the ANC's Transvaal branch.

He was banned in 1952 but continued to work for both organisations.

In 1963, soon after the ANC was banned, JB left the country with Joe Slovo.

His wife and family never saw him again. On August 1, 1973 -- after 10 years of hard work in exile -- he died from a disease he got while living in Tanzania.

And now he lies buried under the snow many thousands of miles from home, in a graveyard with many other people from all over the world who gave their lives to the fight for freedom.



FIVE BRAVE

ONE of the greatest struggles in South African mineworkers' long fight for a better life began one cold morning in August 40 years ago.

On that day -- August 12 1946 -- more than 60 000 mineworkers on the Reef began a week-long strike that was to shake the mining industry.

It wasn't the first strike on the gold mines. But it was one of the most important events in the miners' proud history of struggle in this country.

The stoppage was one of the biggest in South Africa until the workers' movement took off in the 1970's.

For the first time mineworkers used a trade union to organise their strike -- a union called the African Mineworkers' Union, led by a tall man called JB Marks.

And in the strike the AMWU fought for exactly the same things we in NUM demand today -- a living wage, a healthy workplace, more money for injured workers and an end to the system of migrant labour.

At the end of those five brave days at least 12 workers lay dead. Most of the strikers were driven back to work at gunpoint.

The workers won none of their demands. But they did leave an example of courage for us to follow -- and many lessons for us to study.

Today we in NUM are taking this struggle forward,

and one way to make sure we win is to learn well from their example.

To do this, we must first look at the conditions our fathers worked under in those years.

Lambalazi and less than two shillings a day

The 1940s were bad years for all the workers of South Africa. It was the time when the whole world was at war with Adolf Hitler, the German dictator.

Wages were low, food was scarce and the townships were overcrowded. In the countryside the land dried up, cattle died and crops refused to grow.

Things were especially bad for the mineworkers. Underground, in terrible conditions, they did the hardest work in the country.

Every day white miners beat the workers to make them work harder. Rockbursts and other accidents killed thousands of workers.

If a man died in an accident, the mine sent 50 pounds to his family -- enough to last a few months.

Coffins and rotten food

In the compounds, 40 men slept on top of each other in cement beds they called coffins.

Rotten food came from the mine kitchens. The lumps of black bread called mbunyana intlokoyekati were so small they left a hole in your stomach. Workers called their porridge lambalazi --

water that makes you hungry. In return for all this, workers were paid one shilling and eight pennies a day -- at a time when families needed ten shillings a day to live.

Sometimes these things seemed as hard as the rock that workers mined underground. But the miners knew that just as they could move rock to find gold, they could stand together and fight these things.

Boycotts, sit-ins and the AMWU

The mineworkers did not wait for a union to help them. They used many of their own weapons in their struggle against the mine owners.

On some mines, workers refused to eat food from the kitchens. They said: "We will boycott your kitchens until the food improves."

At other mines workers used the sit-in strike underground to protest at assaults and too much overtime.

You can see that our fathers were using the same weapons miners use in the struggle today.

There were many struggles like this during the war years. Often the strikes were crushed by the police -- but many times the workers won and got small changes that made life a bit better.

The union makes us strong

The problem was that

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1946





DAYS

Wherever they struck, the miners were hounded by police...

workers on the different mines were not united. If workers on a mine in Benoni went on strike, then workers in Johannesburg and on the West Rand did not hear of the strike until it was too late.

There was no way worker leaders from the different mines could come together to plan united action, either.

That's why the African National Congress, after realising the terrible hardships that miners worked and lived under, decided in 1941 to form the first union for black mineworkers -- the African Mineworkers' Union (AMWU). JB Marks was elected President and JJ Majoro became the first secretary.

The AMWU joined a union federation called the Council of Non-European Trade Unions. At that time there were 119 unions in CNETU. It was the biggest trade union grouping in South Africa until Fosatu was started in the 1970s and Cosatu in the 1980s.

The union grew very slowly at first. It was not easy for union leaders to get passed the barbed wire and police surrounding the compounds.

During the war, the government also made a law that more than 20 people could not meet at one time.

By 1943 the union had only 1 800 members -- out of 350 000 black workers on the mines.

JB and his comrades were getting impatient. So he decided to break the law and organise mass meetings on

mine property -- and the workers flocked to hear him speak in their thousands.

An old man who worked on a mine in East Champ D'Or remembers those meetings, where workers crowded to pay a shilling to join and a sixpence a month to be members of the union.

"Marks would come and use the football grounds. In those days there was no security branch and it used to be the South African police -- a sergeant and a couple of people to take notes -- who would come.

"All the miners would go there. The compound police wouldn't stop them. Marks was going from mine to mine -- there were a lot of mines in those days.

"Ordinary underground workers became members. Even the omabalane were paying their sixpences. Nearly the whole compound would go to meetings."

By 1944, the AMWU had 25000 members and their fighting spirit was growing stronger every day.

Ten shillings a day

In April 1946, the union held its annual conference. Things were getting very bad on the mines. And the workers were angry. They decided to demand the following things:

- * Increase wages to ten shillings a day.
- * Two weeks' paid leave every year.
- * The right to have union meetings on the mines.
- * The right to live with their families on the mines.

The union tried to talk to the mineowners about these

things. But the bosses refused to listen.

At a reportback meeting in August 1946, JB Marks told the miners:

"We are wrestling with a giant. You have approached the mine authorities in a good manner and put your demand to them. But in every case, where you asked for a fish, you got a serpent."

At the same meeting a well-dressed worker from Randfontein Estates got up. The cops were there, so he gave his name only as "Moustache".

He said: "I say only one thing can help us -- that we at this meeting strike from east to west."

The workers roared their approval -- and the great strike of 1946 was on.

Five long days

For five days -- from Monday August 12 to Friday August 16 -- the strikers held out against the guns and bayonets of the police. Twelve workers were killed. Hundreds were injured. And tens of thousands were driven down the mine shafts at gunpoint.

CNETU tried to call a general strike to support the miners, but most of the CNETU and AMWU members were arrested early in the strike. Other unions in CNETU failed to join the strike and the miners were defeated.

But the AMWU and its members left an example of unity and courage that we can learn from.

Lessons from the strike

CNETU: This was still a young organisation, and most of its unions were small. It had 119 small unions and many of these had less than a thousand members each.

There were also divisions in CNETU during the war. Some union leaders wanted to organise strikes in the factories. Others said that if they went on strike it would weaken the war against Hitler.

In 1945, a group of unions split away from CNETU.

These fights helped make sure there was little support from other unions when the miners were being beaten by the police.

Internal fights can make the unions weak -- especially at times like today when the government is out to crush the union movement.

CNETU also shows how important it is to have one big union in each industry rather than lots of small unions.

Community organisations: In the 40s, community organisations began to grow in the townships. The Communist Party was very active inside the country, organising rent and food strikes. Together with the ANC and other organisations, it helped organise the famous Alexandra bus boycotts of the 1940s.

Huge squatter movements also sprang up in Alexandra township and Orlando.

But the problem was that these community struggles

were not united under the banner of one organisation.

The ANC was still growing strong in the 40s and was not yet a mass movement.

The AMWU was not able to call on these organisations for support during the 1946 strike.

Today things are different. We have mass organisations growing in the township.

Today workers can call on these organisations when help is needed. And these organisations can call upon the workers for support.

Workers must be part of these organisations to make sure that they play the leading role in the struggle for liberation.

AMWU: The union also had problems that explain why the miners were defeated in 1946.

At the time of the strike, it had over 25 000 members -- but there were 350 000 workers on the mines.

The union also did not have a strong system of shaft stewards, so there was no chance for full participation by workers in the decisions of the union.

In 1946, some miners heard about the strike and joined -- even though they had never heard of the union.

All these things show how important it is to organise every worker on the mines and to make sure each and every member has a say in the running of our union.