

BUILDERS OF THE NATION

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WORKING IN THE MINES

Mineworkers made possible South Africa's industrial revolution. Coal was needed for the development of railways. Diamonds and gold were in demand abroad and sold at great profit. Large, busy towns like Kimberley, Newcastle and Johannesburg sprang up around the mines. These mines needed the labour of hundreds of thousands of workers from all over southern Africa.



Miners outside a mine shaft, 1900. While blacks and whites worked together underground, the unequal working and living conditions in the mines reinforced racial divisions.



A miner celebrates his union, 1987.

A new recruit is inspected by a mine doctor in the 1950s.



Underground workers without helmets or protective boots, 1915.



A compound in the early years. Miners were deprived of normal family life.

Mine owners indentured 80 000 Chinese labourers to work in the gold mines of the Witwatersrand together with thousands of skilled miners from Britain and other countries. Mine workers were racially divided. Blacks were not permitted to train as artisans. They were paid very low wages, housed in single-sex, overcrowded compounds and provided with a very basic diet. Underground, miners worked day and night in dark tunnels many kilometres below the surface, drilling, digging and shovelling. There were many rockfalls and explosions. An average of 700 men died every year from accidents and lung diseases.

From time to time, both black and white miners went on strike. The black miners' strikes in 1920 and 1946 were the biggest strikes until the National Union of Mineworkers strike in 1987. The white miners' strike in 1922 grew into a general strike which helped to bring the government down.

Until 1979, successive white-ruled governments refused to recognise black trade unions, and the mineowners were able to control black workers through the compound system and the pass laws. It was only after the formation of the NUM in 1982 that the mineworkers began to improve their working and living conditions, as well as race relations underground.

Through years of struggle and organisation, miners today are in a better position than ever before to negotiate and to contribute co-operatively and productively to the mining industry. We salute the miners of South Africa!

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NUM mobilises its members.

