ORGANISING ON THE MINES

By Cyril Ramaphosa
General Secretary
National Union of Mineworkers

When the National Union of Mineworkers was formed an experienced unionist said to me "organising workers in South Africa is the art of the possible". But organising workers in the mining industry is the art of the impossible.

It has been the art of the impossible because it has been the art of trying to make a fundamental change in a system by using structures and instruments that were designed to perpetuate that system. It has been the art of the impossible because it has been the art of trying to make a revolution with moderate tools that were invented to prevent a revolution. Because of the nature of the mining industry, which is conservative or ultra-conservative by any definition, the black miner has been condemned to seek radical ends within a framework which was designed to prevent sudden and radical changes.

For almost one hundred years now, black miners have not been able to change their status. The African Miners' Union in 1946 under J B Marks made an attempt but was brutally crushed by a combination of employer and government forces.

It is against this background that our union has developed its organising strategies. Organising has taken place around a number of issues, some of which are safety, wages, and working-class unity.

The most significant issue we are organising around is resistance to the system, with the hope that once the mine owners are convinced or capitulate under the resistance, a change can be negotiated. However, the problem is that the system was designed to prevent anything from happening, to prevent any change. The name of the system is control, manipulation, and exploitation.

In order to understand the full flavour of this system one must see the industry against the larger canvas of a country which has permitted one nation to systematically suppress a whole people as a matter of public policy.

It is within this larger context that the mining industry, its ancient industrial relations practices, its mindlessness, and its violence, must be situated. One has to cut through a swamp of myths in order to understand this. The mining industry is defined by oppression and exploitation of the black miner. It is defined by an evil social and economic structure which manufactures two kinds of people, blacks and whites, and which keeps blacks and whites fighting against each other for the benefit of a few capitalists.

The mining industry has long held a special place in the history of the labour movement in South Africa. It was this industry that gave the labour movement its first apprenticeship of horror, with the mass dismissals in 1946. The horrors still continue today with the dismissal of 17 000 workers.

Six months ago shaft stewards in several mines started suggesting a change in organising strategies. The strategies suggested were radical and meant that a new issue should be added to our existing reformist issues such as safety, wages etc. The new issue was resistance to the system. The industry will have to make the key revolutionary decision of how much pressure it will take to make it change the system. Until that question is decided, the only alternative black miners have is to shatter the harmony of an industry from which they have reaped only violence and exploitation.

It is, of course, Utopian to believe the industry will change the system without massive pressure. Hence the necessity for pressure and more pressure. Our shaft stewards have made it clear that our Union can no longer avoid its destiny. They have gone out to organise around the issue of resistance.

To be sure, resistance was always an agenda item for black miners as soon as they found an organisation through which they could articulate their views and aspirations, however slight the possibility of success. Black miners' resistance in the past months across the country has exploded a number of myths and dashed mine managements' hopes regarding the co-optation of our union and the loyalty of workers to their system. The act of resistance has above all produced a more committed and disciplined membership.

The resistance has manifested itself in a number of ways, but chief among them are:

* Relationships between black and white

   The relationship between black and white miners at the rock face is influenced by what happens in the wider society where the white man is baas and his word is a command that must be obeyed. Tensions rise and violence erupts. Assaults at the rock face are common and are usually perpetrated by the white miner. After each assault the black miner is found guilty and discharged.

Shaft stewards on two mines met and deliberated over this problem and decided that the only solution would be physical resistance by every black miner to violent attacks by white miners. They announced the strategy at a members' meeting and stated that whenever a black miner was attacked by a white miner he should fight back and make sure that he hit harder and won the fight and if he did not win he should summon the help of other black miners. The following day, an assault took place between a black and white miner. The white miner who had started the attack was shocked to see the black miner fighting back. The black miner won the fight and nobody was dismissed.

Assaults have ceased at that mine. After that fight, which was much publicised, the membership soared and the system was dealt a good blow. The strategy is spreading to other mines.

I need to pause here and explain why this approach was opted for. This form of resistance is born out of utter frustration and pain. The act of assault by one man against another is humiliating. Black miners have tried on numerous and countless occasions to bring these sorts of incidents to mine managements' attention but their pleas have always fallen on deaf ears. The union has always encouraged them to follow the grievance procedures but on a number of occasions, instead of discipline being meted out to the assailant, it is meted out to the complainant.

Can anyone fault black miners for resisting humiliation and dehumanising acts in this way?

* The legacy of the Masters and Servants Act
is being challenged

I'm convinced that when the Masters and Servants Act was promulgated its main targets were the mining and agricultural industries. With its repeal its effects have completely disappeared in all industries except mining and agriculture.

The line of command on any mine is such that every white man is a supervisor of some black worker or workers. This ensures every white person the position of master to his black team or gang.

In the underground situation the miner, shift boss, mine overseer, and section manager have their own terrain of masterdom where they rule supreme and treat everybody who is not white as servants. Each of these officials, or masters, as they regard themselves, has a "picannin". The job of the picannin is to look after the welfare of the master. He runs errands for him underground, he carries his satchel, which has his food, clothes, Afrikaans newspapers, and comics.

The picannin is paid by the mine but is not involved in the

Production side of the mine's operations.

Shaft steewards at Vaal Reefs thought that there was some-
thing wrong with this practice and approached one of the
miners and asked him why he had a picannin. The miner was
dumbfounded and could no respond except to say "this is how
the system works".

An instruction was given to picannins to refuse to carry
the masters' satchels as it was not part of their jobs to
carry another man's food, comics and newspapers. All the
picannins were only too pleased to be relieved of their
heavy burdens and those who were not members joined the
union.

There was general panic amongst the masters, who could not
believe that this was happening to them. Some resigned
and went to other mines. Management panicked and used this
resistance as one of the reasons for dismissing 14 000
workers.

*   Queueing underground

In the past it has been the practice for white miners to
go down the mine last and to be the first to go off-shift.
The union's approach is clear, however. All people work-
ing below the surface are miners and should be subject
to the same practice, irrespective of race. Consequently,
black miners were now saying white miners should also stand
in the queue.

These are just a few examples of resistance that black miners
are putting against the industry with the hope that change
will be forthcoming. Black miners are fighting a desperate
battle against desperate odds. Every weapon that the industry
can command is arraigned against them. Fighting against such
odds, they cannot afford to confine themselves to one weapon.

The first prong of the strategy of resistance is continuous
pressure. The idea here is to maintain constant pressure
against a situation that one does not want to accept under any
circumstances.

The second prong is raising the consciousness of the working
class by clarifying the issues and building cadres.

The third prong is progressively undermining the quasi-colonial
system by introducing into it indissoluble antibodies which
contradict its spirit and logic.

At this moment, in this industry, there is no other way for
black miners to grapple with the question of fundamental change
except by resisting the system. One may ask, "How can we
the union and the industry break this resistance cycle?"

There are prerequisites and preconditions:

*   The first precondition is a willingness by both parties
    to negotiate in good faith. Real willingness might
    require both parties to compromise.

*   The second precondition is an understanding of our possibi-
    lities and the possibilities of the situation. And by this
    we must understand that the black miners' most urgent need
    is action to counter miscalculated incidents like the
    Vaal Reefs mass dismissal.

*   The third prerequisite is an open and frank dialogue on the
    basis of mutual respect between mine management and black
    miners.

*   The fourth prerequisite is a new value system and a new
    orientation.

This in broad outline is one way the problem on these mines can
be solved. It is a way in which the timebomb can be defused.
This outline raises our final question: whose task is it?
It is the industry's as well as our task.

* * * * *