

The Role of Trade Unions in the Mining Industry.

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Introduction

Trade unions are an organised association of workers in a certain profession and their sole purpose is the protection of member's and workers interests. These interests vary and some of the trade unions main roles include negotiating for wages, employees' benefits, working conditions including occupational health and safety due to nature of mining operations. Also the unions strive for better accommodation arrangements, as well as holding employers accountable in complying with the labour laws of the country. Unions are instrumental agents of social change through advocating for transformation guided by respective workplace legislations. Due to changing dynamics, the unions in the mining sector also fight for the development of mining communities. This paper gives a brief overview of the role of trade unions in the mining industry.

Historical Overview of Trade Unions in the Mining Sector in South Africa

The discovery of minerals in the late 19th century in Kimberley (1867) and Johannesburg (1886) respectively drastically changed the economic and political structure of South Africa. Less access and ownership of mines was given to black people instead they were used mainly as cheap black labour. This system did not allow for workers to bargain for better wages and were forced to work for very low wages on the employers' terms. As such, the Mines and Workers Act resulted in black miners getting manual labour and whites getting skilled and supervisory jobs. This laid the basis of South Africa's political economy up to today – white monopoly capital and cheap black labour. This backdrop created a conducive environment for the development of workers organisations especially trade unions to fight for better working conditions for mineworkers.

The mining industry was one of the major employers in the apartheid era. There were issues such as beneficiation that didn't exist, where none of the minerals mined in the country were refined in the country. Moreover, because of the inhumane conditions for workers, no developments towards adequate housing was put aside for mine workers. This was because of the migrant labour system that was prominent during the apartheid era. Needless to say, housing and many other issues within the mining space still remain pertinent issue today stemming from that historical perspective. This was because when the architects of apartheid

designed these systems, it was so that the effects would still be felt many years into democracy.

This unpleasant history is also the reason that black mineworkers were not allowed to form trade unions between the periods of 1946 to 1982. Hence we only saw the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1982 and it is an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

This history is very critical because the trade unions in the mining industry are still fighting for the same issues that they fought in the past and currently. These include barriers for employment, increasing mineworkers' welfare by obtaining training for mineworkers, improving the conditions of the mines as well as accommodation. Historically and today, trade unions such as the NUM have mobilised against discrimination of black mineworkers in a bid to improve the treatment of black workers under the apartheid system. The union has campaigned against the class system and fought against exclusion of women in the mining sector.

Challenges faced by trade unions in fulfilling their roles in mining sector

Despite all these attempts, the mining industry itself has not changed sufficiently. Despite having worked towards increasing wages for workers, wages still remain low. These wages are still determined by a job grading system based on the apartheid structure. According to this system, workers' wages are not dependent on the task they do or the corresponding risk to which they are exposed, but on the amount of power they have over other employees. Moreover, companies continue to subcontract and that lead to reduced employee wages, weakening of labour movement as casualised workers are discouraged to join the trade unions.

Issues of occupational health and safety in the mining sector are also a concern that trade unions have had to continuously grapple with on behalf of mineworkers. Although trade unions are active in ensuring the mining companies comply with health and safety laws, mining industry is still experiencing fatalities through at decreased levels compared to previous decades. This was after the ANC set up the Leon Commission of Inquiry into Health and Safety in the Mining Industry, and the resulting Mine Health and Safety Act, section 11 of 29 of 1996 has improved the country's laws in this area. Despite these improvements

however, some employers tend to abuse this Act as a way of penalising and retrenching workers and so this calls for a review.

Companies are not building adequate housing and continue to house workers in single-sex hostels. A living out allowance is now granted to individuals who do not wish to live in the provided hostels. This has resulted, however, in mineworkers moving to shanty towns and this is not an improvement in their living conditions or welfare. The role of the union in this regard is to negotiate for better housing conditions and it is important that they do so from an informed point of view in terms of what workers really want.

Furthermore, mineworkers are always looking to augment the basic (salary) and one of these ways is to accrue as many long term and short term incentives offered by the company as possible. In terms of the mining charter Employee Share Ownership Plans (ESOPs) are one such incentive that trade unions have to fight to ensure that workers benefit from. Most ESOP deals have not been able to ensure that workers benefit as intended and this has been problematic.

The role that trade unions play in the mining sector as the voice of the workers is not always the easiest to carry out but it remains visible and important.

Current and Future Role of Trade Unions

Owing to the fact that despite improvements in the sector trade unions continue to remain relevant in fighting for the best interests of workers. Trade unions however have to look at the many phenomenon that are taking place within the industry and look to form a more proactive stance on the outcomes of these anticipated issues. The growing mechanisation in the mining industry, coupled with the 4IR is anticipated to displace many jobs. The role of the trade union in this regard is to look at enforcing workers sensitive contributions against the rise of mechanising the mining sector. If this means training workers for these new jobs or readying them for a just transition then so be it.

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