

Kusasaletu: living to fight another day

Harmony Gold may backtrack on closure threat as workers and community resist

by Liv Shange

About 300 workers and community members marched on February 6 in Carletonville in a spirited manifestation against Harmony Gold's closure of its Kusasaletu shaft. As *Izwi labasebenzi* goes to press (Feb 7), five weeks into Harmony's effective lock-out and cruel eviction, it looks like the company may agree to reopen Kusasaletu.

Pressure has certainly been brought to bear on Harmony, through the resistance of the hundreds of workers who refused to go away when told, the mobilisation of the communities of Wedela and Khutsong, the solidarity of workers from throughout Merafong and also internationally, as well as the court action brought by the workers' new union AMCU. If confirmed, the concession should be treasured as an opportunity to reinforce the organising efforts against further closures and retrenchments.

The Kusasaletu shaft is one of Harmony's (the world's third largest gold miner) greatest assets. In the 2012 financial year it generated R2.3bn in revenue. July-September 2012, it made R134m profit – 18% of total group profits! The shaft is said to have at least 26 viable years ahead. The threat to close has nothing to do with the alleged operational or safety considerations. It is a calculated attempt at setting an example to workers across the country, that 'struggle does not pay'.

Kusasaletu workers were on strike October 2-29, and left the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) after the strike.

Back at work they fought, e.g., the company's attempts to victimise strike leaders in a series of underground sit-ins. On November 22, workers marching on their way to a mass meeting were shot at from the direction of the NUM offices. Two were killed. A third wounded worker was arrested for their murder when discharged from hospital. The shooter is known and can be seen in the Wedela township, but no attempt has been made to arrest him. The violence and instability, which Harmony is using as a pretext for its offensive, stem from management's attempts to re-impose NUM's authority and to use police and security to resolve conflicts.

When management imposed a ban on mass meetings, workers continued to meet after hours. In early December they marched to submit a memorandum of demands. As management refused to receive the memorandum, the workers at 73-level responded with a sit-in, on December 15. Four days later, the company suspended 562 workers. On December 20 when these workers were refused entry as they came to consult the union in preparations for their disciplinary hearings. When they protested, mine security and police opened fire, injuring five workers. Another sit-in followed, forcing the company to put the suspensions on hold until talks scheduled for January 4. But when workers returned from the festive break they found themselves locked out of their workplace as well as from their hostel homes. Workers who had remained behind told of how they had been forcibly evicted. Additional gates and

welded road blocks surrounded the mine. About 2500 workers who had travelled thousands of kilometres from as far as Lesotho, Mozambique and the Eastern Cape were stranded in the rain without food or shelter. Several hundred camped out in the open on the mine premises.

In the days and weeks that followed, the company tried to break the workers' resistance by closing down the clinic which many workers depended on for life-saving treatment, then cutting off water and electricity, refusing entry to community members who brought food, and eventually chasing out the about 500 workers who had refused the 'offer' to go to their 'primary homes' and remained at Kusasaletu. The Democratic Socialist Movement in the area took the initiative to form the Kusasaletu Crisis Committee, involving workers and residents in a defence campaign. Shelter has been found in a tent/shack at the Wedela Roman Catholic church and in the homes of comrades in the township.

The poorest working class families and associations are providing the relief. The workers who made Patrice Motsepe one of the richest men on the continent have slept outdoors for five weeks, struggling to eat, while he laps up praise for handing half of 'his' wealth to his own charity. Battling to cover the basics of survival has been linked organising and mobilising for the February 6 march.

– Although the turn-out was much lower than the support we have, the march was a success, says Kusasaletu Crisis Committee organiser Sithembile Nqulo.



The march organised by the DSM and Kusasaletu Crisis Committee on Feb 6, 2013.

It is a victory on its own that the march went ahead despite the effective sabotage by the Merafong public safety department. Local officials were clearly under direct pressure from the Harmony management, in particular its security, to stall the manifestation. Scandalously, NUM figures also featured in the police efforts to frustrate the mobilisation, while also engaging in outright intimidation of the organisers.

One mining job equals to the livelihood of 26 people, because of the spin-offs the mining industry has in other sectors as well as the average 8-10 dependants of each mine worker. The loss of Kusasaletu's 6200 jobs in other words would spell disaster for over 160 000 people. Harmony is prepared

to gamble with our future ('ikusasa lethu') to settle scores. While the company may now be conceding some ground, it must be remembered that it is attempting to impose draconian conditions for the re-opening. These include amongst others the reiteration of standard safety regulations – for the propaganda purpose of casting the independently organised workers as the instigators of the violence – and also a virtual prohibition of workers' mass meetings. But for all their arrogance, the bosses are not yet able to confidently move out of their defensive corner. Workers must use the space to prepare for the battles that lie ahead in the mining industry.

Mine Line Workers Co-op: closing in on victory

by Sheri Hamilton

The struggle of the Mine Line workers, who occupied their factory in October 2010 after the owner Wynand Mulder applied for voluntary liquidation, continues. The former owner had run up huge debts to support his extravagant lifestyle. The workers occupied the factory to protect its assets from looting by Mulder in collusion with the company liquidators. The workers committee established in the process later formed a co-operative to apply for funding to run the factory which remained a viable business for the supply of valves and other components to the mining industry. After countless attempts to raise funds from various government departments and other business support entities, the Industrial Development Co-operation (IDC) agreed to consider the co-operative's application. The workers had specifically requested the funding as part of the IDC's support programme for 'businesses in distress' established after the recession resulted in massive job losses especially in the manufacturing industry.

The irony of the situation, observed one of the workers after yet another delay in negotiations with the IDC, is that had Mulder, who inherited the business from his father, approached the IDC for support, the factory would be up and running by now. But the rules and criteria for funding are not meant to support workers who want to create jobs and run their own businesses but the bosses. After two sets of management teams, countless meetings and workshops in which the goal posts appear to shift each time, the workers are now approaching what in their view are the final hurdles in meeting the stringent requirements of the IDC. They have made several concessions to save their jobs including securing a management team that meets the criteria of the IDC, ceding all the shares of the co-operative as surety for the loan to run the business and setting up a separate company on whose board the co-operative will be represented together with the IDC and management. Moreover, they have sought to diversify their scope by secur-

ing letters of intent for their line of products beyond the mining industry, in water and sanitation, transport and in energy.

Throughout the process the workers have remained steadfast in their commitment to regain their jobs and with the support of the Democratic Socialist Movement have met regularly to discuss and plan how to proceed at every turn along the long and winding road, to report on progress and to keep up the spirit of their struggle. The IDC will be meeting on February 28 to make a final decision on the Mine Line Workers Co-operative application. Victory seems tantalisingly close but there is no guarantee that the application will succeed. What they are attempting to achieve goes against the logic of capitalism. Mine Line workers are attempting to co-operate in working together to meet to their need to survive. Whatever the outcome, with the support of the DSM, the struggle will continue for as long as workers are willing and able.



Banner at Mine Line occupation, Nov, 2010.