

## **Occupational health and safety improving labour relations**



### **Gideon du Plessis is Solidarity's General Secretary**

In the wake of the Marikana incident in 2012 labour relations in the mining sector have been characterised by rivalry between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). Solidarity and UASA, the other two recognised unions primarily focussing on skilled miners, have also been luring members backwards and forwards from each other and this has added to the competitive trade union environment.

### **Trade unions and occupational health and safety**

As a result of AMCU's drastic membership growth since Marikana, this union has become a significant player. Given the mining sector's unique tripartite structures (trade union, employer and government) AMCU had to get a seat in Occupational Health and Safety Forums (OHS forums). Thus, in 2017 AMCU became a member of the Mine Health and Safety Council (MHSC) and also joined Anglo American's safety tripartite forum.

In the OHS environment trade unions and employers, and the trade unions among themselves enter neutral ground, having a shared interest in worker safety and well-being. The result is that whereas AMCU did not caucus with the other three trade unions during the previous round of mining wage negotiations in 2015 and 2018, the protocol that is being followed at the MHSC is that the four trade unions formally consult with each other and speak with one voice.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic this has contributed to the four mining unions being able to formulate a joint position on burning Covid-19 related issues in ongoing discussions with the Minerals Council of South Africa, which further reinforces a culture of unity.

### **Trade unions in alliance**

The OHS practice of union alignment, resulted in the mining trade unions forming an alliance during this year's wage negotiations in the gold sector, consolidating wage demands and negotiating under one banner. This development is in stark contrast to the 2018 negotiations when AMCU went on strike all by itself, with the other three unions using their numbers majority to extend wage agreements to AMCU members – the strategy on both sides also being about power play and membership growth.

To ensure that this trade union alliance functions more constructively than a political alliance does, roles were defined and allocated beforehand and so the NUM acts as chief negotiator, AMCU takes the chair in caucus meetings and Solidarity and UASA focus on gathering information and providing administrative and legal support. The best strategy is decided upon by means of debating at a caucus meeting.

The Harmony Gold salary negotiations were preceded by a safety summit where the unions and management reached agreement on key safety issues. During the subsequent Harmony salary negotiations, the mere spirit of cooperation and the trade unions' collective approach paid off with parties being accommodating towards each other and a win-win agreement could be concluded quickly.

The spirit in which the Harmony wage agreement was reached has led to Harmony also establishing a tripartite safety forum as Anglo American has done. What makes this forum unique is that the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which also enjoys recognition at Harmony, forms part of the forum. NUMSA competes with the NUM and AMCU for members at many workplaces, and NUMSA blocked Solidarity's application to the international worker organisation, IndustriALL. Now NUMSA is part of mining's organised labour grouping and the OHS platform can bring about greater solidarity between the five unions.

### **Trade unions and modernisation**

The improvement in trade union, and trade union/employer relations that developed on OHS platforms created the spirit for another event of historical importance when the mining unions recently concluded an agreement with the Mandela Mining Precinct (MMP).

The MMP is a mining-focused research institution established by the Minerals Council South Africa, the CSIR and the Department of Science and Innovation to focus on the innovation and modernisation of mines and mine safety. The MMP and mining unions joined hands to find solutions as partners to make the mines more sustainable. This agreement can serve as a blueprint for other economic sectors with regard to the way in which trade unions and players in the relevant industry can work together in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and as such it holds various benefits for employers and employees alike. Similarly, other sectors can take a lesson from mining about how a non-competitive field such as occupational health and safety paves the way for less conflict in the competitive labour relations field.