



Mine Line factory occupation: breaking a new path of struggle

by Wilson Makola, chairperson
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Mine Line workers blockading the factory gates, October 22 2010.

On the 20th of October, 2010, the workers of Mine Line and Tap Engineering decided to take over the management and control of the factory and put it under workers control as a cooperative. Situated at Doornkop Harmony mine on the outskirts of Krugersdorp, it employs 107 workers. It produces and manufactures a variety of valves and locomotives used in the mines. After months of challenging struggle, a break-through might be at hand with the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) promising to urgently look into funding to restart of production.

Fraud and deadly accident

The factory occupation followed the application for liquidation by the previous owner, Wynand Mulder, who defrauded the company of millions of Rands before placing it under liquidation. He borrowed money from Absa in the company's name to pursue business interests elsewhere.

Due to the employer's non-compliance with occupational safety and health regulations, on the 4th August 2010 there had been a fatal accident at the factory where three of our colleagues lost their lives. In an endeavour to run away from his responsibilities, on the 18th August 2010, Mulder vanished into thin air. This was after he

had not paid workers' provident fund contributions for the past three years, 2007-2010. He also owes workers their leave pay and outstanding wages and bonuses.

Factory occupation

On 20th October 2010 when workers assembled at the factory, we found two trucks standing outside the factory ready to load the machines. We told the drivers to go away as it was illegal for them to take assets from the liquidated factory before the process of liquidation was finalised. After lengthy debates it was decided that the guarding of the factory should start with immediate effect to stop further asset stripping by Mulder in collusion with the liquidator, Commonwealth Trust, and the security company guarding the factory. Lots of stuff had been taken from the factory – castings, machines, patterns and moulds – in the presence of the security guards.

Solidarity campaign

The struggle at the Mine Line factory is enjoying the support of various organisations and institutions. Soon after its inception a Solidarity Committee was formed. It comprises the Metal and Electrical Workers' Union of South Africa (MEWUSA), the union organising at Mine Line, the Cooperative, Policy and Alternative Centre (Copac), the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), Landless People's Movement (LPM), the Zabalaza Anarchist-Communist Front (ZACF), the Democratic Left Front (DLF) and students from Wits University. The Mine Line factory occupation has also received international support, such as from the 10th congress of the Committee for a Workers' International held in December 2010 in Belgium. That was through our

DSM delegation that participated in the conference. The National Union of Metal Workers of SA (Numsa) regional leadership have also visited the factory in support.

On 20 November 2010 we held a solidarity rally at the factory premises. Through this rally people got to know exactly what was taking place. Often people had not understood when we told them about the occupied factory. They came in numbers to see for themselves what was taking place there. Numerous organisations and institutions attended the rally. Every speaker and every organisation supported our course of action. They regarded it as a good step to fight job losses, liquidations and retrenchments.

Significance of Mine Line factory occupation

The economic crisis and recession that swept across the globe has impacted heavily on economies all-over the world. After and during the recession millions of jobs were shed through retrenchments, wage cuts, short-time, liquidations and factory closures. The bosses or the employers want the workers to carry the burden of a crisis that they did not create. They are no more making profits as they anticipated. And they want working people to pay by slashing down salaries and wages. It is against this background that Mine Line workers decided to occupy their factory to take the fight back to the bosses. For the working class to wage an effective war against capitalists and bosses, the workers across South Africa and the whole world should organise themselves and form a united front to fight capitalism. In South Africa Cosatu, Nactu and Fedusa must unite in a fight against job losses. They must set aside their ideological differences and take the working class struggle forward.

We are demanding that:

- >Absa, SARS and others from whom Wynand Mulder borrowed money must pursue him, not the occupied company to recover their monies.
- >Wynand Mulder to be criminally charged for the death of the three deceased workers and the injury of one.
- >Wynand Mulder to bring back all the assets that he has stolen.
- >The government to nationalise Mine Line under the democratic control and management of our workers' cooperative.
- >The government, through the IDC and other institutions, to recapitalise the company with start-up and working capital.
- >The trade unions' Job Creation Trust assist with funding as its funds were paid by us workers in order to contribute to saving jobs.

Challenges

Our struggle has many challenges. On the 24th November we were served with an eviction order – the liquidators wanted to sell all the assets at the factory on auction. On the 26th November 2010 we went to Pretoria High Court to oppose the eviction and auction order. We did this without a lawyer as we did not have money to pay the lawyers and we succeeded in stopping the eviction and auction!

The major problem we are having is that we are no more getting financial support from the union, because of the internal problems in the union (see p. 12) and the workers are now starting to get demoralised because there is no money to buy food for them while guarding. In the beginning we used to guard the factory day and night. The guarding is still continuing but at a very small scale, and this is opening the struggle up to other challenges.

Financial support

We need start-up and working capital to start production. We have approached the IDC, the

department of trade and industry (dti), the Department of Economic Development (DED) and the Job Creation Trust (JCT) to give us financial assistance. The IDC has shown a lot of commitment to assist, committing to try to speedily arrange start-up capital for us. We eventually made this break-through after being held back for months by the liquidators of Commonwealth Trust who did not want to give us the company's financial statements which the IDC needed to make a decision. They finally handed over the statements after being threatened with a march to their offices on 28 March 2011.

We are calling on all the workers across South Africa and world wide to learn from Mine Line/ TAP Engineering workers that there is an alternative to defend and protect jobs. As the working class we must unite and educate one another on how to fight back the job losses, retrenchments, liquidations and factory closures. Emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself. *Forward with the working class struggle!*

Aurora workers let down by union leaders

by Liv Shange

Thousands of workers at the Grootvlei and Orkney gold mines have not been paid since February 2010 and are now owed more than R12million by Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) company Aurora Empowerment Systems which took over management of the mines in 2009 when the previous owner Pamodzi Gold was placed in liquidation. Aurora is owned by Zondwa Mandela (Nelson Mandela's grandson), Khulubuse Zuma (President Zuma's nephew) and Michael Hulley (President Zuma's attorney). The unions organising at the two

mines, the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and Solidarity, have also accused Aurora of asset-stripping. The new owners have also completely disregarded environmental regulations, allowing heavily contaminated water to flow straight into sensitive wetlands.

While Khulubuse Zuma, known for his extravagant life of luxury which includes a fleet of 19 top-of-the range cars, pledged a R1-million donation to the ANC on April 8, the union leaders have failed to mobilise the workers, who enjoy massive public sympathy, in a campaign to have these parasitic

bosses thrown out once and for all. On the same day, Solidarity revealed that one of the workers had committed suicide. While the union leaders have left the workers to despair and wait for food parcels, they have fixed all hopes on a passive wait for a capitalist saviour.

Since 2009, a string of prospective international buyers have figured in the media, the latest being Chinese-owned multinational mining company Shangdong Gold. So far all have disappointed. Even if a successful sale is carried through, it holds no guarantees for the workers' jobs and wage claims.

Instead of organising a community-based solidarity campaign, the NUM has begged the ANC to return the donation to Khulubuse and to hand the money to the workers. The ANC's response was they had no obligation to do so! The obvious response should be a mass campaign for the nationalisation under workers' control and management of these mines. The failure

of the NUM to even raise, let alone mobilise around, this demand is one of the most concrete signs yet of the deadly danger posed to the workers' movement by the Cosatu unions' alliance with the African National Congress; all the more tragic as the Aurora case itself exposes the pro-capitalist character of the ruling party beyond all doubt.



Defaced sign at Grootvlei mine.