

By Sipho B Linda

Mine Line Worker Cooperative Secretary

The Mine Line struggle is a story of workers who refused to go down without a fight. As workers, armed with a fighting strategy and a disciplined programme, we aim to achieve what the major labour organisations in this country have failed to do: to put forward an alternative to the thousands if not millions of job losses of the past years, and of many years to come since the economic crisis seems set to escalate under the system of capitalism.

The whole saga began in August 2010, on the West Rand near Doornkop mine. A few weeks after the liquidation of Mine Line and TAP Engineering (see Izwi labasebenzi May-July 2011), workers became aware that the former owner Wynand Mulder was colluding with Commonwealth Trust, the liquidator company, to start stripping the machines and other assets of the factory. To stop this we resolved, on October 20, 2010, on occupying the factory and started doing so on the same day. We changed the locks and guarded the factory day and night, with the assistance of comrades of the solidarity committee, especially the Landless People's Movement. We used the occupation to demand accountability of the liquidators, to ask the banks that were owed by the former owner not to claim the money back, and to demand that the state should nationalise the factory under the control of our worker cooperative. This is where the matter was brought to the attention of the state's Industrial Development Corporation (IDC). We appealed to the IDC for funding to resuscitate the company and resume production of valves and locomotives to supply the mining industry. Since then the IDC has been actively involved; but of course with a double face – one side showing willingness to assist but the other coming up with complicated technical obstacles calculated to exhaust and defeat the Mine Line struggle. The IDC convinced workers to vacate the factory and allow an auction of the assets to take place in May 2011 against a promise of the IDC buying the assets on behalf of the cooperative. However the auction went ahead with the assets being snatched by other buyers, probably a front for the previous owner. Another obstacle has been the IDC's insistence that their funding must be based on a business plan that proves the viability of the market. Putting together such a business plan requires a lot of costly research and contacts in the mining industry, involving resources we do not have as workers. But through pressure of disciplined

mass action of the workers we have managed to compel the IDC to keep coming to the party, in doing so also honouring its mandate of rescuing collapsing businesses and creating new jobs, which is the official policy of government.

The assistance which the IDC has provided as a result of these engagements include paying for a consultant tasked with compiling a business plan on behalf of the cooperative. However, the application for funding based on this plan was rejected by the IDC in December 2011 on the basis that it did not have enough letters of intent to do business. Once again the tension between the IDC and workers boiled up because IDC again demanded that the workers must secure more letters of intent on their own. We responded the same way: we lack resources and capacity.

We then mobilised, this time supported by comrades of the struggle against Murray and Roberts, to go and demonstrate at the IDC offices. This action got a quick and positive response from IDC, which agreed to fund another consultant to be appointed to deal precisely with the challenge of securing more letters of intent.

Workers remain organised while working closely with this consultant. As long as the struggle of Mine Line enjoys the support of different social movements and individual activists victory is certain. We appreciate the support of the DLF, OKM, TCC, LPM, and COPAC which organised the workers into a cooperative, and last but not least the DSM and Cosawu who have made sure that the struggle is alive and moving forward on daily basis.

A successful struggle is about two things: organisation and a fighting strategy. If you are organised but without a fighting strategy, you will suffer a defeat. If you have a strategy but are not organised, you will still suffer defeat that will compel you to capitulate.

If you don't have either, join the union and fight to win.

*Phambili ngomzabalazo wabasebenzi phambili!*