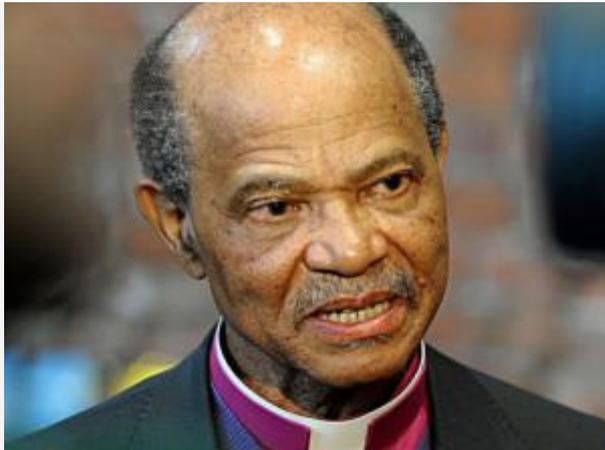


Church played big role in ending strike

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By John Capel



Having just come out of the longest mining strike in our history, we need to pause for reflection. Why did it take a gruelling five months to settle the strike?

When Mineral Resources Minister Ngoako Ramatlhodi entered the fray, recognising the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), it seemed the government were finally doing the right thing. Here was a minister who stuck his neck out, was prepared to work towards a settlement, only to be admonished later on by senior ANC leaders. His withdrawal sent shivers down our spine.

The nation wondered and asked why and what next? Progress made was scuppered casting a dark shadow, dimming the light at the end of the tunnel.

Stephen Grootes writes about anti-establishment forces, like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) rejecting establishment politics. The rise of consensus politics being challenged and the threat of new forces to the 20-year rule of the ANC.

In an article, "Endgame of mine strike is a test of democracy" May 15, 2014, published in Business Report, the Bench Marks Foundation warned of vested interests within the tripartite alliance and among the mine bosses preventing the settlement of the strike.

The strike was truly a test of democracy. Would common sense prevail or was the state going to call a state of emergency and get the army to sort out the strike? This rumour surfaced again when Ramatlhodi dropped the bombshell of pulling out. The ruling party was quiet, except to call Amcu a vigilante union, and seemed to do everything in their power to avoid a settlement.

Name calling and derogative statements only fuelled tensions and with the sudden withdrawal of Ramatlhodi all seemed lost. Or was it? In a subsequent unpublished article Bench Marks wrote

that the peacemakers had arrived. Not in the form that we expected, but in public sympathy for the striking workers. Churches began rallying behind the workers; Gift of the Givers started feeding starving families and many ordinary citizens began to fundraise and support the strikers.

One person stands out in all of this; not only is he the chairman of the Bench Marks Foundation, he is also the Anglican Bishop of Pretoria and the former president of the SA Council of Churches.

Jo Seoka, steeped in the struggle for democracy and who has been honoured internationally for quietly working for peace and reconciliation on the continent, has been central to the peaceful resolution of the strike.

Right from the beginning on August 16, 2012, he was the only leader to intervene on the Koppie. On arriving on the hilltop before the mass killings, he asked the workers how he could help. Mambush (the man in the green blanket), the workers' leader requested that he please ask management to come and talk to them.

Management refused, referring to the workers as a bunch of criminals and murderers. On the following Monday, Seoka was back on the hilltop and eventually played the role of mediator and peacemaker in settling the strike and workers went back to work.

The question we need to ask, what would have transpired had he not been there, and how would the platinum strike this year have ended had he not been standing next to the workers and their leaders?

We suggest that that the nation owes him a huge debt of gratitude. Tirelessly he stood with the workers, giving the world a balanced opinion of what was really transpiring on the platinum belt.

His message all the time to the workers was "be disciplined, peaceful, steadfast, and focus on your demand of a living wage – you are now getting nearer to your goal, don't be distracted". This message is what kept workers' hopes alive and, we believe, prevented harsher state action being taken. Right from August 16, 2012, his intervention gave workers hope.

The confidence he had among workers grew and he was one of the few outside leaders that workers respected. He also addressed many community fundraising events and lent his support to various pieces of research that painted a different picture of mining. In fact, his intervention gave credibility to workers' demands and their union, Amcu.

He was, we contend, the buffer between the state taking harsher action in the interests of the tripartite alliance, which basically wanted to prevent the further erosion of the National Union of Mineworkers' membership.

When all seemed lost, it was the bishop and the lawyer, Seoka and Dali Mpofu, who brokered an agreement. The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, the judge, Department of Labour and the minister of mineral resources had all given up.

As The Mercury, Citizen and Sowetan reported, Amcu started and ended meetings with prayers, and many thought that only divine intervention would end the stand-off.

Seoka is not one who wants acclaim, he is after all a priest who stands alongside those who are oppressed and need help. It is his pastoral mission to ensure peace and justice prevails and human dignity is respected. He countlessly said that the platinum strike was more about human dignity than about anything else.

And it was, yet this was being missed by the ANC government. They got into the trenches to defend their narrow interests, missing the point altogether. It was a test of our democracy and

emerging forces. Amcu and EFF both challenged the status quo, and the ANC government must realise it rules for all, not just those who elected them into power.

Yes, it is sad that the once giant among giants, Cosatu, seems to be out of touch with its members' desire for a better life. But thank God, things are normalising – well we hope so.

Now as a nation we need to stand back and reflect on what lessons we can learn from the platinum strike.

When the water gets muddied, the role of the church leaders in socio-economic strife is crucial. Such leaders can only do this if they are not “in the back pockets of politicians” as Reverend Mpho Tutu once wrote in a newspaper article.

The church can act as an honest broker, but that does not mean not taking sides.

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