

Re-visiting the South African Mine Workers' Union – A Significant Factor of South African Mining History

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Founded in 1902 as the Transvaal Miners' Association, the South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU), as it was renamed in 1913, rose to prominence as a militant union for white miners, especially during the turbulent years of industrial strife and bloody strike action in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Since the election victory of the Pact government in 1924 a program of pro-white protectionist legislation was introduced into the labour market. As South Africa's most prominent white trade union of the 20th century, the Mine Workers' Union therefore became renowned for defending job reservation in the mining industry. After 1948 it enjoyed the NP government's support in this regard. However, skilled labour shortages and changing labour conditions in the 1970s forced the government to introduce labour reform. Job reservation was scrapped and black unions were officially recognised, as recommended by the Wiehahn Commission. These initiatives put the MWU on a confrontational path with the government and the union aligned itself with right-wing political resistance and protest. But, the altered political and economic South African realities after 1994 forced the MWU to rethink its vision, strategies and structures. By 2002 it had reinvented and transformed itself into Solidarity, adequately equipped and geared for addressing the labour challenges and demands of a post-apartheid South Africa