

Speech notes for Dr. Con Fauconnier,
President, Chamber of Mines of South Africa,
for an address to the gala dinner,
at 19:00 on 23 November 2004
as part of the
ICEM Global Mining Conference
(taking place: 21-24 November)

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, tonight is certainly a very special occasion and I thank the organisers for inviting me to be here and for having given me an opportunity to say a few words.

Not only are we gathered together in a social environment where we are sharing food, drink and good company, we are also celebrating the coming together over a number of days of intense conferencing, with colleagues, friends, social and other partners. These past few days have been both interesting and informative for everyone concerned and I think I am not being premature when I say that this conference has been a resounding success, and I applaud the organisers for getting this show on the road and for their sterling work in keeping it on track. Well done!

As South Africa enters its next 10-year phase of its democratisation and continues its efforts to break free of the shackles a repressive regime imposed on the majority of its people, it is opportune at this time to reflect briefly on the contribution of trade union influence to both political and social change generally.

I specifically recall my studies of history, especially the industrial revolution. I remember as a 16-year old schoolboy getting somewhat excited to discover that it wasn't so long ago when the world - in the space of a few short years and combined with the harnessing of steam power to drive the factories - changed irreversibly. I remember also being horrified when I learnt of the appalling conditions that factory workers had to endure while making the factory owner very wealthy in the process. It was no wonder that workers soon realised that they were getting a raw deal. One could even stretch one's imagination a little and suggest that the factory owners themselves were the cause of the rapid growth of 'worker power' in those days. Whatever the case, worker power emerged and it is here to stay.

Later on, this worker power came to the fore in certain very dramatic ways. The Pittsburgh steel workers' strike and the teamsters strike in the USA are two that come immediately to mind. These two strikes in fact almost brought America to a standstill. More recently, there was the bitter and protracted strike in the United Kingdom over the closure of its coal pits, a strike that ultimately divided the country and one in which neither the country nor the union came out as winners.

Closer to home, there was the infamous strike of 1922 where so-called commandos, made up mainly of unruly strikers, and the government of Jan Smuts engaged in pitched battles in the streets of Johannesburg; Fordsburg mainly; with eventually artillery and aircraft bombardment being used to restore law and order.

Ten years ago there could quite easily have been pitched battles in the streets of Johannesburg and any other town or city for that matter. South Africa's politically astute unions could very easily have caused chaos and the potential for armed conflict certainly was there. But it did not arise. Instead the unions encouraged their members to use the power of the ballot box, to cast a vote rather than fire a bullet. To not put too fine a point on it, it is because of this mature and responsible manner that not only is a decade of democracy able to be celebrated in South Africa, but also a democracy that came about in a way that certainly showed the African continent, and indeed the world, how it should be done.

I said earlier that worker power, which is to be respected as a properly organised and structured system of labour lobby and representation, emerged as a result of prevailing conditions at the time of the industrial revolution. Today of course the whole trade union scenario is somewhat different to those dark days. While it is still the representative voice of millions of workers worldwide who otherwise would have no voice with which to address management - the ICEM itself representing some 20 million workers, organised labour today has spread its sphere of influence into fields as diverse as retail sales and employee insurance of various kinds.

Labour unions view themselves as good 'corporate citizens' of their home-base countries, and rightly so.

The mining industry is particularly proud of its relationship with South African mining unions and associations. Certainly, we engage in head-on clashes at times - especially during wage negotiations - but at others we literally link arms and march in protest together on embassies, commissions and even the Reserve Bank to make our point, and to do so without yielding to the temptation of resorting to solutions of pure compromise which in the long term may harm relations. Today, we are together addressing issues around HIV & Aids, skills development and education, social upliftment, sustainable development and a whole host of other matters. This is done for good reason, because if we were not in partnership together - and also often with government's support, participation and encouragement - none of these matters could have been responded to with initiatives that would have a hope of succeeding; of this I am entirely convinced.

To my mind this is what true freedom and democracy is all about, and this is why we in South Africa are so fortunate, because we have found the means with which to make it work.

So while we are coming to the end of 2004, the year in which 10 years of freedom and democracy have been celebrated with just cause, I would like to close my remarks by saying that I view these past 10 years much as one would view a learner driver's licence. We have had the opportunity to gain experience during our ten years of holding our learner's licence, now, we have the next ten and the next ten and so forth ahead of us, into which we can drive with confidence,

knowing that we have learnt from our mistakes and have been strengthened by our successes.

Thank you.