

The making of the

WORKING

CLASS



The Kimberly diamond mine. Each prospector owned a small plot which he dug with the help of African labour. The plots were linked to the surface by a line which was used to haul the dug rock to the top where it was then sifted for diamonds.

AFTER the discovery of diamonds near Kimberly, in 1867 and gold in the Eastern Transvaal in 1871, the face of South Africa rapidly changed. Money was now available to build larger armies, better systems of transport and more efficient governments so that the human and natural resources of the country could be exploited more effectively. Big capitalists became interested in the profits to be made and imperial countries like Britain were soon following their lead. The impact of these events was felt on the highveld of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

Until this time the Boer Republics of the highveld had been very weak and unstable. Our history books usually tell us that the trekkers moved into land left empty after inter-tribal fighting. Here they set up self-sufficient apartheid style states. Recent historical writing shows that this is wrong. Instead of heading for depopulated parts of the country, the trekkers chose to settle close to or among some of the largest concentrations of black population. Here they often came into conflict with nearby black chiefdoms.

Why has this misleading picture been painted in our history books? Part of the reason is that historians have often imagined that the separation of black and white races in South Africa was the natural and original way of things. They tell us that the trekkers were strong, that they did not have to rely on any outside help and that they were racially exclusive. Blacks on the other hand were attracted to the white states by the possibility of earning money and by the benefits of 'white civilisation'. The white states, these histories tell us, were therefore justified in segregating themselves and in refusing blacks political and other rights.

Little of this is correct. The trekkers were neither racially exclusive nor self-sufficient. For them to be able to cultivate their land, for them to be able to look after their herds, for them to be able to hunt — they needed black labour. This meant that they had to attract blacks to work for them or that they had to find some way of forcing blacks to work. But because the trekkers were militarily weak compared to many of their neighbouring African states, they could not do this by themselves and they became dependant in many ways on these African neighbours — especially for labour. The Swazi, for example, sold young children who they had seized from other chiefdoms to the Boer farmers.

According to an early account of one Swazi chief: 'The first white man to come to Swaziland was a Boer named Ngalonkulo. President Kruger also came to the country in the early days to purchase Tonga children with horses and oxen from the Swazi. Other Boers made similar purchases.'

These children who were then 'apprenticed' became one of the earliest parts of the rural working class.

So, between the 1840's and the 1860's a degree of equality existed between white and black societies in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Until the late 1860's and the 1870's most black societies were independent, for example, the Sotho in Lesotho, the Zulu, the Swazi, the Pedi, the Transvaal Ndebele, the Venda and the various Tswana chiefdoms. In places, the Boer states were in fact on the defensive. In 1868 for example they were pushed out of the Zoutpansberg in the Northern Transvaal. And in 1866 and 1876 they had to fall back after failing to defeat first the Transvaal Ndebele and then the Pedi.

The situation only began to change after the diamond discoveries in the late 1860's and more particularly the gold discoveries on the Witwatersrand in 1886. After the discovery of diamonds, capital began to pour in to exploit the diamond fields. Railways were built into the interior and a huge demand grew for labour and for food to feed the miners and cities began to spring up round the mines. Serious competition for labour was the result. Boer farmers in the independent trekker Republic of the Transvaal began hijacking migrant workers travelling to the mines. Both the Transvaal

In the last issue of FOSATU Worker News, we looked at the breaking of Xhosa resistance in the Eastern Cape. In this issue we move on to examine the part played by the mining revolution in subduing independent African states in the interior of South Africa, and in creating a much larger African working class.



Early mineworkers

and the Zulu states blocked the free flow of labour to the sugar plantations of Natal. Conflict began to grow.

It was in this situation that Britain appointed a new high Commissioner (a kind of governor) named Sir Bartle Frere to its colonies in the Cape and Natal, and instructed him to join the Boer Republics into one united federation with Natal and the Cape. His second task was to defeat the independent chiefdoms of the interior, so as to provide security and new sources of labour.

Frere wrote at the time: 'The uneducated lower classes (of the black races) are well inclined to become the free labouring population of states which protect them. They are in this respect a great benefit and a very decided advantage to the European colonies which do not seem likely to prosper on this continent if restricted to exclusively white labour.'

Of the various independent African states to be attacked, the Zulu were top of his list. In 1877 one of Frere's closest advisers — a man named Theophilus Shepstone — wrote that the Zulu king Cetshwayo was 'the secret hope of every petty independent chief hundreds of miles away from him who feels a desire that his colour should prevail and it will not be until this hope is destroyed that they will make up their minds to submit to the rule of civilisation.'

So, Sir Bartle Frere proceeded first to take control of the trekker Republic in the Transvaal and then to attack the Zulu and the Pedi. Neither of these African states gave up easily and the British suffered serious defeats at the hands of the Zulu, before the Zulu were eventually beaten at the

battle of Ulundi in 1879. In the decade that followed most of the African chiefdoms in and around the Transvaal were brought under white control. Taxes were imposed and migrant labour was drawn out. By 1897, over 75 000 Africans were working at any one time in the gold mines of the Rand. The first major stage of proletarianisation (making people workers) had been achieved. The South African working class was well on its way to being formed.

PART FOUR: THE MINING REVOLUTION