

BLACK INDUSTRIAL PROTEST ON  
THE WITWATERSRAND, 1901-02

*by Peter Warwick*

A feature of the historiography of industrialisation during its initial stages of development in South Africa has been the acceptance that the role played by the black labour force was largely a passive one. Organised industrial action by black workers, however, can be traced back at least to the turn of the present century, when a series of protests by black workers on the Rand took place. During 1901-02 strikes and mass desertions occurred at the Consolidated Main Reef, Geldenhuis, Langlaate and Durban Roodepoort Mines, as well as at the Vereeniging Coal Mines and the Brakpan Electric Works. While each dispute can be understood fully only by examining the particular work context in which it took place, the protests happened at a time of transition in the Transvaal from a period of war to one of reconstruction, and in the circumstances of wage reductions and an offensive by Randlords, in close collaboration with the post-war British administration, to destroy completely the informal bargaining power of the black industrial work force on the gold reef.

The background to the protests will be sketched in as briefly as possible. During the South African War the workers who remained in the industrial region experienced considerable hardship. Shortly after the beginning of the war many of the 20 000 or more workers who remained in the mining area were commandeered by the Boer government either to provide unpaid labour for the commandos, or to work in other occupations related to the war effort. In January 1900 a maximum monthly wage for black workers of only 20s was introduced by the government, a curfew was put into operation, all assemblies of Africans prohibited, and frequent police raids made into the compounds to maintain control over the labour force and to discourage any protests by workers. Although Africans' expectations were apparently raised by the prospect of a British administration in the Transvaal, since pass books were burned *en masse* by workers when Roberts's columns entered Johannesburg in June 1900, afterwards the hardships of those in the industrial

area were consolidated rather than ameliorated. 8 000 workers were conscripted to build a new railway for transporting coal along the gold reef at the wage rate of only 10d a day; 4 000 men were drafted to form an inexpensive labour force for the army; and the remaining workers were retained by the mines for maintenance work at a wage rate of 1 shilling a day. Martial law restrictions were placed on the movement of Africans, so that many workers found it almost impossible to return home and, therefore, were compelled to remain on the mines long after their contracts had expired.

During the war the wages of black workers were reduced by the Chamber of Mines from their pre-war level of 50 shillings to 30-35 shillings. Equally important, however, wage rates outside the gold mining sector were maintained and often increased, and alternative employment opportunities in more congenial occupations were easily available in reparation work, in large-scale public works enterprises, at the ports, and even in other industries on the Rand itself. The gold mining industry was only able to recruit a work force in 1903 which was two-thirds the size of that which it had employed in 1899.

Death rates among workers in the mining compounds before the outbreak of war are not available, but immediately afterwards the number of deaths rose steeply from 92 in May 1902, to 247 in November. Between these months the average monthly death rate per thousand workers was 48,5 and in July 1903, a peak was reached of 112,54. Harsh though conditions may have been on the reef, workers were often in a poor physical condition when they arrived to begin work, having travelled long distances on foot or in closed railway trucks with no sanitary facilities (those transporting workers were classified as goods rather than passenger trains). The problem was exacerbated after the war by the congestion of the railway system, the shortage of rolling stock which caused the terrible overcrowding of workers in available trucks, and by further delays in the transporting of workers from Braamfontein to particular mines. One in eight mining recruits

were found physically unfit to begin work immediately.

The post-war British administration also introduced a much more sophisticated system of control over African workers. During the 1890s many mining companies systematically recruited workers from each other by employing labour 'touts' to procure newly arrived workers in the industrial area and to encourage desertions from the compounds of neighbouring mines, promising the workers better pay and conditions. In spite of legislative attempts to prevent such practices, especially the pass law of 1895, which compelled Africans to wear a metal arm badge (or later an official pass) numbered as a means of identification, desertions became such a problem because of the inconsistencies and maladministration of the law, which workers were able successfully to exploit, that in November 1898 the number of desertions reported by mining companies exceeded the number of workers legitimately discharged. This system provided black mine workers with the means to exercise selection in their ultimate choice of employer. After the annexation of the Transvaal, however, workers were confronted by a maximum average wage system, the establishment of a monopolistic recruiting agency, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, which was created with the intention of 'rendering impossible in the future the indiscriminate touting and traffic in Natives which in the past existed among the mining companies' (Chamber of Mines, Annual Reports for 1900 and 1901, p. 111), and by an administration determined on regulating labour to a greater degree within the industrial area. The Milner regime extended the pass department, developed legal procedures to deal with breaches of contract, introduced a scheme to register the finger-prints of all mining employees to help identify those who deserted, and established regulations to prohibit mining companies recruiting workers in labour districts. The possibility of black workers exchanging employers to find the most congenial working conditions was therefore considerably reduced; the mine workers' former bargaining power,

albeit exercised informally and on an individual scale, was largely destroyed by the new rapport which had been established between the mining industry and the state. It was in these circumstances that the protests by black workers took place.

The first endeavours of the W.N.L.A. met with only limited success and some active resistance on the part of workers. In 1901, 192 Venda workers refused on arrival at the mines to begin work, and only after a dispute lasting ten days were they eventually persuaded to do so. 29 Rolong workers also refused to commence work, expressing dissatisfaction with the rates of pay they found to exist on the mines, and the Association prudently returned them to Mafeking.

#### VEREENIGING ESTATE COAL MINE

The first serious protest by workers was in a number of respects untypical of the kind of unrest which followed later, since it did not take place on a gold mine where wage reductions had been enforced. On 7 September 1901, 162 Sotho workers arrived at the Vereeniging Estate Coal Mine from Aliwal North, where many of them had been waiting for up to five weeks for rail permits to enable them to travel to the Transvaal. Two days later the workers held a meeting after which they refused to begin work until they had been paid 1s 6d for each day they had been detained at Aliwal, in accordance with a promise made to them by the recruiting agent. When the Manager, E.M. Goodwin, assured them they would be paid in due course, the workers threatened to return home unless they were paid immediately. The next day 60 of the workers openly deserted, in spite of the warning that by doing so they were breaking the law; the group was detained after crossing the Vaal River and brought back to Viljoen's Drift. When the Sotho refused to re-cross the river, soldiers of the East Lancashire Regiment surrounded the workers, who armed themselves with sticks and stones in a bid to escape. Nine workers were shot dead and fifteen others were wounded.

The most prominent issue in the negotiations between the workers and the management was the deception practiced by the recruiting agent who had enlisted their labour; the workers insisted that the agent had promised them that their wages would be paid while they were detained at Aliwal, and that they had been brought to Vereeniging under false pretences, since they had been told they were to work for the government not for a private company. The dispute, however, followed a series of protests by Sotho workers against their maltreatment at the Vereeniging Mine; only a short time before the military had been called in to the estate to quell a disturbance, after which two white workers had been imprisoned for three months for assault. The workers may have known of the reputation of the Mine, increasing their determination not to take up employment there. Indeed, conditions on the coal mines at Vereeniging at this time were known to be particularly hazardous; 1 100 desertions took place from the Cornelia Mine between July and December 1902, and when a census of workers was carried out at the end of the year only 850 workers were found out of the anticipated labour force of 1 150. The spokesman for the Sotho protesters was the headman, Jacob, though it was claimed later that the most militant among them was a worker named Likwala. Although Jacob was officially charged with responsibility for the work party, on the two occasions when he was approached to use his influence with the workers to prevent further conflict, he refused to do so.

#### JOHANNESBURG LOCATION RIOT

On 1 January 1902, a disturbance took place at the Johannesburg location when 6 Zulu policemen and 2 white constables were attacked by 200 mostly Xhosa mine workers. The gathering of angry workers was dispersed only after shots had been fired into the crowd, killing 2 Africans and wounding a number of others. Later, 43 participants were sentenced to terms of imprisonment of up to 12 months. The riot provides evidence of the deterioration of relations on the Rand at this time between Xhosa and Zulu workers. Afterwards a meeting was held by the Zulu workers at the location, at which a petition

was drawn up to Sir Godfrey Lagden, the Commissioner for Native Affairs, requesting that a separate location be established for them, since the workers wished 'to be removed from immediate contact with other Natives (and more especially the Maxosa element)'. To analyse the riot as one of the earliest examples of 'faction fighting' on the mines, however, would be misleading, unless it is understood that the antagonism between Zulu and Xhosa workers was to a large extent the result of attempts by the mine owners to exercise greater control over the work force by 'divide and rule' tactics. It was reported to the South African Native Affairs Commission in 1905 that the policy of appointing Zulus as gangers over workers from the Transkei was one of the main reasons, in addition to the reduction of wages, why Xhosa workers had shown reluctance to work on the gold fields after the war. Supervision of the compounds and locations increased in intensity during the war and afterwards; many of those recruited for police work were Zulus.

#### CONSOLIDATED MAIN REEF MINE

Unrest on the reef erupted again at the beginning of April when 116 of the 183 workers at the Consolidated Main Reef Mine went out on strike. In spite of the intervention of the Inspector of Labour the workers refused to go back to work and were all arrested. The origins of the stoppage are not difficult to discover, since a contractor engaged in the construction of a boiler house at the mine was known by the strikers to be paying his employees higher wages than those they themselves received. The workers demanded either equal remuneration or the right to work instead for the contractor. Indeed, the dispute was aggravated by the intervention of yet another contracting company, Gratton and Stuart of Elandsfontein, which sent a worker into the mining compound to offer the strikers 20 shillings a week if they left the mine and came to work for the company. The Manager of the mine complained that 'if the contractors are allowed to go on they will obtain all the best boys, many of which are as good at certain work as

white men, and at the same time unsettle the company's boys'.

#### GELDENHUIS ESTATE MINE

On 6 January 1902, 536 Pedi workers had been registered for a six month contract to work on the Geldenhuis Mine. At the end of June, 448 workers struck work and demanded to be returned home, claiming that their contract had expired, though it did not run out until 6 July. The Germiston Mounted Police were summoned to the Mine and 16 leaders of the protest arrested and taken to Germiston, where they were charged under the Masters and Servants Act for inciting a breach of contract. The remaining strikers broke out of the compound and marched towards the town threatening to release the detained men by force, and they too were arrested. 432 workers were fined £2 or one month's hard labour, five indunas fined £2 or two months hard labour, and 11 other leaders £2 or 6 weeks hard labour. The company offered to pay the workers' fines on condition that they completed the contract, though over 100 of the strikers appear to have chosen to go to gaol with their leaders instead. The grievances of the workers derived from their dissatisfaction with the nature of their employment. As early as 8 January, Asaph Moruthani, the secretary to the Pedi Chief, Sekukuni II, who had been sent to accompany the work party to the gold fields and report on their conditions of service, complained that the men had been deceived concerning their ultimate destination. Sekukuni had originally refused to supply workers to private industry, but on the assurance of the local administration that the men were required for government work, he had permitted them to leave. It is unclear why the men almost worked out their contracts before resorting to protest action, though it is possible the men may have hoped that the company would turn a blind eye to such an incident so near the completion date of the contract. On 22 May, 164 workers, who had left their employment on the Ginsberg Mine and camped outside Boksburg, had been permitted to return to Pietersburg, together with over 100 workers who had deserted from the East Rand Mines, rather

than prosecuted and made to complete their contracts. It is possible that this episode set a precedent which other workers attempted to follow. The strike was led by the 5 Pedi indunas, whose task it was to supervise the work force and provide a link between the mining company and the workers' Chief. S.M. Pritchard, the Chief Inspector of Labour, believed the protest was wholly their responsibility: 'the strike was due to the indunas ... That these men were the instigators there would appear to be no doubt'.

#### LANGLAAGTE DEEP MINE

Shortly after midnight on 28 June, 1 100 workers at the Langlaagte Mine broke down the gates of the compound and marched towards the Village Deep Mine from where they had been enlisted earlier. A detachment of the Johannesburg Mounted Police pursued the deserters, who were armed with knobkerries, bottles and stones, and eventually persuaded them to return to the Langlaagte Mine, where they stoned the compound manager's office before going back to their quarters. The 15 leaders of the protest demanded the dismissal of the compound manager, and declared their intention to desert again the following morning unless this was done, though police supervision prevented another mass walk-out. Although the dispute appears quickly to have subsided, the roots of the unrest were deep. Because of the restrictions on the movement of Africans in the Transvaal, many workers at the mine had been prevented from returning home directly their contracts had expired. Moreover, the behaviour of the compound manager, Joseph Woichowsky, turned the workers discontent into open anger. Woichowsky had been guilty of rejecting almost out of hand applications by workers for temporary passes to leave the compound, which prevented them visiting a store situated within a few hundred yards of the mine. Almost certainly the Langlaagte workers depended on the store to supplement their diet. Protesters interviewed by the police after the walk-out also claimed that Woichowsky had presided over acts of gross cruelty at the mine. Trooper Brickhill of the J.M.P.



reported that:

'... the Compound Manager illtreats them by having them thrashed both in the compound and down the mine with a cat-o-nine tails and thrashed them on the testicles: further ... they were shut up like dogs ... (they) stated they would work and not give any trouble if the Compound Manager treated them as human beings not dogs, and they would not continue to work while he was in charge of the compound and they would kill him if he continued'.

Clearly, the relations between the labour force and Woichowsky had deteriorated in the circumstances of renewed mining operations.

#### DURBAN ROODEPOORT MINE

Within a month of the Langlaagte and Geldenhuis protests further unrest was evident at the Durban Roodepoort Mine. On 21 July the black work force of 700 men held a meeting before the morning shift, after which they demanded to speak to the manager and refused to go underground unless they were given an increase in the 30 shillings a month for which they had been contracted. To emphasise their case the workers assembled in the compound with their belongings and threatened to leave the property. Within 2 hours, however, the protesters had been induced to return to work, 'assisted' by the black mine police, and the threat that if the stoppage continued the strikers would be punished in the same way as the Geldenhuis workers. Afterwards the 3 leaders of the protest, 'Canteen', 'English' and 'Madoda', all from Mozambique, claimed they had been misled by the recruiting agent at their kraals, who had assured them that they would receive wages in excess of those that had prevailed before the war, and that they would be contracted for a period of only 6 months. When they had arrived at the mine they found they were to be paid a mere 30 shillings a month, and that their contract was to extend for 12 months. The leaders, who had agreed to resume work only with

the consent of the strikers, emphasised they were underpaid, but that it was only a little more money they demanded.

#### BRAKPAN ELECTRIC WORKS

The final eruption of worker protest in 1902 occurred at the Brakpan Electric Works. On 11 September, 61 Xhosa employees under their leader, 'One O'Clock', struck work and marched to Boksburg, following the example of 40 workers who had left the property in June, where they demanded to lay their grievances before the Magistrate. They complained of ill-treatment at the hands of the resident engineer who, they reported, regularly sjambokked workers and had them thrown among burning embers; they protested, too, against the dangerous nature of the work caused by bursting boiler tubes. The Chief Inspector held an enquiry at the works, after which he concluded it had been the intention of the workers to obtain discharges on the pretext of ill-treatment. His verdict was endorsed by the magistrate of the Boksburg Native Court, who sentenced 55 strikers to one month's imprisonment with hard labour since, he believed, 'it was perfectly clear that the desertions took place with the object of getting more remunerative work elsewhere'.

The strikers described above were small in scale; they appear to have involved no more than 2 500 workers. They took place over a period of 12 months, in a variety of districts, and were not confined to one industry. Although the disputes at Geldenhuis and Langlaagte occurred on the same day, there is no evidence to suggest that they were in any way directly related. The only specific link connecting any 2 of the incidents is that the punishments meted out to the Geldenhuis strikers was used by the management of the Durban Roodepoort Mine to threaten their workers to return peacefully to work. (But in view of the 'official' nature of the documentary evidence used for this study it would be unrealistic to conclude, therefore, that the action of one group of workers was necessarily completely unknown to any other group). None of

the protests appear to have been successful in their immediate aims, though the reluctance shown by black workers to migrate to the gold fields induced the Chamber of Mines to re-introduce the 1897 wage schedule at the end of 1902. Any continuing upward movement of wage-levels in the immediate post-war period, however, was prevented by the introduction of indentured Chinese labour to the Rand in 1904. Some improvements took place in the conditions of life in the mining compounds, though it has been argued that this can be related to the fear of censure from the British government on the part of Sir Godfrey Lagden, rather than to pressures for improvements from the mine workers themselves. (Jeeves, p.17)

Why, then, do the protests merit examination? In the first place they are the earliest organised protests by black workers on the Rand which so far have been analysed. Further research may show other strikes to have taken place before the South African War. Secondly, it is important to understand the way in which what Charles van Onselen has described as the 'individual, informal and largely unorganised' resistance to exploitation on the part of the first generation of black industrial wage-earners in southern Africa evolved into more formal and recognizable expressions of organised protest action. The development of black worker protest is most usefully conceived as a continuum of resistance to exploitation which includes opposition to wage labour on the part of Africans by raising necessary cash requirements in other ways (such as the sale of livestock and agricultural produce); resistance to recruitment by labour agents, who frequently practiced deception concerning wage rates, contracts and working conditions; selectiveness in the labour market to achieve the highest possible remuneration; individual desertions against unsatisfactory working conditions; strikes and walk-outs which though revealing recognizable leadership left behind them no permanent worker organisation; and finally the establishment of black trade unionism. The Industrial and Commercial workers' union, formed in 1919, has been interpreted for too long as a movement almost with-

out antecedents. Thirdly, small in numerical terms and unsuccessful though the protests of 1901-02 may have been, it would be surprising if they had been anything else in view of the penalties which faced workers who were brought before the courts, the intensification of police activity on the Rand during the war and immediately afterwards, the swift action of the army and the police against protesters, and the close community of interest between the government and the mining companies, which was attested to by the partisan spirit in which the investigations of the Chief Inspector of Labour were carried out. Finally, the protests took place in a common environment and evidence a number of common features.

The disputes occurred after a period of considerable hardship on the Rand during the South African War, and in the circumstances of a rapidly rising death rate among black mine workers, wage reductions, and a decline in the purchasing power of workers' wages as a result of the inflation of livestock and grain prices, and the prices of other consumption items. They took place, too, in an environment in which the expectations of workers had been raised as a result of the outcome of the war (in this respect the protests might be considered in the context of the industrial ferment in South Africa which followed immediately after the two world wars). Restrictions on the free movement of black workers in the Transvaal, institutional and legislative measures to control more effectively the black labour force, and the more efficient policing of the mining area, implied that it was much more difficult after the annexation of the Transvaal for workers to desert a company either to escape unsatisfactory working and living conditions and repressive supervisors and policemen, or to find alternative better-paid and more congenial work. In these circumstances individual protest action on the part of black workers was made more difficult, and the conditions of life in the mining industry made all the more bearable.

The deception of black workers by recruiting agents was protested against by workers at the Geldenhuis,

Vereeniging and Durban Roodepoort Mines; at the Brakpan Electric Works and the Vereeniging and Langlaagte Mines workers complained of their ill-treatment by other members of the work force; specific demands for higher wages were made by workers at the Consolidated Main Reef and Durban Roodepoort Mines.

In most of the disputes some form of leadership can be discerned. At the Geldenhuis and Vereeniging Mines negotiations were conducted by headmen in whose charge the workers were placed during their period of employment; at Geldenhuis the induna system provided the cohesive force for the protest, while at Vereeniging the headman, Jacob, appears to have been reluctant to act against the aspirations of the workers, though the *de facto* leadership may have lain elsewhere. In other disputes rank-and-file leaders are cited by name in the reports, though in view of the authorities' desire to prevent further protests, men may have been singled out for salutary punishment; thus, some of the leaders may have been created as much by the management as by the workers, though it is important to recognise that in the subsequent inquiries these men showed themselves willing to represent the grievances of their fellow workers.

The ethnicity of those taking part appears to have been an important binding force in the protests, often stemming from the immediate grievances of the workers. At Geldenhuis the dispute was fundamentally between the management of the mine and the Pedi work force, the unrest at the Durban Roodepoort Mine was apparently confined to workers from Mozambique, and the strike at the Brakpan Electric Works was reported to have been an exclusively Xhosa affair. At Vereeniging the Sotho workers cited the independence of their people as a symbol of protest; when the Provost Marshall attempted to induce the workers to return to the mine he was informed that 'they were Lorethodi's (sic) people and they were going to fight ... (the British) may beat the Boers but could not the Basuto'. Ethnicity appears to have been an important and understandably useful binding element

in the earliest protest actions by the first generation of industrial workers in southern Africa (in the Wankie Colliery Strike in 1912, for example). However, it would be premature to conclude, therefore, that class consciousness derived from the labourers' own perception of themselves as 'workers' had not yet begun to transcend ethnic divisions. The impression of ethnic cohesion in the protests may be exaggerated by the inadequacy of the available evidence, since it is possible that the ethnicity of the workers involved in some of the disputes may only have been assumed by the management to have corresponded with that of their leaders. Furthermore, the largest protest, that involving over a thousand workers at the Langlaagte Mine, was not described as having been confined to any one ethnic group .

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