

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1922

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I. Turmoil in South Africa, 1918-1922

The Arrogance of General Smuts

In the years following the First World War the dominant political figure in South Africa was General Smuts. He had returned from Great Britain, where he had been a member of the War Cabinet with a formidable reputation as a soldier, a pacifier, and an arbiter in international affairs. The ruling class in Britain saw this former Boer General as a man with whom they could work and had offered him a permanent position in the British political structure — as a cabinet minister or in the House of Lords.

The stories of his activities in Britain during the war were legion if not always glorious. He had been the only member of the War Cabinet who supported the Generals when they proposed the offensive at Passchendaele in 1917 — a disaster that cost the Allies 400,000 men and the Germans 270,000. As a member of the War Cabinet Smuts persuaded the police in London, munition workers in Coventry, and coal miners in Wales to return to work after they had come out on strike. He helped plan the Middle East strategy, which brought Palestine under British control, and was sent to Hungary to help oust the Communist regime of Bela Kun.¹

He also tried to change the map of Southern Africa when he proposed to the War Cabinet that South Africa be given Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) — but had to be content with the mandate of German South West Africa (SWA), the future Namibia. Most important for events that were to follow in South Africa, Smuts took the leading role in setting up an air ministry in Britain in 1917. He unified the various branches of the air service, and was effectively the creator of the Royal Air Force. He was aware then of the importance of aeroplanes as a means of control and submission, and was prepared in 1918 to use this formidable weapon against Africans who were campaigning against the passes on the Rand. The aeroplane was not needed at the time but was used to deadly effect in March 1922 against the white workers, and against the Bondelswarts in South West Africa when they rose against the imposition of new taxes in 1923.

Smuts assumed the premiership of South Africa after the death of General Botha at the end of August 1919, and stamped his authority on the political, economic and social development of the country. This was no easy task. The country's economy was depressed, and inflation was rampant. Rural areas had been devastated by a cycle of droughts and heavy rainfalls, and disease had destroyed livestock and people alike.

There was widespread unrest in African communities throughout South Africa and SWA, and Smuts faced opposition in the Legislative Assembly

from the Afrikaner based National Party (NP) and the South African Labour Party (SALP). Outside the chamber he was challenged by the (white) trade unions and by the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), forerunner of the African National Congress. Old social problems, brushed aside by the war, reappeared and demanded solution – and all that Smuts could provide was exhortation or repression.

The opposition to Smuts in the early 1920s, propelled by different agendas, was fragmented and divided. The black communities, lacking effective national leadership, and divided regionally and ethnically, could not mount an effective campaign against the government for the most elementary of social and political rights. Furthermore, the black urban work force was small in number, mainly unskilled or employed in domestic service, largely migrant, and only concentrated in large numbers in the mines where they were housed and controlled in single-sex compounds. There was as yet only the beginning of an organization to represent the workers, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (the ICU) and it had no presence until 1924 in the industrial and mining heartland of the country, the Witwatersrand.

The NP was interested only in protecting the interests of its Afrikaner constituents and had little influence in the trade unions, while the SALP, pusillanimous and blinkered by its belief in segregation, confined itself largely to parliamentary politicking. The white working class, intent on maintaining its privileges, used its organizational base in the trade unions to fight for its own sectional interests. The struggles they engaged in, against mineowners, industrialists and public services, were bitter, but were circumscribed by remaining inside the arena of white settler society.

Smuts had no hesitation in mobilising the police against industrial or community action – whether black or white. His police suppressed the incipient trade union organised by Masabalala in Port Elizabeth in October 1920, and shot down the religious sect, known as the 'Israelites', at Bulhoek in 1921.² At the same time the police in rural areas kept a close watch on dissidents and were prepared to remove those it deemed subversive. In the case of white trade union action, Smuts stood waited for an opportunity to intervene. It was only at a particular historical juncture in 1922, when the white opposition, both nationalist and labour, found common enemies in the Chamber of Mines and Smuts that they campaigned together – although their co-operation was always limited in scope.

The Labour Party, consistent with its segregationist policy ignored, or was opposed to, the struggles of the black population and the white trade unionists were openly hostile to African campaigns. Only the tiny International Socialist League (ISL), and later under its new name as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), participated in the strikes of Africans on the Rand alongside the SANNC. In particular, the *International*, organ of the ISL and then of the CPSA, gave the strikes of both black and white workers its full, if critical, support. This extended through 1922, until its press

was dismantled by the government during the General Strike. In these events little is known of those who were active in the strikes and were said to be members of the ISL or CPSA. It has never been shown conclusively that persons called communists were indeed members of the party. Yet W H (Bill) Andrews, a leading member of the CPSA, was on one of the smaller (if unofficial) strike committees in 1922 and it is claimed that two of the leaders killed during the revolt of March 1922 were also communists.

David Ivon Jones, the secretary of the ISL, who had been instrumental in forming the first black trade union – the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) – and had been behind some of the party's support for the African strikers in 1918, was in Moscow when the miners came out in January 1922 and he took up their cause. He wrote about the strike and subsequent revolt and aimed to raise support in Britain.³ It is also said that he advised his comrades in South Africa on the course of events, although the slowness of the post would have made it extremely difficult for his letters or articles to reach South Africa in time for them to be considered.

Smuts bombed the white workers into submission but the ultimate effect of that action led directly to the eclipse of Smuts and the replacement of his government by a coalition of the National and Labour Parties. The National Party went on to introduce legislation that made Afrikaans the national language alongside English, changed the South African flag and, more important, allowed Hertzog to introduce his Native Bills (only passed in 1936 with the assistance of Smuts). Hertzog also introduced a 'civilised labour' policy which led to the replacement of some black labour by 'poor whites'.

Nonetheless, the white working class of South Africa suffered a major defeat in 1922, even though the action had been confined mainly to miners, and mostly on the Rand. This boded ill for the Labour Party, which emerged from the strike with little glory, for the miners who were crushed, and for the Communist Party which was reduced to a small sect.

Discontent and Strikes, 1918-21

The existence of centres of disaffection in South Africa after 1918 owed much to the state of depression in the economy, the prolonged droughts in the countryside and the despair felt in many communities. But there was also a continuity in anti-governmental agitation that extended through the war years. There had been confrontations between the peasants of the eastern Cape and the administration over the dipping of cattle at the beginning of the war. The groundswell of discontent was never extinguished and was exacerbated in the countryside by disease, afflicting both livestock and people alike which, together with drought, left the population impoverished. Opposition to government agents emerged openly in 1917 when the report of a commission on land holdings (by Africans) was published, leading to the publication of a new Native Land Act and, even more ominously, a Native Affairs Ad-

ministration Bill which aimed at forcing all Africans, except those under contract, out of the towns.⁴

Writing to Lord Bryce on 23 March 1917, John X Merriman, a contender for the Prime Ministership of the Union of South Africa in 1910, spoke of the tensions in the country.

We are struggling with our session. The bitterness of the anti-English faction is incredible, quite equal to the Irish sample . . . Just at this moment, as if the division between the European sections was not enough, we are called upon to consider a most ill-judged measure of Native administration, the object of which professes to be the segregation of the European and non-European, and the relegation of the latter to special areas. The effect of this, if it could be carried out — which is impossible — would be to reduce the Native to the condition of serfs — at least that is the opinion of the Native leaders and their friends . . .

Predicting that if persisted upon, the new Act could lead to a cycle of unrest, he said that 'No legislative barriers can stop the Native tide from rising'. He concluded

The experiment of a white race settling in Africa is by no means assured, and unless we mend our ways we may go the same way in the South that the Romans and the Greek, the Carthaginian and the Vandal, did in the North; or at best we may become an African Mexico.⁵

This was a most prescient observation by one of South Africa's leading statesmen.

Merriman was not alone in his foreboding. Official dispatches from the Governor-General, Lord Buxton, to the Colonial Office and reports in the Department of Justice (DoJ) files in the post-war period were filled with reports from police and informers, some serious, others trivial, of populist leaders who were said to be rallying supporters with a series of demands. The reports also showed that communists (or 'bolsheviks' as they were called) were kept under close surveillance and that Ministers were considering the introduction of anti-communist legislation.⁶

The same DoJ files also mentioned groups of whites who had been opposed to South Africa's participation in the war and were organizing a revolt which would lead to the declaration of a Republic. It is not certain how far the police saw conspiracies behind every bush. In their reports the detectives and informers undoubtedly exaggerated and provided alarmist accounts of 'menacing' events, but there can be no doubt about the discontent in the country. The government took the threat seriously. On 1 July 1918, the Prime Minister, General Smuts, issued a manifesto calling on all loyal citizens to stand by the government.⁷

The DoJ files included accounts from across the country of individuals who were said to be agitators. Some were men returned from the war who complained of their treatment in France and predicted the imminent arrival

of Germans or Americans to liberate the African people. Some urged their communities to kill local farmers or demand their land back, claim the right to better conditions or refuse to quit the land when farmers gave them notice. There were other demands: for higher wages and for campaigns against, the pass laws, bachelor and house taxes, railway and tramway regulations, and against the inadequacies of schooling. There were many reports of speeches by 'agitators', many of them inflammatory. Preacher Ngobeza from the Standerton district (in the eastern Transvaal), in a speech in March 1921, was reported to have said

the white people had no right to be here. and the white man who says that he has got a farm here must roll it up, put it in a train and spread it in the land where he comes from.

He also urges a general strike by all members of the Congress, if the whites got cross and used force they would make war.

There were also reports on the formation of the ICU and its activities in the Cape Town docks and accounts of the protests in Port Elizabeth (the Masabalala 'affair'), in which a large crowd of Africans gathered to protest against the imprisonment of their leader. When a petition for his release was arbitrarily rejected there were scuffles followed by a shooting spree in which the police and armed civilians killed 23 and wounded 126. But the most urgent communications came from the Witwatersrand.⁷

There were strikes of African workers on the Witwatersrand between 1918 and 1920 and although there was an embryonic general workers union, known as the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), organized by the International Socialist League, it collapsed in 1918. The involvement of its members in subsequent strikes is unclear, but most industrial action appeared to be spontaneous, was disciplined and was well led.

Industrial action by black workers commenced in February 1918, with the boycott of the stores on mines in Benoni. This action spread rapidly across the Witwatersrand and at one stage 15 mines were affected. The workers, who found that money had depreciated during the war by 50 per cent or more, complained that prices were too high and rejected statements of white officials that the increases were due to the war and that whites were also affected. Reporting from Benoni, one detective said:

At first it was thought that only east coast Natives were involved, but all tribes were involved, *and each tribe had its own system of picketing.*
(my stress)

Indeed, on the mines, although there were few signs of discord between ethnic groups, there is evidence of ethnic leaders organizing and leading their compatriots. Thus a copy of a 'Notice to Natives', found in the Department of Justice files, reads:

I beg of you people of Gaza [east coasters] that a person seen going to the Jew stores [that is, the mine concession stores] on Tuesday must be thrashed and the articles that they bought taken away from them and if a purse it must be thrown away and if a blanket it must be torn.

If one of a tribe goes and buys the whole tribe will be included
I finish here.⁸

The nature of the boycott varied from mine to mine. Africans confined to the compounds tried, in some cases, to break out and attack the stores. They were driven back by police. In Springs a large number of women marched on the store and threatened to break it up. Once again the police intervened to stop the destruction. And in Brakpan 600 Shangane workers marched to the Charge Office to demand their release [from their contracts]. They were driven back by mounted police.

The boycott was not a success, even if a few prices were lowered. Within a few weeks it was all over, some men were jailed, and conditions on the mines remained as before.⁹

There were innumerable small strikes in 1918, often involving a small number of workers. Then, in the middle of the year, following a successful strike by white municipal workers, the 'bucket boys' or night soil workers (and also municipal workers) came out on strike. They were arrested and given two month's prison sentences with hard labour. The magistrate warned them that they would be required to resume their normal work, under armed guards and without pay. If they refused to work they would be flogged, if they tried to escape they would be shot. This was too much. The clamour for their release forced the hand of the Prime Minister and they were freed.

The agitation over the bucket workers led to a demand by the SANNC for an overall increase of wages by 1s per day, to be enforced, if necessary, by a general strike from 1 July. The response was overwhelming. Selope Thema, a Congress leader, writing about the event a decade later, said that at the time all the Transvaal African population was seething with dissatisfaction and a general uprising was feared. Saul Msane, Secretary-General of the SANNC who condemned the call for a strike, was stigmatised as *Isita wa Bantu* (enemy of the people).¹⁰

An American missionary, Rev Ray Phillips, who claimed that he assisted in defusing the militancy, said subsequently that:

We attended some of their meetings; heard the disappointment and despair clothed in lurid language by the leaders.

'We'll never get anything out of the white man', they cried, 'except by violence . . .'

A strike was organized at the Village Main Reef Mine. Five thousand native workers refused to work on a certain morning. A lightning strike! It was only on the third day that they were forced back to their work at the point of a bayonet. The strike failed of its purpose — but it was a glorious success in the minds of the leaders. Why? Why, because it demonstrated that *they could do it!* . . .

A new strike was being talked about, but on a larger scale. Now all the 200,000 mine workers were to be organized. Not only that, but every shop worker, every house-boy, every kitchen servant — the whole

300,000 and more [urban residents] were to be enlisted and instructed as to their part.

Then one dark night, as the white folks slept, the compound gates were all to be opened, the mines captured; looted; every shop to be raided; banks broken open; and in every home the white people were to be disposed of quietly in their beds! That day – THE DAY! – Johannesburg with all its mines, buildings, homes, *everything*, would be in black hands.

Claiming that he and his friends had heard things that were not heard by others, he set about winning the confidence of the leaders.¹¹ By the time the 'revolt' was due to begin the firebrands of Congress had second thoughts and were tamed. This had as much to do with the arrest of two leading members of Congress as with the intervention of Rev Phillips. Yet Phillips and others who formed discussion clubs and a Joint Council of Europeans and Natives, to placate the 'hotheads', undoubtedly made a profound impression on the new educated elite. Nonetheless, despite Phillips' diversions and the consequent dampening of militancy, the SANNC, and particularly the Transvaal section, still faced a constituency that demanded militant action.

The first months of 1919 were marked by widespread strikes, pass burnings, and riots by African workers. In Bloemfontein a strike for a minimum daily wage of 4s 6d, centred in the black township, failed, but it led to the formation of the first of two bodies known as the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU). Then, in March 1919 the Transvaal Native Congress resolved to campaign against the pass laws and renewed the demand for higher wages. Action followed almost immediately. On Sunday, 30th March, after addressing a meeting at Vrededorp, Johannesburg, Congress leaders collected passes from those present. On Monday several hundred men gathered at the pass office, where once again passes were collected and destroyed. Those who would not comply had their passes taken, were instructed not to carry passes again, and told to demand more pay. Groups of 20-30 men, and some women, then scoured the town, collecting passes from men they saw. Once again the men were told to demand higher wages. The police tried to round up the groups and succeeded in some cases, in retrieving hundreds of passes. All those arrested gave their names as 'Congress'. Concurrently, a Civil Guard was organised to assist the police.

The campaign escalated on Tuesday when a meeting in Vrededorp resolved to pull working men out of the workshops, and to pay special attention to the Municipal Compounds and the mines. Delegates at the meeting came from several Transvaal towns and they too were instructed to collect passes in their own towns and get the men to leave work. As a measure of intimidation the South African Mounted Riflemen (SAMR) were brought to Johannesburg from Pretoria, and were used outside the courts on Thursday 3 April when the crowd tried to release those who had been arrested.

The campaign could not succeed and Congress leaders stayed away from rallies after the arrests. Nonetheless the defiant spirit remained and was to fuel further struggles, particularly on the mines. There are too few available accounts of the responses to the campaign among the people involved. The one account left in police reports was resonant with the women portrayed in Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*. A Miss Kekane, speaking on 29 April, after having been released from jail because of her participation in the anti-pass campaign, urged her listeners to carry on the fight, saying that the women would help the men. She ended by declaring

If any man comes to me and says he loves me and I find that he has a pass I shall kill him stone dead as I don't want this pass.

The response of men who might have 'loved her' is not recorded.

It was suggested at the time that the SANNC was using the strike of white tramway men and power station engineers for higher wages in Johannesburg to further their own aims. The strikers, who had set up a Board of Control (the body that was dubbed a 'soviet') stopped the lights and trams in the town for two days before the town council capitulated. Yet the decision to launch the anti-pass campaign preceded the strike and there was little sympathy for the black workers from either the Board of Control, or the white strikers. Many black passers-by in Johannesburg were assaulted by the whites who met to cheer their 'soviet' in the Town Hall. The central strike committee further showed its contempt by offering assistance to the authorities 'to prevent outrages on white women and children'.¹²

The struggle was far from over. The clamour in the countryside rose in intensity as drought gripped South Africa and Mozambique. The country had experienced a cycle of droughts and heavy rainfall (which washed away the crops) since 1912, and the situation had been worsened by cattle disease and finally by the post war influenza epidemic. Men on the mines and in the towns received even more urgent requests for money from their families. Yet, despite the inflation, there had been no increase in wages. Mineworkers, house servants, shop workers, dockers and clerks, all clamoured for increased wages, and many linked their disabilities to the notorious pass laws.

There were strikes in several towns but the storm centre remained the Witwatersrand. In rapid succession black miners, sanitary workers, house servants and others came out on strike, and in almost every case faced opposition from the white workers, leading at times to open conflict in the streets.

The black miners, whose strike was by far the most important, witnessed a pay increase of 8s a day for white workers after they threatened to strike. Africans were given an increase of 3d per shift. This was beneath contempt and the workers were incensed. Then, starting on 10 February, after the price of cigarettes increased by 3d to 8d per packet, African miners boycotted the concession stores. This continued for several days and in some cases was accompanied by rioting. On the 11th the first strike took place.¹³ On 20 February the *Rand Daily Mail* noted that there was a marked degree of

cohesion among the workers who had a 'system of picketing which has been sufficiently complete to prevent numerous peaceably inclined and satisfied Natives from going to work'. By Saturday the 21st eleven mines were out involving 42,000 men. On Sunday the SANNC called a meeting at which 2,500 were present, with a few representatives from the mines. The meeting expressed its solidarity with the miners' demand for higher wages and urged the workers to avoid violence. This was one of the few occasions in which Congress leaders called for solidarity: otherwise they had little effect on the course of events.

The miners, confined to the compounds, faced constant provocation from the police who searched the men for weapons and arrested strike leaders. Generally the workers kept the peace although, at the Village Deep mine, there was a scuffle which led to shooting and a bayonet charge: three Africans were killed, and forty-seven injured, twelve of them whites. But as the strike continued, bringing out a total of about 80,000 (with a maximum of about 40,000 on any one day), men were forced down the shafts with rifle butts and sometimes with fixed bayonets.

The white miners did not strike, and did not stay neutral. Their union recommended to their members that they

carry on operations on the mines as usual . . . provided it is the wish of the management' [and furthermore] that . . . they uphold the maintenance of the colour bar as at present constituted, and deprecate any attempt made to imperil it; and recommend the strongest possible measure to combat any such attempt.

As it was *the wish*, the white miners went underground and, when necessary, did the unskilled work to get the gold ore out with the rock. The tension between white and black workers grew as the strike crumbled. At the beginning of March black workers at the Spring Mines *offered to work for a week without the help of the whites, and guaranteed to double production*. It is not certain whether this offer was repeated elsewhere, but it marked a turning point in the claim by African workers to a more responsible and permanent position in the productive process. If the challenge had been accepted by the mine managers the status of Africans in the mines would have been altered irrevocably and a permanent work force would have taken over from migrant (and recruited) labour. Yet the offer was spurned despite the repeated efforts by the mine owners to reduce the number of white workers. It was either felt inexpedient to antagonise the white workers at the time, or the management felt that any response to the black workers during a period of industrial action, would be used as a lever to win further concessions for the migrant workers. The white workers responded angrily and as a consequence it was reported that there was an increase of violence and assaults underground.¹⁴

Only the ISL issued leaflets calling on white workers not to scab, but to no avail. The appeal was ignored and without support, and without centralised organization, the great strike crumbled.

The government had anticipated some of the reactions to post-war discontent and took steps to contain any disturbances. In the immediate aftermath of the peace settlement in Europe, Lord Milner at the Colonial Office received continued reports from the Governor-General, Lord Buxton, who kept him informed of strikes and disturbances, and sent newspaper cuttings and reports of speeches. In March and April 1919 Buxton sent details of widespread strikes by whites in the building trade on the Rand and Pretoria and of the tramway men and power workers in Johannesburg — leading to the establishment of the 'Soviet' by the strike committee. There was also mention of strikes, or threats of strikes, on some mines, among hairdressers, bank clerks and others. The dispatches were routine, but there was a note of urgency after Buxton received a request from the Minister of Native Affairs, F S Malan, on 3 April for aeroplanes, bombs, explosives and flares for use against Africans if the situation got out of hand.

A telegram from Buxton, received in London on 5 April, was more explicit. He said that the government wanted Lt Gearing and his aeroplane (then on show in South Africa) to be made available for demonstration and moral purpose on Africans if they got out of hand. This was because the South African Defence Force had no planes and no pilots. Buxton had agreed, if the Minister asked for it,

on the clear understanding that it will not be used except in connection with serious disturbances among natives, and that its use is not required or requested in connection with any European disturbances, that its main object of utilising its services is the moral effect on the natives . . .

He also added that Lt Gearing could only use bombs or guns under stringent conditions, and in 'extreme necessity' . . . Lord Milner gave his approval two days later.¹⁵ The South African government did not require the aeroplanes on this occasion and made no request for the services of Lt Gearing or his plane. In March 1922, just three years later, Smuts used the South African Air Force's aeroplanes to bomb white strikers into submission.

Apart from the SANNC, the only group, that gave its support to the strikes, or was sympathetic to African demands was the ISL. Its full involvement was concealed to avoid legal action. Consequently, statements in the *International* denied involvement in the events of 1918-20. This was not corrected in subsequent publications although Jones, in his report on *Communism in South Africa*, written in March 1921, said that

In 1918 the propaganda of the IWA [the communist-formed general worker's union] and the pressure of the rising cost of living, produced a considerable strike movement among the native municipal workers, and a general movement for the tearing up of passports. Hundreds of natives who had burned up their passes were jailed every day, and the prisons were full to bursting. Gatherings of native men and women were clubbed down by the mounted police.

... But the most portentous event so far in the awakening of the native workers was the great strike of mine workers on the Rand in March, 1920... For the time being all the old tribal feuds were forgotten, and Zulu and Shangaan came out on strike together irrespective of tribal distinction to the number of 80,000. Without leaders, without organisation, hemmed in their compounds by the armed police, the flame of revolt died down, not without one or two bloody incidents in which the armed thugs of the law distinguished themselves for their savagery.

The mining industry has been wobbling in its attitude towards the educational and civil advancement of the natives. Hindered by political organizations, and the Frankenstein of race prejudice which it has itself conjured up, the Chamber of Mines hesitated in its desire to reduce working costs by opening the higher industrial employments to native and coloured men. In the last few years the *Star*, the Chamber of Mines' daily, has incessantly declared in favour of the civil advancement of the natives, vigorously attacking the white unions for the denial of opportunity to the native worker. These appeals, made in the interest of lower working costs, are nevertheless unanswerable in logic from the Labour point of view. The native does not care what the motive may be. He sees in his economic exploiters the champions of his civil rights. Now that the capitalist parties are safely seated in the government saddle we may look forward to steps being taken to realise the programme.

II. Strike and Revolt on the Rand

The General Strike of 1922

The General strike of 1922 was one of the most traumatic events in the struggles of the mainly white working class against their employers and the South African state.

Although it started as a dispute against wage cuts on the mines, the strike developed into a revolt and ended with the aerial bombardment of portions of Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand. The workers were pounded into defeat, leaders of the strike were killed (or ostensibly committed suicide) and three men died on the scaffold.

It was a pitiless struggle, leaving the organizations that had been actively engaged in the strike severely weakened. The trade union movement went through a period of dormancy and the white miner's organization, almost destroyed as a result of the strike, was effectively incorporated into the state machinery. The Communist Party suffered a decline that left it ineffective over many years. The strike also had a profound effect on the political future of South Africa. The incumbent government of General Smuts was defeated

at the polls by a coalition government of the National and the Labour Parties in 1924 — leaving the way open for National Party hegemony, until it merged with the South African Party (led by Smuts) in 1934.

Despite or perhaps because of the centrality of this event in labour history, interpretations of the nature of the strike and the response of the labour movement towards it have undergone a sea-change. Through the 1920s and 1930s, at least, most members of the Communist Party averred that this was an outstanding example of the struggle between the ruling class and the workers, even though there were racist aspects that were deplorable. The Trotskyists did not dissent. The *Spark*, organ of the Workers Party of South Africa, carried an article on the strike, in November 1935, in which it described the struggle as one between classes, and commemorated the strike as one of the great events in working class history. Edward Roux, in his biography of S P Bunting, and one of the pioneer young communists who demanded that the party organize Africans in the early 1920s, was more critical of the communist position in 1922. Yet he also took the position that, wrong as some of the party had been, they had been correct in supporting the strike.

This interpretation was altered after the Second World War, when the Communist Party dropped talk of class struggle and made the 'national' struggle its priority. The strike was then found to be only racist and therefore reactionary. Smuts's onslaught, the bombing of working class positions, the arrests and trials of thousands of strikers and the crippling of the trade union movement was removed from historical memory. The event was far more complex than a black or white account would suggest and merits a reinvestigation, returning to the views of those who were involved at the time.

*The Origin of the Strike of 1922*¹⁶

Employers in South Africa, caught in the post-war depression, had called for the replacement of white workers by blacks. In July 1921, E J Way, president of the Institute of Engineers, spoke for many when he called for the removal of half the white workers and the employment of skilled black labour. He said the ending of the 'sentimental colour bar' would save over £1m per year: £419,000 in wages, and £600,000 for the recruitment of black labour. If labour costs were lowered, low grade gold mines could be reworked and other areas, idle for want of capital, would also be opened.

Jones in his report on *Communism in South Africa*, offered a different perspective on the urgent need of the employers to replace the white workers. He said that

During the war, the capitalists, urged by the necessity of keeping up gold production, discovered that it paid them to regard the white workers as an unofficial garrison over the far larger mass of black labour, and that it was not bad business to keep the two sections politically apart by paying liberally the white out of the miserably underpaid

labour of the black . . . The premium on the mint price of gold enabled the Chamber of Mines to keep up this policy of economic bribery till the end of last year. Now it seems as if it had come to an end. The bribe fund has petered out. The premium on the mint price of gold is being reduced and under the threat of closing down the non-paying mines the white miners are compelled to accept lower pay. During the last few months there have been unofficial strikes [at the Simmer Deep last year] . . . The mines have withdrawn the 'stop-order' system . . . [This deduction by the employers of trade union fees had made] the Union an adjunct of the Chamber of Mines. Now this 'privilege' has been withdrawn as a measure to weaken the none too pliant membership.

In December 1921 the mines, the electrical power stations (the Victoria Falls and Transvaal Power Company or VFP) and the engineering companies announced wage cuts and an end to piecework and underground contracts for white workers, from January. It was also widely held that the colour bar, which guaranteed white workers their jobs on the mines, would be scrapped. All attempts by the Mine Workers Union and the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF) to secure arbitration was rejected by the Chamber of Mines, saying that no outside arbiter could judge the financial position of the mines. The workers responded by calling for a strike. On 31 December they set up an Augmented [strike] Executive, consisting of the executive of the SAIF and representatives from forty affiliated unions, under the chairmanship of Joe Thompson. The white coal miners came out on 2 January and, in one of their most myopic moves, told black workers to stay out of the struggle. There was no call for solidarity action. Supervised by officials, the black workers supplied the country's coal without any difficulty. The offer that had been made by Africans on the Springs mine in 1920, to work without the white miners was now put into effect. Yet even this was of short duration and the *status quo ante* was soon restored.

On 3 January the Chamber announced plans to axe 2,000 white miners and it was rumoured that larger numbers would be made redundant. On the 9th over 20,000 men answered the strike call, closing mines, some private engineering firms and all VFP stations, except Rosherville – which supplied power only for pumping and lighting in the mines. Despite some regional defections, most stayed out throughout the strike. Negotiations to end the strike, which extended from 15-27 January, failed to reach any agreement.

Old themes resurfaced during the strike. Bunting reported that at many meetings there was talk of the killer disease phthisis, over which they had struck work in 1913. Men said, 'We have but a few years to live in any case; we may as well stop a bullet as linger in mortal disease'. The memory of 1913/14 was ever-present: a banner carried at a funeral procession in Boksburg for two men shot dead stated 'Remember 1913'; and a SAIF banner read 'Remember our Comrades murdered in 1913'.¹⁷

The strikers of 1922 were bitter. From the beginning they declared this to be no 'ordinary strike'. It was a strike 'for the future of South Africa, a strike

in which all selfishness has been cast aside', said Thompson. Frederick Creswell, the leader of the Labour Party, declared in mid-February that the strikers were fighting so 'that the industries of South Africa should be conducted on lines contributing to the mass of the people . . . they should from all classes receive the fullest support and financial help'.¹⁸

Jack Cowan, Mayor of Springs and a former trade unionist, addressing a meeting of strikers on 5 February, was even more emphatic.

Rather than go down in the struggle we are prepared as a last weapon to have a revolution . . . There have been two wars in my lifetime, and I have fought in both . . . If it comes to fighting, and God forgive that it should, I am going to do a bit of fighting for myself this time. I have done enough for the other side. I have always recognised and supported governments, but when governments want to down you and your children, and when Smuts, the Prime Minister, is backing the Chamber of Mines to put the white standard of South Africa in the background and the Black standard in the foreground, it is time for every man to put his thinking cap on . . . if we have to fight . . . some of us will go down, but . . . in a year or two, half the people in this hall will go down with phthisis. What is the difference between having to go down a hole to die or having to die fighting for a chance for your kids.¹⁹

The trade union movement was in financial difficulties when the strike began. The SAIF and the South African Mine Workers Union were penniless and although some unions, including the Boilermakers, Reduction workers, Woodworkers and Engine drivers Unions were better placed, most were unable to provide strike pay. Consequently a central fund was set up for the alleviation of distress among miners who were in need of food. Street collections, plays, dances and horse races were organized to raise funds. Contribution came from sections of the white middle class and, more importantly, from farmers who sent provisions over several weeks, alleviating the conditions under which the miners lived.²⁰

The Augmented Executive was large and unwieldy and there was little consensus on the strike or its progress. Only a few of the affiliated unions came out on strike and only a small number agreed to come out if called upon. The National Union of Railways and Harbour Servants did not join the strike and the trains carried troops from coastal towns to the Witwatersrand without hindrance. Despite sympathy for the miners and resentment over pay and working hours, strikes on the railways were illegal and those that came out would lose their privileges as civil servants.²¹ The Typographers also continued work, printing anti-strike commentaries in the newspapers. There was no popular paper providing strike news and support for the strike until the *Transvaal Post* appeared on 13 February. The paper claimed to be 'The Champion of an economically free South Africa' and declared that it was fighting for 'the supremacy of the White Race'.²²

In protest against the use of scabs, public amenities were cut off: power workers walked out in Johannesburg plunging the city into darkness until volunteers got the machines working again.²³ By the end of February trams had stopped running in Johannesburg and squads of commandos marched around the town, watched by police who kept them moving. Seven hundred special police, paid and armed, were used to protect mine property and there were reports of attempted train wrecking, of train derailments and of power pylons being dynamited.

Headlines in the press proclaimed: 'An Organized Revolution', 'Red Regime Atrocities', 'Unadulterated Bolshevism', 'Lenin's Last Desperate Attempt'. A journalist writing on the strike said:

Today Johannesburg is only dimly beginning to know that it has escaped from the foul conspiracy which seized on the strike as a means of Bolshevism . . . As an individual who witnessed the growth of violence, who has seen the attitude of Bolshevists, who has seen the mob defiance of the police, who has witnessed the attacks on Natives . . . and who has day by day wondered at this plague of unredeemed brutality of men and women, I say there was a calculated design to repeat on the Rand the unnatural outbreak of crime in Russia that horrified the entire world.²⁴

Support from the white middle class for the strikers did not last. The average Johannesburg citizen, inconvenienced by the stoppages, joined the special constable force to protect persons and property, and to reduce the effectiveness of scab hunters. The farmers' patience also wore thin, particularly as their donations of food drained their resources. They sent less and less to the strikers and some warned that they would (and subsequently did) answer Smuts' call to join with the armed forces to end the strike.²⁵

On 13 February Smuts, representing the government, met a deputation but refused their moderate requests to end the strike. He insisted that the miners go back and accept the best terms available to them, pending a parliamentary settlement.²⁶

The Commandos

While the trade union leadership was obviously failing to advance the worker's cause, groups of strikers, formed in mid-January and known as commandos, were growing in strength and in influence. Organised on semi-military lines (but lacking arms in most cases), they had elected commandants, generals and captains. They were present in districts and sub-districts and in every town on the Witwatersrand. Although they kept in touch with the local strike committees, and some were formed by trade unions, they acted autonomously. Some were peaceable, others wanted to settle matters by force. Initially they were straggly bands of men, but former officers with war-time experience instilled discipline.

As soon as commandos had learnt to march in columns, they eagerly showed their smartness to the public, and to other commandos. Soon they were marching through public streets to mass demonstrations, each commando headed by buglers, a mounted section on horses, and then the 'infantry' on column of route. After the infantry came the cycle and motor cycle section, which formed the dispatch riding, scouting, and later, in some cases the dynamite laying section of the commandos.²⁷

The first commando, composed of smallholders at Putfontein on the East Rand, were all republicans. On the night of 18 January they disarmed and imprisoned two policemen guarding a pump house near Modder East mine, and after merging with another armed commando resolved to attack police camps on the East Rand. This was vetoed by union leaders who ordered the guns restored. Yet, at the end of January, 500 men paraded in military formation at Fordsburg (Johannesburg). The commandos said that they proposed preserving the peace and good order, stop scabbing, protect property, and added that they would defend white society against black marauders. The men were trained to unseat horsemen and taught how to make bombs but, for the first three to four weeks, they remained friendly with the police. Their fight, they said, was against the magnates, not the authority of the state. This attitude changed after 4 February when there were reports of widespread scabbing in several coal fields. The SAIF called meetings across the Rand to get workers to stand fast, but this was countered by General Smuts' assurance that adequate protection would be afforded scabs to restart the mines. He brought in the police and, in response to this, the commandos were mobilised.

The state took steps to stop the commandos. A proclamation signed by Colonel Theo G Truter, the Commissioner of Police, on 7 February, stated:

The use of bodies of men such as commandos to pull out officials working on essential services constitutes a crime of public violence, and every person who forms a unit of such body or commando, or who counsels, instigates or incites to the commission of such act is guilty of the crime of public violence, and would, if convicted by the courts, be subject to heavy punishment. The police have been instructed to take action in all such cases.²⁸

The leader writer of the *International*, writing before the proclamation was issued, but published on 10 February, had no doubt about the importance of the commandos, even if they did make some mistakes.

The Red Flag commandos of the Rand are a real contribution to working class weapons and one for which . . . there is no precedent in the industrial history of the English-speaking working class at any rate.

. . . We salute you Red Guards of the Rand! You are better men on 'commandos' than you ever were in the stopes and shops. It is fit and proper that you should appropriate the military formation and discipline hitherto monopolised in your master's cause, for your own.

You are learning to discard what masters and pastors had taught you, the lies that soldiering must mean soldiering for the bosses and their pirate flags. You are teaching yourselves and your fellow-workers of the world that there is only one army worth joining, the Red Army, and only one cause worth living and dying for, the cause of the Red Flag, which alone can ennoble war and bloodshed.

Truter's proclamation did not stop the formation or the mobilization of the commandos, but it did have an effect on some of the strikers. From 8 February it was reported that men on several gold mines approached the managers with an aim to ending the strike. Also, the police were ready and pickets (who worked with the commandos) were arrested. By the middle of February picketing had almost stopped although, on a few occasions, there were clashes with police. In Boksburg, where the police fired on the crowd, a number of strikers were killed.

Jones viewed the issues involved in terms similar to that of editorials in the *International* — presumably written by W H Andrews. He said that the commandos were 'in open preparation for an armed conflict . . . they intimidated and arrested scabs and had them tried at the Trades Hall, and they set up Red Cross sections in preparation for battle. Women's commandos were formed and one of them tried to get the operators out of the central telephone exchange.'²⁹ After skirmishes with government troops, he said, commandos took possession of some white working class suburbs, but the strike committee was split: some wished to limit the action, others prepared for the expected bloody conflict.

The government was determined to smash the strike and had been preparing for a show-down even before the strike began. The Defence Committee of Trade Unions, composed of trade unionists reporting on the events of 1922, said in their findings that the 1914 Martial Law proclamation was carefully revised and printed as early as the 30th January 1922. The Minister of Defence, not to be outdone, boasted on 8 April that he 'had been prepared for this affair from the 1st of January not only (*sic*) from the 30th'. He did not indicate what these preparations involved, nor did he say when the air force was put on the alert.

Smuts also defended his approach in Parliament. When NP leaders said on 17 February that the strikers' aim was to prevent a curtailment of their sphere of work, he claimed that most workers opposed the strike and that the mines were being worked out and increased costs required cuts. To maintain a white South Africa (on which he said he agreed with the opposition), a lower scale of living was needed. That is:

White South Africa would be immediately more helped by the maintenance of the low-grade mines in full force, and the whole of the gold mining industry at work, rather than by the retention of the *status quo* agreement [namely, the ratio of whites to blacks employed underground].³⁰

Revolt . . . 'For a 'hite South Africa'

The revolt on the Rand was confined exclusively to whites. Despite the presence of Africans at some of the rallies they were not involved in the strikes or in the revolt that followed. Nor was there any appeal to black workers to join the strike, although some white miners condemned African workers for scabbing. Consequently it can come as no surprise that there was no support from any black organization, or that the leaders of the SANNC, except for one letter from the Transvaal section appealing for an increase of wages for the workers, stood aloof from the struggle. Only some African chiefs and headmen, summoned by the Native Recruiting Corporation, who toured the compounds to quite the movement down³¹ There is no statement on the strike in documents of the organization available to me. Other movements were more forthcoming.

Dr Abdurhaman, the leader of the African Peoples Organisation (APO), condemned the strike and the crimes of white labour. The white workers, he claimed, were only interested in preserving their privileged position in industry and had been content before their own wages had been cut. They had done nothing to improve the wage packet of black workers on the mines.³² The ICU, which was not yet organized in the Transvaal, could only speak from afar. At a meeting in Cape Town (no date given), Kadalie 'condemned the attacks on non-Europeans' and called on the government to protect the people. He also 'blamed the colour bar for the trouble on the Rand, and demanded its abolition'. When there were calls from the strikers for an armed revolt,

the ICU called on non-whites to be loyal to the government, King, and country. On its side the government assured the country that the Africans had done nothing to cause trouble.³³

This accolade from the government would not prevent Smuts from proceeding with discriminatory legislation after the white workers had been dealt with. But for the duration of the strike he was assured of black support and the white workers, contemptuous of the blacks, seemed oblivious of the consequences of their policies and actions.

The slogan 'For a White Africa' appeared everywhere during the strike and, in retrospect, this stamped the events of 1922 as racist. For many of the strikers the slogan was undoubtedly racist but the issue, as seen in 1922, was more complex. The interpretation given to this slogan by many trade unionists, and by the CPSA, was related to the prevailing standard of living of whites, and the contrasting conditions under which blacks lived. With white miners earning seven to ten times more than blacks, their replacement would increase the mines' profitability considerably. It would also lower wage levels and reduce all standards of living. The position of the CPSA was spelt out in an editorial in the *International* of Friday 27 January 1922

Natives at starvation wages, that is the thing to attack: that is what ruins the white standard. Well, then, if you want 'White South Africa', your

campaign . . . must be rather in the direction of encouraging native labour to become 'unpayably expensive' . . .

The white workers are under a very real and proper fear of competition from this cheap labour: in fact, except for a few skilled trades and the protection of the colour bar, they cannot compete with it under capitalism, and in fighting for the colour bar, they are at best fighting only a rearguard action . . .

Fellow workers, ask yourself, am I really for the whites as whites — landlords, magnates, profiteers, exploiters and all — or am I rather for the workers as workers, white, brown, yellow, black and all — and against the capitalists as capitalists — THE ONLY REAL BLACK MAN? It is not in the spirit of the Voortrekkers who conquered Dingaan . . . that you will achieve a White South Africa. It is in the spirit of the humble but very determined industrial proletariat of Russia, who overthrew the master class and made work, for the common good, the one condition of 'status'. There is no . . . future for the white workers under capitalism. Communism alone can make South Africa a white man's country, in the sense that Communism alone can secure to every worker — whatever his colour — the full product of his labour. Only when that is secured will a White man be safe: only then can you begin to talk of a 'White South Africa'.³⁴

By using the slogan of the day, the writer of the editorial came close to endorsing the worst aspects of white supremacy. All the attempts to swing the argument against the capitalists ('the only real black man!') used the same race prejudices that afflicted white society. Despite appeals to revolutionary events in Russia, and rational arguments against trying to hold onto an unreal status quo, the party's definition of a 'white South Africa' was fatally flawed.

Jones started on a different premise. In his article on the 1922 strike he condemned the British press, either for its silence, or for its reports justifying the massacre of workers. 'International finance', he said, 'looks after its own'. The strike, which continued for eight weeks, presented 'lessons of great importance' for the international working class, because

- (1) It presents us with the problem of colour prejudice within the ranks of the workers in its acutest form, there, where the conditions for its solution are already maturing.
- (2) It is the first great armed revolt of the workers on any scale in the British Empire.
- (3) It presents one of the most striking examples of the use of the aeroplane as the supreme capitalist weapon against the workers, and suggests serious problems for the military mechanics of revolution.
- (4) It is a victory for imperialist capital, on the one hand extending its tenure of life by expansion, on the other performing a revolutionary role by drawing in still wider masses of the backward peoples into the world movement.

Yet Jones's analysis proceeded on the premise, stated in earlier debates, that the white workers stood at the forefront of the South African revolution, an argument that was generally accepted and dominated policy in 1922. These white workers, and in particular the miners, had now 'revolted' against the Chamber of Mines, the embodiment of capital in South Africa. Jones explained:

The Johannesburg gold mines produce more than half the gold of the world. They are concentrated in a single management, with the ultimate control in London . . .

The gold mining industry of the Rand has been described as the fulcrum of world capital. Twenty years ago the old Boer republics became an obstacle to the Chamber of Mines, and the whole British army was requisitioned to blow them out of existence . . . After the job was done the Rand magnates got leave to import fifty thousand Chinese workers under indenture.

These were repatriated, said Jones, because the mine magnates had discovered that 'the Chinaman was too much of a revolutionary to be profitable'. Their departure had raised anew the question of recruiting black workers for the mines. There were 200,000 black, and 25,000 whites on the mines. 'Herein lies the root of the conflict. The white miners are a block to native progress'. This repeated what he had said in his report on 'Communism in South Africa'. That is, that the class consciousness of the white worker was 'so far, fitful and easily lost. He is used to lord it over the unskilled native as his social inferior'. Moreover, black labour was little more than the assistant to white labour:

As workers whose functions are wholly different in the industrial world, there is hardly any competition involved; indeed, the white miner is as much interested as the Chamber of Mines in a plentiful supply of native labour, without which he cannot start work. They are therefore annoyed at any strikes of natives, and are prone to assist the masters in their repressive methods, although in the case of white strikes they are not behindhand in appealing to the natives not to go down the shafts . . .

If Jones had stopped at that point his understanding of events in 1922 might have been very different. But, he continued, ' . . . natives as a rule are unwilling to go without the white miners', and contrary to what he would say a year later spoke of the African's use of the word 'boss' in addressing white workers as a convention like 'sir', and animated by 'respect for the white worker as his industrial educator'.

One of the white miner's nightmares, he said, was the loss of his monopoly over blasting underground. This he took up again in his article on the strike, where he said

Their legal privileges are an anachronism. *Yet no Communist can withhold support of their resistance to the capitalist offensive.* (my stress)

Since the repatriation of the Chinese repeated attempts have been made to open up the skilled positions to the natives, and to break down the legal monopoly [on such jobs] of the white miners . . . The question became acute at the end of 1921. The low exchange value of the pound sterling had for two or three years enabled the mining industry to sell gold at a premium. With the improved position of the pound sterling as against the dollar, the premium is disappearing, and the mining industry is compelled to work on the bare mint price of four pounds five shillings.

The employers, needing capital to open up the undeveloped portions of the Reef, wanted more than 'a mere drop of wages'; they required a drastic reduction in the number of white skilled workers and a more extensive exploitation of black labour.

Industrial black labour, continued Jones, consisted of men in the engineering and other industries who were becoming proletarianized, and those on the mines who greatly outnumbered the whites. Yet the black mine labourers could not take decisive action. Describing them in terms that lacked his usual sensitivity, he said they were

the lowest possible form of cheap, unskilled labour drawn from one of the most primitive peoples in the world, politically passive and industrially unorganized, recruited on indenture from the tribal reserves, and housed round the mines in closed compounds under strict police supervision, with hardly a vestige of civil rights.

The situation was explosive, but problems created by the division of workers on grounds of race seemed insoluble. Jones explained:

The white workers . . . yield a power quite out of proportion to their numbers. They can stop industry. But this passive native mass is a constant menace (*sic*) to them, and is used against them by the capitalists, whereas the white workers fail to take the surest means of securing their position by common organization with the natives, as advocated by the Communist Party.

The condition of affairs accounts for the state of armed conflict into which the general strike eveloped. At the last it was a conflict for the control of the industry, for the abolition of the Chamber of Mines, and for ousting Smuts from power.

Side by side with this analysis Jones descended to crude populism. Gold mining capital, he declared,

rules directly by the bayonet and the policeman's baton. It brutalises whole masses of the backward peoples. Their noble naivete (*sic*) can only be preserved for humanity if the working class movement is able to snatch them from the grip of capital without too great a loss of time.

Discussing the social forces in South Africa, Jones said the Afrikaner nationalists had nothing to do with the rising. Initially they supported the strike [and at that stage farmers gave strikers cattle as gifts or on deferred

terms and shopkeepers gave generous credit terms]. They then repudiated the strike and contingents of white farmers joined with Britishers in suppressing the strikers. Yet Jones declared that this was not a colour issue:

It was not a conflict of whites against blacks, but a pure class struggle between the politically conscious workers, who happened to be white, and the capitalist class . . . The international offensive of capitalism spreads to the colonies . . . In South Africa it takes the form of a demand on the part of the Chamber of Mines that the mining regulations be altered to allow cheap native labour into more skilled positions. This means larger gangs of natives working under fewer skilled whites . . . a demand for the general reduction of wages [and] a reduction of one fifth in the number of white workers . . . Hence it was for the white workers a question of very existence.

For the communists it was also a question of 'very existence'. Believing the white miners to be 'politically conscious workers' they backed them, underestimating the impact of racial antagonisms opened up by the strike.

The Defence Committee started from a different position but employed similar arguments. It said wages were never mentioned and the struggle focused 'on the question of the Colour Bar, including the Status Quo Agreement'.

[The] dominant principle for which these men fought was the old principle vital to the welfare, if not indeed to the existence, of every civilised community, for which men have always fought and will always fight as long as they are men and not emasculated parasites, and that is that free men will not tamely submit to be ousted from work and they and their descendants degraded into pauperism by the substitution of slave labour.³⁵

The Committee described African labourers in terms similar to that of Jones. Their conditions, they said, were akin to chattel slavery; they lived in closely policed compounds, and were paid starvation wages. This would not be tolerated by a white 'unless he were a convict'.

With such a system of labour the European cannot compete, and would not if he could since it must in the end degrade all labour to that level, unless a clear line of demarcation can be drawn and maintained.

[The ending of the Status Quo Agreement would] extend that form of Negro slave labour to all the occupations which had hitherto been free labour occupations and . . . oust the dearer Europeans from them.

They said the mine owners and their political supporters deceived the world in claiming that the colour bar 'was an irrational and immoral attempt to keep black labour in subjection for the benefit of white workers'. And here, they too descended to the ubiquitous racism of the society.

We do not deny that there is some, although very little, truth in that.

The aversion of all white races to living and working on a basis of equality with the Negro no doubt enters into the matter; but a part of

even that aversion is due to a sound instinct to preserve the purity of the race and part is due to an instinctive perception of the fact that the European worker who accepts equality with the Negro tends to become in the end . . . a Negro ceasing to live up to the standards, traditions and inspirations of the great White race, which can be the heritage of them alone. The mere fact that the Negro submits (*sic*) to be compounded is, in itself, sufficient to make it impossible for him ever to be an associate on equal terms of White men, whose ancestors have fought their way to freedom . . .

[The dominant reason for supporting the colour bar was] a deep seated and righteous objection to the extension of the slave labour system which is known as compounded Native labour.³⁶

The Defence Committee said that workers held two points of view. One claimed that low grade mines could only be worked at a profit by unskilled black labour, which they could accept because gold mining was a temporary phase and not a permanent part of national life. The other view was that these mines could be worked profitably by whites who were paid adequate wages.

But all of us are agreed that the slave labour system, existing as it does only by virtue of special legislation, must be kept by legislation within the narrowest possible limits.³⁷

Their position was absurd, but Jones was also totally wrong in failing to see what was clear to some members of the CPSA. Frank Glass, secretary of the Cape Town branch, where the strike had little support, stated in the *International* on 17 February that the white workers were too backward, their trade unions too weak, and the party's forces too insignificant to make a revolution — and part of the reason lay in the racism of the white workers which disqualified them from becoming leaders of a united working class.³⁸

Call for a Republic

Early in February the General Strike Committee instructed workers to 'see that all scabs from Roodepoort to Geldenhuis Deep [mines] are withdrawn immediately . . .' Anger was rising and calls by a local strike committee in Germiston to meet with Smuts and an arbitration court were rejected. On the eve of a conference of Nationalist and Labour Members of the Legislative Assembly called by Tielman Roos, the leader of the Transvaal National Party, Bob Waterston, now leader of the Brakpan commando, moved at a Johannesburg meeting that

This mass meeting of citizens is of the opinion that the time has arrived when the domination of the Chamber of Mines and other financiers in South Africa should cease, and to that end we ask the members of Parliament assembled in Pretoria tomorrow to proclaim a South African republic, and immediately to form a provisional government for this country.

Waterston elaborated:

We realised that this was the last step and not the first. But . . . when the provisional government is formed in Pretoria, as tomorrow we hope it will be, it will be a constitutional step, and it will lie with the other side to attack this provisional government and put it out by force.³⁹

Nationalist and Labour MPs were horrified. Tielman Roos denounced the idea of revolution and one Nationalist said that Labourites in the South African army had helped suppress the Boer rebellion in 1914 — let them wait till the next election before talking about a republic. Labour MLAs were also opposed to the proposal and spoke of treason. They said people would be shot on the streets of Johannesburg. There was no support for Waterston despite his claim that 90 per cent of workers were prepared for any step rather than go down without a fight. Within days he withdrew his proposals and blamed others for having suggested the plan to him. There was also no support for Percy Fisher (who spoke for the strike committee) when he proposed that a provisional government would be formed that afternoon to take over the mines. Finally a conference committee advised constitutional methods to secure a change of government.

Racist Attacks?

There was never any picketing of blacks working on the mines. Jones, in trying to explain, had to repeat the racists' arguments.

No violence had been made against them on the part of the white workers — only against the skilled workers who blacklegged. Natives were not regarded as scabs, their whole outlook and mode of life being too primitive (*sic*) for the conscious workers to attribute any responsibility to them.

He also commented on a photograph, which he said, appeared in a 'capitalist journal' of a crowd of strikers bearing a banner — the banner that haunted socialists in South Africa ever since:

WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE AND FIGHT FOR A WHITE SOUTH AFRICA.

'In the crowd', he said, 'several black workers were to be seen. Till the fifth week of the strike this slogan did not betoken any race enmity. That dastardly evil was left for Smuts to do'.⁴⁰

The commandos responded to rumours of black rebellion and over the course of a few days there were ugly clashes between whites and Africans in Brixton, Vrededorp, Ferrairastown, Sophiatown [all working class suburbs or black townships of Johannesburg], and the new Primrose mine near Germiston where African workers attacked a procession of strikers with assegais, revolvers and pickhandles. According to Herd, blacks were attacked by the crowd and many had to be rescued by the police: several were killed,

and more than 20 injured. The police claimed that this fighting was a ploy to embarrass the authorities and intimidate citizens, strike leaders claimed that the region was inflamed and that blacks were arming and anxious to attack whites, but it was mainly non-striking hooligans who attacked blacks.⁴¹ Again, Jones explained, using material he had received from South Africa:

The cry of native rebellion, with its mythical horrors of rape and massacre, always conjured up to confuse the class issue, was again set going; and it diverted many of the strikers for two or three days from the real issue.

The Communist Party maintained that the blacks were armed by mine officials and used as mine guards. The fact that fighting started simultaneously all along the Reef pointed to a concerted and organized plan and news of the clashes surprised at least some of the strike leaders. Fisher and others of the Committee of Action threw themselves between excited whites and blacks to stop the fighting. The CPSA intervened by printing thousands of leaflets that read:⁴²

LEAVE THE KAFFIR ALONE!

WORKERS, HANDS OFF THE BLACK WORKERS!

It is not they who are your enemies, but the Chamber of Mines which exploits both them and you.

Keep your attention fixed on defeating the Chamber: that is your only job in this strike.

The Chamber's agents and CID [police] provocateurs have repeatedly tried to foment trouble between whites and blacks in order to divert your attention from your only job in this strike. Remember that they tried on the same game when the Municipal Board of Control was established in 1919, and they succeeded then.

DONT FALL INTO THIS TRAP AGAIN

The natives will not fight unless someone goads or incites them to do so. See that you do not play that part, and treat whoever does as the worst of scabs. Beware of police frame-ups.

LEAVE THE KAFFIR ALONE!

The Defence Committee claimed that whites only attacked Africans on three occasions. Firstly, on 7 March, when blacks stoned a procession of strikers outside New Primrose mine. The strikers, together with whites who came to their assistance, retaliated by attacking mine officials and Africans. In the fighting two whites and two blacks were killed and twenty blacks wounded. The other cases involved whites who were not strikers. They attacked the Municipal Compounds in Marshallstown and in Ferrairastown: five Africans were killed and eighteen (including three whites) were wounded. They also claimed that Africans killed four whites in Sophiatown and rioted and threw stones at whites in the vicinity of Fordsburg and Apex railway stations. The trouble, said the Committee, 'was confined to an area

of not more than two square miles out of the 150 square miles affected by the strike . . . where Negroes and Europeans live cheek by jowl in slums and in extreme poverty . . . ' In these fights between poor whites and blacks, a white man and an Indian woman were killed and an African wounded in Brixton. The Committee added that the blacks on the Rand were afraid, and justifiably armed themselves with knives, etc, but the feared Native uprising never took place and the blacks were well behaved (*sic*).⁴³ The evidence suggests that the confrontations were exaggerated. Hessian, despite his bias against the strike and the strikers, said in his dissertation that:

There were a few occasions in which commandos attacked Africans, but these were ascribed by strikers, by the Transvaal Native Congress and the government to older workers (sometimes described as 'hooligans') who came from the poorer areas.⁴⁴

The Move to Martial Law

In late February the level of violence rose. Strikers assaulted white scabs and 'police spies' and placed them on 'trial', paraded provocatively, and so on, while the police arrested strikers and commando members. Finally the police fired at strikers who gathered at the Boksburg jail to serenade their imprisoned comrades with the *Red Flag*. Three were killed and several wounded. It was said later that the shooting was pre-planned, ostensibly to establish police authority.

An approach by the Augmented Executive to meet with the Chamber of Mines on the 3 March, when the strike was crumbling, was rejected and, in a provocative letter the mineowners informed the SAIF that the federation would not be recognized in future.⁴⁵

A move by the Augmented Executive to end the strike was rejected by the strikers, and a Committee of Action backed by the commandos was set up, consisting of W H Andrews, H Spendiff, George Mason, Percy Fisher, J Wordingham and E Shaw. On Sunday 5 March the Committee met with delegates of strike committees from across the Reef and called a general strike. At this point the 'more temperate strike leaders faded out of the picture'. The response was confined to the Rand. Some unions called their workers out, some did not, and others, like the railwaymen, only came out after their families were threatened by strikers.

Smuts watched and waited. On 31 March he said that as early as the 17th of February he and his colleagues,

feared that for a couple of days they might lose control of the Rand, but they had decided to give the country an object lesson with reference to the subterranean, menacing dangers even at the risk of a couple of days revolution in Johannesburg.⁴⁵

Answering a call from the Committee of Action, thousand of men from the commandos came into Johannesburg. They patrolled the streets,

recruited workers and pulled shop assistants out of stores; they commandeered rifles and revolvers; wielded bicycle chains attached to sticks, old swords and bayonets, spears, assegais and bludgeons, poles barbed with spikes or hooks.⁴⁷ The police were reinforced by the South African Mounted Rifles and the Civic Guard, bringing their strength up to 8,000 men. There was shooting between strikers and scabs and clashes between strikers and blacks. The government, refusing to negotiate with the strike leaders, responded with force and used aircraft to disperse gatherings. On Thursday 9 March the Active Citizen Force and 26 Burger Commandos were called up by the government and martial law was declared on Friday. This heralded the end of the general strike, but at the same time brought a crowd estimated at 90,000 onto the streets of Johannesburg. On the morning of 10 March armed revolt broke out.⁴⁸

It transpired from court cases and the official Martial Law Enquiry of 1925 that Commandant General A A Sandham, a miner, had ordered commandos to gather at selected spots, armed with rifles and revolvers, bombs, sticks and stones. But no one body was in control of events and several commandos, who were not contacted played no part in what followed. Many prominent strike leaders knew nothing about the mobilization, and few of those who did parade knew what the assemblage was about. When questioned during the subsequent court cases or the Enquiry, members of the commandos gave diverse reasons for their involvement. Some had been told there was a 'Native rising' and they were to rescue the women and children, others heard that there was to be a drive against scabs. There were those who had been told that they would overthrow the government and the capitalist class, and if only they could take the police stations and hold out for 24 hours, thousands of men in the OFS would swarm across the border with arms to help them. There were even stories about Americans who would be coming to assist.⁴⁹

Early on the morning of the 10th the commandos attacked railway property and police posts. For several days they controlled part of Johannesburg and adjoining towns. Banks, shops and offices closed by order of the local strike committees; restaurants, cafes and hotels got permits to open at meal times; food was commandeered and butcher shops emptied of all meat; newspaper vendors were chased off the streets. Some telegraphic communications south of the Rand were disrupted and some train lines blown up, but the post offices opened under police guard.⁵⁰ Householders foraged for food and with menfolk away women set up elaborate warning systems for self-protection. Snipers were active in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg, and typographers who refused to strike at the *Star* were armed to protect themselves and their premises.

Jones provided a graphic account of events in his article:

The outlying mining towns of Benoni and Brakpan were already dominated by the armed strikers. In a few hours aeroplanes were hovering over the scenes where commandos were mobilizing. Boer

commandos were soon on their way to fight for the government . . . An aeroplane dropped a bomb on the Benoni Workers' Hall, and blew the whole building full of executives and strikers to atoms.

[In] Johannesburg, the workers' commandos took possession of the working class suburbs of Fordsburg and Jeppe . . . They also entrenched on the neighbouring low hills overlooking the military camping ground. Here half a dozen aeroplanes operated on these positions with deadly effect . . . Artillery bombardment proceeded at the same time, but the position was stubbornly defended, and only given up after terrible losses. Here where no bourgeois property was endangered, the aeroplanes could operate with impunity.

Fordsburg was different, said Jones. From there the centre of Johannesburg could be controlled and air attacks would have led to destruction of valuable property. Then, after all other resistance had fallen, Smuts threatened a general ground bombardment and the Boer commandos and the regular troops massed for the final assault:

Here, in those few tragic hours, the brave victims of capitalist ferocity atoned many times over in blood and tears, and deeds of heroism that move the proletarian heart, for the anti-native outrages committed in their name a week before. Here the red forces were directed by Fisher and Spendiff, two miners' leaders followers of the Communists, and while ardent strike militants, most fervent partisans of the negro workers at the same time.

The bombardment was expected to last ten minutes. It went on for seventy minutes . . . It was only a question of time, and the issue was never in doubt, for Smuts only directs final assaults for political reclaim when the issue is absolutely safe.

Fisher and Spendiff were killed, said Jones: 'On Spendiff was found his membership card of the Communist Party. Thousands of prisoners were taken, and the militants weeded out for the court martials'. Jones could not know that a month after the article appeared four men would go to the gallows, and that another fourteen had death sentences commuted.⁵¹

He concluded with the claim that the revolt on the Rand had inspired workers in Australia — and that 'the deed of indictment against capitalism [was] filling up from every land and every clime; and the roll of honour of proletarian heroism [was] growing from Africa, Australia and India . . .'

In its response the Comintern condemned the imprisonments and killings, and said the mine magnates' aim was to reduce the living standards of white workers to that of blacks. However, its analysis of the struggle could only lead to further confusion among its adherents. It said that the strikers were mainly Afrikaners, while the capitalist side was almost exclusively represented by British subjects. Eventually, Afrikaner nationalism and the class struggle of Afrikaner workers would be linked. The task was to break down the race prejudice of the South African white workers and link them to the

Negro and other coloured proletarians in a common fight which would be both national and social.⁵²

But the tide had turned in South Africa and the white labour movement surrendered its class aims for a minority stake in the government. The SALP joined with the Nationalist Party to defeat Smuts in the general election in 1924. The CPSA gave its support to the electoral pact and then, drawing back, urged Labour not to join a coalition government. The hope of uniting black and white workers receded and the CPSA went into a decline. Members deserted the CPSA and the trade unions distanced themselves from party members. Acutely aware of the difficulties, Jones stated in his letter of April 1924, just before his death, that:

As a matter of fact, there is no room for a CP in white South Africa *except* as the watchdog of the native, as the promoters of rapprochement, watching *within* the broader organizations, for every opportunity to switch the white movement on right lines on this question and scotching every conspiracy to rouse race hatred and strike breaking of race against race.

The pain that Jones must have felt when the revolt failed is revealed in the letter. His work in South Africa (1910-1921) had been devoted to building a socialist movement in the country. However the 'white movement' was not switched 'on the right lines' and there was no 'rapprochement' inside the labour movement. With few exceptions white and black workers were not brought together in struggle because the social forces holding them apart were greater than any conceived common interests. That was a problem with which the left in South Africa would have to grapple in the decades to come. It must remain a moot question whether it ever did.

References

[Titles, publishers, and dates of publication appear in the bibliography below].

1. See eg Smuts, chs 4-5; Armstrong.
2. For the Masabalala affair see Wickins, Roux (1947) and Simons and for the Bulhoek massacre, see Roux (1947), Simons and also the reprint in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 6, January 1991 of an article by Frank Glass, written in 1921.
3. 'The Workers Revolt in South Africa', October 1922. See Hirson and Gwyn Williams, forthcoming.
4. 'The Native Problem', *Round Table*, No 34, March 1919.
5. Lewsen, pp 293-4. The Land Bill proposed in 1917, and opposed by Merriman, was redrafted and finally enacted in 1936. The Native Administration Bill, which met with fierce condemnation from the SANNC and brought its leaders into close accord with the ISL, was also withdrawn, only to be enacted in 1927.
6. A copy of the Department of Justice files, on microfilm, is at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
7. See also 'Unrest in South Africa', *Round Table*, No 33, December 1918. *Ibid*.
8. The document has no date but from its number seems most likely to have been written in February 1918.

9. The **International**, while sympathising with the miners, did not support the boycott, saying that the problem was one of wages, not of consumption.
10. **Umteteli wa Bantu**, 21 September 1929. See also Bonner (1982) for a more detailed account of the leadership of the SANNC and a discussion of the events of 1918-20.
11. Phillips, pp 117-19. Phillips, together with members of the Stokes-Phelps Commission, then visiting South Africa, played a significant role in dampening the mood of the time. However, this account is probably exaggerated, the likelihood of a revolt in 1918 being far fetched. The role of the Stokes-Phelps Commission and of Phillips is discussed in Hiron (1979).
12. Such, said the **International** on 5 July 1919, 'is the corrupting influence of false labour organization, of labour-fakirdom, of miseducation, of capitalist flattery and bribery, of sectional and colour pride and prejudice'.
13. Information on the strike is taken from the Department of Justice files (which include cuttings from the daily press), and from Diamond, Simons, Bonner, and the notebooks of Cope. Because the accounts are very different, I have relied heavily on the DoJ files.
14. Bonner (1979), p 282.
15. CO20863 551/112, Public Records Office.
16. For discussions of the strike see Bunting, Cope, Diamond, Defence Committee of Trade Unions., Herd, Hessian, Johnstone, Simons.
17. For a full discussion of the high mortality rate on the mines due to phthisis (the 'white death'), and the strike called in 1913 to reduce the number of hours at the pit face, see Hiron and Williams, forthcoming.
18. Hessian, pp 71-72. Although his work was antagonistic to the strikers, Hessian scoured the local press and provides material that is not easily available.
19. Reported in the **Sunday Times**, 5 February 1922, quoted in *ibid*, p 132.
20. Hessian, p 64.
21. *Ibid*, pp 68-69.
22. **Workers Dreadnought**, viii, 52, 11 March 1922. This British publication carried reports from, and was sold in South Africa by, syndicalists.
23. Herd, pp 40-3.
24. Glanville.
25. Hessian, pp 77-79.
26. *Ibid*, p 80. The deputation consisted only of National Party representatives. Labour delegates, who were to have attended, arrived too late to participate.
27. Hessian, pp 144-49.
28. Reprinted in **Workers Dreadnought**, viii, 52.
29. This commando, commended by Jones, was led by Eva Green, a member of the CPSA.
30. Defence Committee, p 26.
31. Sheridan Johns III, notes in Karis and Carter, Vol 1, p 146.; Bonner (1979), provides information on the tour of the compounds, but provides no details on the number of chiefs involved, or on their tribes they represented, pp 276-7.
32. Report of meeting of the CPSA in Cape Town to hear a report from a miner's representative, **Cape Times**, 2 February 1922. See also Simons, p 297.
33. Sheridan Johns III, notes in Karis and Carter, Vol 1, p 146.
34. **International**, 27 January 1922.
35. Defence Committee, pp 5-6.
36. *Ibid*, p 7.
37. *Ibid*, p 7.
38. Glass changed his mind at some point and later praised the miners for their action.
39. Quoted in Defence Committee, p 12. Waterston, a Labour Party MLA, was Jones's predecessor as secretary of the SALP in 1914 before Smuts deported him illegally to Britain.
40. Concerning the presence of black people in the crowd where strikers held the banner aloft, he was correct. It is also obvious that their presence was not questioned by the white workers. Although there is no obvious explanation for their presence, it does seem that many Africans had no disagreement with the strikers. However, other photographs show women parading with identical placards,, their intention obviously racist.

41. Herd, p 48.
42. *International*, 10 February 1923, following a trial of one of those accused of involvement in the riots of March 1922. The leaflet was reproduced in the article.
43. Defence Committee, pp 15-18.
44. Hessian, pp 69, 83.
45. *Ibid*, p 82.
46. Herd, pp 45-6.
47. *Ibid*, p 49.
48. Hessian, p 137.
49. *Ibid*, p 171.
50. Herd, pp 57-8.
51. H K Hull, D Lewis, S A (Taffy) Long and C C Stassen were executed after being found guilty of 'murder'. The first three for killings in the course of the strike and revolt. Stassen for killing two Africans. Kadalie is said to have expressed his satisfaction with the government for carrying out the executions. See Simons, pp 296-7
52. Quoted from the *International*, 18 August 1922, by Simons p 298.

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