

# The making of the

# WORKING

# CLASSES

THE years 1907 to 1922 were a time of violent conflict between workers and capitalists on the Rand. Several general strikes of white workers broke out, which for a time threatened to overthrow both capitalists and state. As a result of these strikes many of the industrial laws which still govern trade unions today were passed. In this issue we look at the reasons for this period of bitter conflict.

White workers at this time had many grievances. On the gold mines of the Witwatersrand conditions were extremely bad. Trade unions were not recognised, and management refused to negotiate with trade union officials. Ordinary members of trade unions were afraid to make complaints, for fear of victimisation. Unpaid union branch secretaries were immediately dismissed once management found out what they were doing. Mine managers had completely arbitrary powers to dismiss, so that workers were continually being thrown out of their jobs. Between January and June 1911 for example, 22 180 white workers were employed on the mines and during the same period there were 17 754 changes in employment. Working conditions were also bad. Many miners contracted miners phthisis, a killer disease of the lungs. Long hours of work were common (from 70 to 78 hours a week in some grades). The only holidays miners were allowed were Sundays (which they often did not get), Christmas Day and Good Friday.

White workers also feared for their jobs in other ways. In the early days most of the white workers on the mines were skilled workers imported from overseas (e.g. from Britain or Australia). They themselves worked on the job, and also supervised low paid black contract labourers. (For Black mine workers, see our previous issue No. 29 May 1984). As time passed the mine owners attempted to break up their jobs into separate smaller and less skilled parts. This enabled the managers to employ less skilled black workers on these jobs at lower pay. It also allowed them to convert the skilled white workers into a less skilled supervisor with less control over his job. White workers resisted this move by the mine managers. When the mines attempted in 1907 to increase the number of drills that the white miner had to control from two to three the white miners went on strike. White workers looked to the new Afrikaner government in the Transvaal for support, but they received no help from them. Instead the government called in British troops to crush the strike and encouraged unskilled Afrikaners to act as scabs. One of the main mining capitalists at the time, Phillips, remarked to a fellow capitalist "As you know, Brother Boer has no sympathy for the working man, quite the reverse".

The strike was broken, but the main effect of

this was to politicise much of the white working class. Union membership increased from 300 in May 1907 to 4 000 by September. Two years later the South African Labour Party was formed to fight for the rights of the white workers, and won considerable working class support.

The growing militancy and politicisation of the white working class worried the government. In 1909 it passed the Transvaal Industrial Disputes Prevention Act which provided for conciliation boards where a serious dispute had occurred. However, the government was not prepared to push the mining industry very far. Conciliation boards could sit but the government gave them no powers to enforce their recommendations. As a result the mining industry could ignore them, and generally did so. The white miners' position remained as bad, if not worse than before.

It was this situation which caused the 1913 strike. Starting on one mine it quickly spread right across the Rand until 19 000 workers were out on a general strike. On a number of mines black workers also struck in support of their demands. The government was caught completely unprepared. In 1910 the Union of South Africa had been formed (out of the 4 previously independent provinces) but still by 1913 no national army had been formed. As a result the government did not have the armed forces to crush the strike, and important concessions had to be made to the strikers (e.g. 10

days holiday on ½ pay, 8½ hour day). Recognition of trade unions was also proposed. Many union members felt much more could have been gained from this position of strength and that union leaders had not been radical enough in their demands.

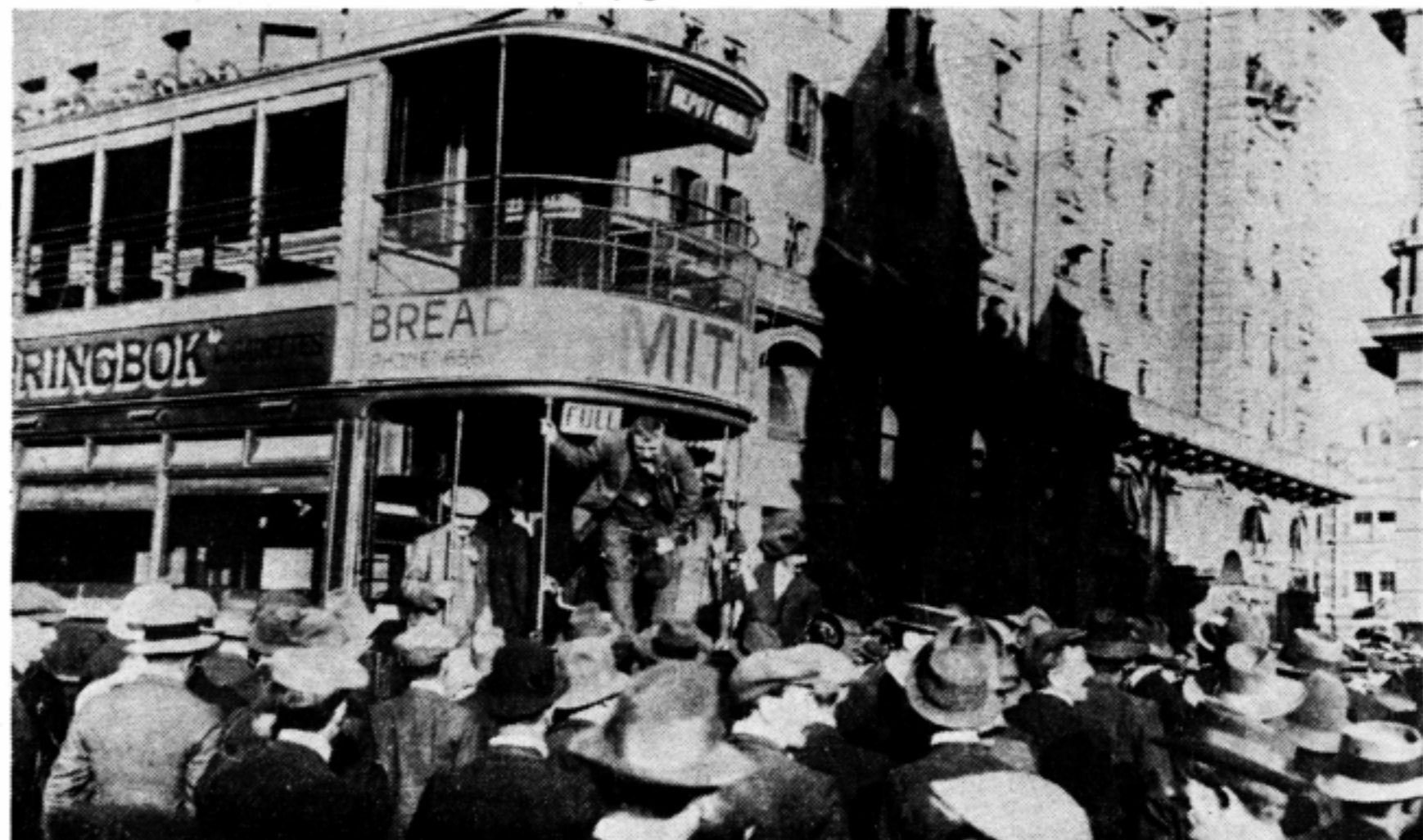
But, at the same time as it made these limited concessions, the government also made preparations to crush the miners in any future conflict. In 1914 the Riotous Assemblies Act was passed allowing the government

- \* to prohibit meetings if they endangered peace;
- \* to prohibit picketing;
- \* to prohibit intimidation (this included swearing and scowling at scabs);
- \* to prohibit the breaking of contract by public service workers.

The government also took urgent steps to re-organise its armed forces (including arrangements to transport troops to the Rand by road, if the railway workers also went on strike).

It was this new situation that workers faced when they came out on strike in 1914 after a dispute on the railways. This time however the workers were over-confident. Virtually no preparations were made by the railway union, and the government moved in to crush the strike. The press was censored, the army moved in with artillery and arrested the strike committee. Widespread arrests occurred. The strike quickly broke.

Although the workers had been defeated it seem-



When the trains were held up strike leaders used them as a platform to talk to workers



Mounted police charging strikers in Market Square

ed almost certain that new conflicts would soon arise. In 1914 e.g. the Secretary for Mines reported that:

"It is no exaggeration to say that too many of these men — and those often of the strongest character, loyalty to their union has taken the place of loyalty to their government or to their employers". Both sides prepared for battle. The next conflict however was to be delayed until 1922. In 1914 the First World War broke out, and this shifted the balance of power in favour of the workers. A labour shortage was created by the departure of 3 500 skilled miners for the war. Also both the government and the employers were worried about the disruption of production by strikes while the war was still on. Finally they feared they did not have the forces to crush a serious strike. In this situation the white miners were able to gain many concessions.

For example:

- \* conciliation board;
- \* works committees of shift and shop stewards which severely restricted management rights over dismissals etc.,
- \* the status quo agreement which stopped the substitution of white by the lower paid black miners in semi-skilled jobs.

The balance of power only began to shift decisively against the white miners after the war. By May 1921 there were 5 000 unemployed white workers. In 1921 the price of gold also dropped, causing a profit crisis for the mines. The mine owners therefore decided to attack the miners head on. They demanded:

- \* a drop of wages by 25%
- \* the substitution of 2 000 whites by blacks in semi-skilled jobs;
- \* an end to workers' rights in shop stewards,

committees and conciliation boards.

The miners response was to strike. (Their slogan 'workers of the world unite for a white South Africa'). This quickly blew up into an open war. Between 10-12 March white workers gained control of most of the Rand. Then the government counter-attacked with cavalry, artillery and bombers. 150-200 white workers were killed, 500-600 were wounded and 5 000 arrested. 18 death sentences were handed down by the courts. Four mine leaders were hanged.

After the crushing of the strike the mine-owners pushed through most of their demands. A few concessions were granted by a new government in the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, (e.g. registration of trade unions and Industrial Councils). The white working class never recovered the militancy of 1913 - 1922.



Strikers barricading Fraser Street to break the charge of the police

# PART EIGHT: 1907-1922 WHITE WORKERS REVOLT