

## Letter

### ON THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1922

Comrade Editor

Your article 'The General Strike of 1922' in *Searchlight South Africa* No 11 argues that the strike by the white mine-workers was not basically an insurrection aimed to preserve white hegemony, and their privileged status on the Rand gold mines, but rather a revolutionary action of the working class, albeit white, against the capitalist system. Your article also claims that there was no precedent comparable in the English speaking working classes – which is probably true. Nevertheless, the attempt to re-interpret that historical event places you in an untenable situation in reconciling the evidence that you marshal – with your own feelings about the insurrection. However, my reading of the article leads me to argue the position that the evidence reveals the strike as profoundly racist and reactionary.

It is my contention that three underlying beliefs contribute to this error in interpretation: firstly an abiding desire to accord the white socialists their due place in the South African pantheon of revolutionaries; secondly a continuing adherence to the problematic of proletarian revolution as the only means of destroying the capitalist system; and thirdly, an overwhelming reliance on the views of Ivon Jones.

One cannot fault your opening discourse on the role of Smuts on the national and international scene – it is scholarly and appropriate. Ivon Jones is brought into the picture with the statement that the latter was 'instrumental in forming the first black trade union'. Jones took up the cause of the South African miners when he was in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny his attitude to the black miners was extremely patronising – even taking into account the period in which he operated. It appears he was filled with a messianic desire to uplift a group that was incapable of helping themselves. His paternalism is evident, for example, in his view that 'natives as a rule are unwilling to go underground without the white miners'. This is confirmed further in his defence of the use of 'Baas/Boss' as being animated by 'respect for the white worker as his educator'. For someone who regarded himself as a Bolshevik such a view is quite indefensible – even in 1922. This leads one to the conclusion that Jones was white first and communist second – and your attempt to excuse Jones on the grounds that one must view the man in his time therefore is hard to justify. You do provide an excellent account of the black miners' boycott of the mine stores where they were being severely overcharged; you also faithfully describe inter-tribal antagonisms. Hence your conclusion that the boycott was a failure be-

cause only a 'few prices were lowered' misses the real issue: it is surely the lessons of co-operation and struggle which the oppressed learn in the process that are important. The fact that a boycott is seldom 100% successful surely is no criterion of failure.

The account of the events in the first months of 1919, which detail the widespread strikes, riots and pass burning are exemplary attention to detail. However, this would have benefited from a citing of the relevant evidence for the activities. Your discussion of how the white Board of control (dubbed the Soviet) 'had little sympathy for the black workers' and the 'Soviet' was even prepared to assist the authorities in quelling the anti-pass campaign underlines the fact that they regarded the issue as a white man's affair in which the blacks had to keep out.

You refer to the events of the 10th February, quoted from the Rand Daily Mail regarding the cohesion of the workers, and the call for solidarity by the SANNC, which you dismiss with the following words: 'This was one of the few occasions in which the congress leaders called for solidarity; otherwise they had little effect on the cause of events.' About 80,000 black workers were involved in this strike. The white Miners' Union 'did not strike (in support) and did not stay neutral'. In fact they were enjoined to 'uphold the maintenance of the colour bar . . . and deprecate any attempt to imperil it.' Moreover you point out that the black workers attempted to create a breach between the white workers and the mine bosses by an offer 'to work without the help of the whites, and guaranteed to double production' — an offer which was of course rejected. This clashes of course with Ivon Jones's belief that the blacks couldn't go down into the mines on their own! It is obvious why the white establishment refused to act on the black miners' offer: it would have had far-ranging consequences affecting the status quo in the country. The immediate background to the strike in Jones's account is sketched with notable precision — but is flawed by his report on communism in South Africa, which stated that the propaganda of the IWA (the communist General Workers Union) in 1918 and the rising cost of living played an important part in the strike movement among the 'natives'. This is hard to accept since there is no indication how this propaganda was transmitted or received and, more importantly, how they circumvented the police guarding the compounds.

Another point at issue is the attempt to characterise the strike as 'a revolt'. One could speculate what the consequences of the strike would have been had this 'revolt' been successful. In light of events post-1948, one can surmise that the victors would have ensured the continuance of the status quo vis a vis the blacks. There is no other feasible conclusion despite the fact that the CP through the 20s and 30s expressed the view 'that it was an outstanding example of the struggle between the workers and the ruling class, even though there were racist aspects which were deplorable.' What puzzles me though is the contention that the CP

changed their stance after the Second World War and declared the strike to be reactionary. In our verbal duels with ideologues of the Party we always held their support for the racist strike against them and this they doggedly defended. In researching this aspect (to bring some new knowledge to bear!), I looked at the writing of Alex La Guma, a CPSA stalwart to the end, as well as the work of Jack Simons. In 'Time of the Butcher Bird' La Guma refers to the Barends family who owned a grocery store in a mining town allegorically representing Fordsburg, where the white miners made their last stand. The reference is suffused in nostalgia as is evident in the following quotation 'The artillery of the government, the rifles, shotguns and sticks of the defeated miners had passed into history books, but the little shop had stood still.' La Guma also mentions Taffy Long, the leader of the Fordsburg commando, who got the death penalty. But it is the Simonses who speak with glowing pride in 'Class and Colour' of how Taffy went to his death 'singing the Red Flag'. Nevertheless, one cannot deny your assertion that the event was 'far more complex than a black or white account would suggest and merits a reinvestigation returning to the view of those who were involved at the time'.

In referring to the origins of the strike of 1922 a number of sources of the developing situation are quoted. We have an Ivon Jones quotation that is analytical and free from race prejudice. He cites the call of the white miners to the blacks 'to stay out of the struggle', which is mildly chided as being 'myopic'. We also have the mayor of Springs who berates Smuts for backing the Chamber of Mines 'to put the white standard in the background and the black standard in the foreground.' All this seems to me to be further evidence that undermines your contention about the nature of the strike and underscores the dilemma presented in your attempt to try to justify the anti-black aspect of the strike. This is evident in your presentation of the aims of the commandos 'to defend white society . . . against the magnates and not the state' and your citing of the fact that the leader writer of *The International* also supported the commandos 'even if they did make mistakes' (your comment). There was also reference to the Red Flag as 'a real contribution to working class weapons', plus 'there is no precedent in the English speaking working classes'. One can but question the historical objectivity implicit in the comments. To those on the scene like Smuts, there was never any doubt about the situation on the mines and his support of the magnates. His declaration was unambiguous: there could be no abrogation of the colour bar. A lower standard of living for the white would be preferable.

You also refer to the fact that Dr Abdurahman had no difficulty in condemning the racism of the 1922 strike and that the white workers had no intention of breaking with the status quo. Abdurahman's views contrast significantly with that of Clements Kadalie of the ICU who made a confused and reactionary call on the blacks to be loyal to the govern-

ment, the king and country. The attempt on your part to excuse or at least to minimise the racist aspects of the strike leads inexorably to the following comment: 'With white miners earning seven to ten times more than blacks, their replacement by blacks would increase the mines profitability considerably'. One could ask on the reasoning implicit in the above, whether you would also have excused the white Australia policy, which was also a policy 'in opposition to the attempt by capital to undercut wages.'

You refer to the editorial of *The International* of 27th January 1922, which is so riddled with racist formulations which oblige you to conclude that it 'came close to endorsing the worst aspects of white supremacy'. Surely, far from 'coming close' it seems to have endorsed those views to the hilt. You concur with Jones's outlook when he adds 'Their legal privileges are an anachronism, yet no communist can withhold support of their resistance to the capitalist offensive.' Could one ask whether that includes black communists as well? I also refer to Jones's further comments about the blacks as 'a constant menace (*sic*) to them'.

It is refreshing therefore to move from Jones's mealie-mouthed populism to the views of the Defence Committee who make no bones what the strike is all about. They speak of: a sound instinct to preserve the purity of the white race . . . and an instinctive perception . . . 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 of the great white race. 'There is an attempt by the DC to justify this racist view by raising the far-fetched fear that the abhorrent compound system might be extended to the whites! You also approve Frank Glass' view '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 the leaders of a united working class' — surely, the *sine qua non* of a socialist revolution! (In a footnote Glass illustrated his acceptance of the difficulties that beset white socialists in the South African context).

Finally one has to deal with the notorious photograph that appeared in a capitalist journal showing the slogan '**Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa**'. Jones comments that 'till the fifth week of the strike this token did not betoken race enmity'. How ever could he justify that? Furthermore, the presence of blacks in the vicinity of the picture is actually interpreted as support for the strike, is another difficult proposition to accept. But the hardest of all, his view that the workers 'atoned many times over in blood and tears, and indeed heroism . . . for the anti-native outrages committed in their name'. This is elegiac but tragic as their suffering was it cannot be logically argued that one thing cancelled out the other. What can be said is that 1922 serves to highlight the fact the white workers' conceptual framework,

although 'progressive' in terms of their own rights, had been shaped indubitably by the white supremacist hegemony.

In conclusion, one has to stress the fact that the article has only two incontestable points, namely that: (a) the uprising was brutally crushed by the state and (b) it was directed against the Chamber of Mines, which represented the interests of Capital. Nevertheless, it is my view that these facts do not obscure nor outweigh the explicitly racist nature of the uprising. Moreover, the regrettable loss of blood did not alter the basic nature of the strike, which essentially upheld the maintenance of white supremacy in South Africa.

Fraternally yours

Joe Rassool

### The Editor's reply

Dear Joe,

Your letter probably represents the opinions of several readers and lies at the heart of many debates on attitudes to events in South Africa. The question is whether the struggles of the white workers and their leaders are to be considered as part of the struggles that socialists can support, or whether they were so racist that they are just beyond the pale. Indeed, was it correct to condemn the hanging of three miners, and shooting many others, or did they get their just deserts? After all Clements Kadalie wanted to see them hang and Abduhrman condemned them roundly.

But first things first. We seem to have a basic disagreement on the role of the working class. I cannot agree with your contention that socialist are wrong in seeing the 'proletarian revolution as the only means of destroying the capitalist system'. It is this that distinguishes my point of view, and that of this journal, from many others. It has been our understanding that if the working class does not act to remove capitalism there is no possibility of socialism emerging. The workers alone, in alliance with the peasants where there is still a large rural population, have it in their power to transform society. I know of no other social class that can perform this task and, if they do not take their place at the head of a revolutionary movement, society must ultimately stagnate or revert to chaos or barbarism. In saying this I do not wish to imply that the workers, as revolutionaries, have themselves been transformed into people who have a complete understanding of social issues. They have until now suffered from prejudices that they have absorbed from the society in which they live — and have even shaped some of the worst features of the country in which they live. After the strikes of 1913 and 1914 Jones (and I think your description of him is unwarranted)

believed in the role of the proletariat as the motor-force of socialism. In this I think he was correct.

The question you may then ask is: which proletariat? We will never know how far Ivon Jones was able to shed his racist prejudices or whether he came over completely to the view which he stated when on trial in 1919, that the future Lenin of South Africa would be a black man – the highest compliment he could pay. He was also unique in calling on the Comintern to convene a Conference of Negro Toilers in 1921. (But that was not in the article, it appears in the biography of Jones). But, as I tried to show, he was a man of his time: he never entered a location or a Reserve and he probably never conducted a serious discussion with an African. There were no black communists before he left South Africa and the nearest the International Socialist League got to the black workers was to form the Industrial Workers of Africa – and Jones was too ill to participate in its practical work. Yes, Jones never quite shed his racism – and my quotations showed this quite clearly. I make no excuse for the many silly things that Jones said: I only place them alongside some of his more perceptive statements.

Nonetheless, as you say, the statements of the time are redolent of racism. The effects of colonialism, with the racism it spawned will live with us long after capitalism is finally removed. It stems from the overbearing arrogance of a people who lorded it over the people they enslaved and conquered. Racial discrimination also arose from the competitiveness introduced at the workplace by capitalists (and the government), in which the drive to keep wages down led to a divide-and-rule situation in which the white workers were faced by the real threat of lowering standards or unemployment. The socialists called for a closing of ranks and co-operation but workers, short-sighted (if you don't like the word myopic), were not often convinced. Instead they resorted to the grossest racial stereotyping and open antagonism. While rejecting all racist attacks, verbal or physical, it is still essential that socialists continue to speak to the workers and mobilize them for the real task ahead: the onslaught on the capitalist system.

Such an approach leads to ambivalence on all our part. We condemn the racism – as in fact the communist strike leaders did in 1922 – while urging the workers to turn their wrath on the real enemies. Percy Fisher, a communist strike leader intervened to stop racial attacks, and the CPSA issued a leaflet, which I reprinted, urging the white workers to turn their wrath on the real enemy; the Chamber of Mines. The leaflet, written in 1922 would have been written in different language in a later era, but it is otherwise to the point and not incorrect.

At the same time the writer in the *International*, probably WH Andrews, was muddled and mixed his enthusiasms with racist nonsense. I did not approve such statements in my article, nor did I suggest that Jones had the same attitude. However, both Andrews and Jones recog-

nised that in raising commandos the workers had found a new method of fighting capitalism. Thirty years later commandos were transformed into guerilla armies and, in many circumstances, these were welcomed by socialists. But in South Africa the commando first appeared in the Anglo-Boer war and by employing the same name the workers' fighting force carried forward the philosophy of a people that had opposed British imperialism while embodying a racism that was among the worst in the world.

Before I leave this point I must repeat my contention that the communists changed their perspective on the 1922 strike after 1950. I cannot believe that you would want me to accept counter-evidence from a short story written by La Guma. However, the Simons are a different matter. Of course they lamented the hanging of Taffy Long — he was a victim of the Smuts regime — but if you read the Simons' book again you will find that they consider the general strike to have been unsupportable. It is still my contention that they are wrong.

I belong to the school that believed that the strike was anti-capitalist and reading the evidence again, and considering Jones's writings, strengthened my position. I did not, as you suggest, 'place overwhelming reliance' on Jones's views. I had found in my researches that Jones threw light on many matters that had been obscure. These matters are discussed at great length in *The Delegate for Africa* and could not be included in a journal article. There was other evidence that became available from writers at a later date, and also from Sam Barlin's report to the Comintern Congress in 1921 which show that the IWA and the ISL were involved in the African mine workers strike in 1920. I never said that the ISL called the strike or even led it. This was the work of sections of the black workers and to them must go the credit. We do not know if they could have carried on without outside assistance and on this it seems evident to me from the reports made at the IWA meetings (and not from Jones's pan) that this group had played a significant part in the events of 1918-20. The ISL, in their journal, denied involvement. In the atmosphere of the time, when the government was actively considering anti-Communist legislation, that is understandable if regrettable.

When eventually the strike of 1922 did take place the most insightful comments came from the pen of Jones. He saw that the strike was aimed at the very centre of world capitalism by being aimed at the gold mines. In this Jones was far ahead of his contemporary's in realising that gold provided the backing of most currencies. If the Rand had fallen to socialists in 1922, and if that fall had not been met with massive armed force, the relation of forces in the world would have altered. The workers could not be allowed to win the battle of the Rand and Smuts was aware of the danger. This too I discussed in the chapters I wrote on the Rand in *Delegate for Africa*. There I also noted that Smuts had first contemplated using an aeroplane to bomb the Africans in the strikes of

1918-20. In the event he used this weapon in 1922 and Jones noted its significance when most socialists were silent.

I must, in all fairness, end this reply. But there are two lesser points that I must take up. Jones and the ISL were full of praise for the solidarity and organisation shown in the boycott of the mine concession stores. That was not the point. Socialists have always claimed that the workers' main struggle must be directed against capitalism at the point of production. However well the boycott weapon was employed (and a consumer's boycott in particular), this could not affect the basic class relations in the country.

The other point refers to the presence of Africans at the rallies called by the strikers in 1922. Like you I do not know why Africans went to the meetings. However it does show several things. Firstly that there could not have been a lynch spirit because the Africans were obviously not afraid. There was no fighting at the rally and the Africans arrived and departed unharmed — and they must have known that they were safe. Secondly, they did stand under that awful slogan and that seems to indicate that they were unconcerned. Thirdly, and this is the most contentious point, to which you have referred: was there an understanding at the time, to which some blacks concurred, that if the Chamber of Mines did remove the white miners, standards of pay would be forced down uniformly until only starvation wages were paid across the board? That appears to have been the understanding of (or misunderstanding of) the latter part of that slogan 'For a White South Africa'. It is an abomination if read literally but, if it was a call for livable wages, it makes more sense in unravelling the philosophy of the strikers in their clashes with the Mine owners.

And as a final point. When the white workers were engaged in struggle with the major prop of capitalism and when Smuts brought in the aeroplanes to bomb them into submission, socialists who had their reservations, could do no otherwise than support the strikers. Frank Glass who saw the situation most clearly and saw that the white workers were not a force capable of changing society, supported them against the mineowners and the government, It was left to the black leaders of the time to call on the government, the government that had smashed the black workers struggle, to suppress the white workers. There is no excuse for their position and I could not commend Dr Abduhraman for continuing to support, not only the government but also the King and the Empire. His daughter called the doctor a reactionary: with this I heartily concur.