

# Chapter Fifteen

## White Workers and the Colour Bar

In the history of resistance to the mine-owners' control, it is clear that the most important conflict of interests occurred between mine-owners and the ultra-exploited black workers – the story of their resistance follows this chapter. During this period, however, the most successful and most *noticeable* struggles occurred amongst the white workers.

This was because white workers had more power than the black workers and could challenge the mine-owners directly, through strikes, through political parties and through newspapers.

What actually were these workers resisting? Mainly, they were fighting against the mine-owners' continual attempts to replace 'expensive' white labour with 'cheap' black labour.

This chapter traces the development of the white labour force in the gold mines and explains why they were placed in a special position by the mine-owners. This special position shaped the forms of white worker resistance in South Africa.

### THE NEED FOR SKILLED WORKERS

Deep-level mining was new to South Africa and there were few men in South Africa who had experience of mining deep under the ground. Some had experience in the diamond mines in Kimberley but deep-level mining for gold was different from diamond mining. Besides, there were not enough experienced miners from Kimberley for the growing number of mines on the Rand. The mine-owners had to recruit skilled miners from other countries.

Where did these miners come from? Most of the skilled miners came from the mines of Britain – from Cornwall or Northumber-

land in England, and from the mines of Scotland and Wales. Many others came from the coal mines of Australia.

These new immigrants brought with them not only mining skills – they also brought their experience of being workers and we shall see later how important this was. They came to the Rand as full-time workers, with no land to go back to. The skilled miners of the early years had a strong influence on the working conditions of white workers in the years to come.

### HIGH WAGES

Skilled miners in South Africa got high wages. In 1897, for

example, skilled miners earned 18 pounds to 22 pounds a month. That was good pay in those days.

Unskilled miners were earning only two to three pounds a month.

There were two main reasons why skilled miners got high wages in those early years:

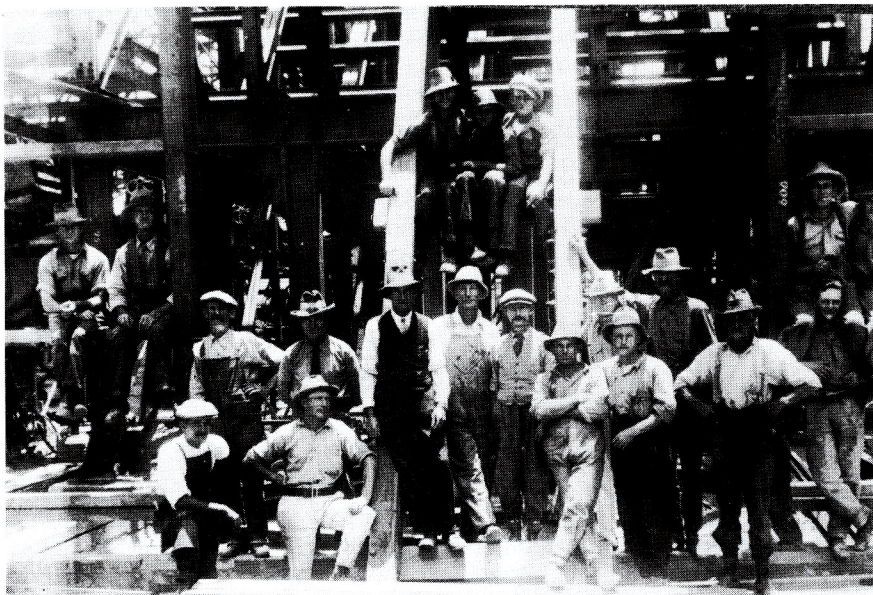
- their skills were in short supply;
- they had strong trade unions.

(1) *Shortage of skills* – One reason for their high wages was that the mines desperately needed skilled workers, as we have seen. So, from the earliest days, mine-owners offered high wages for skills, and skilled miners were in a strong position.

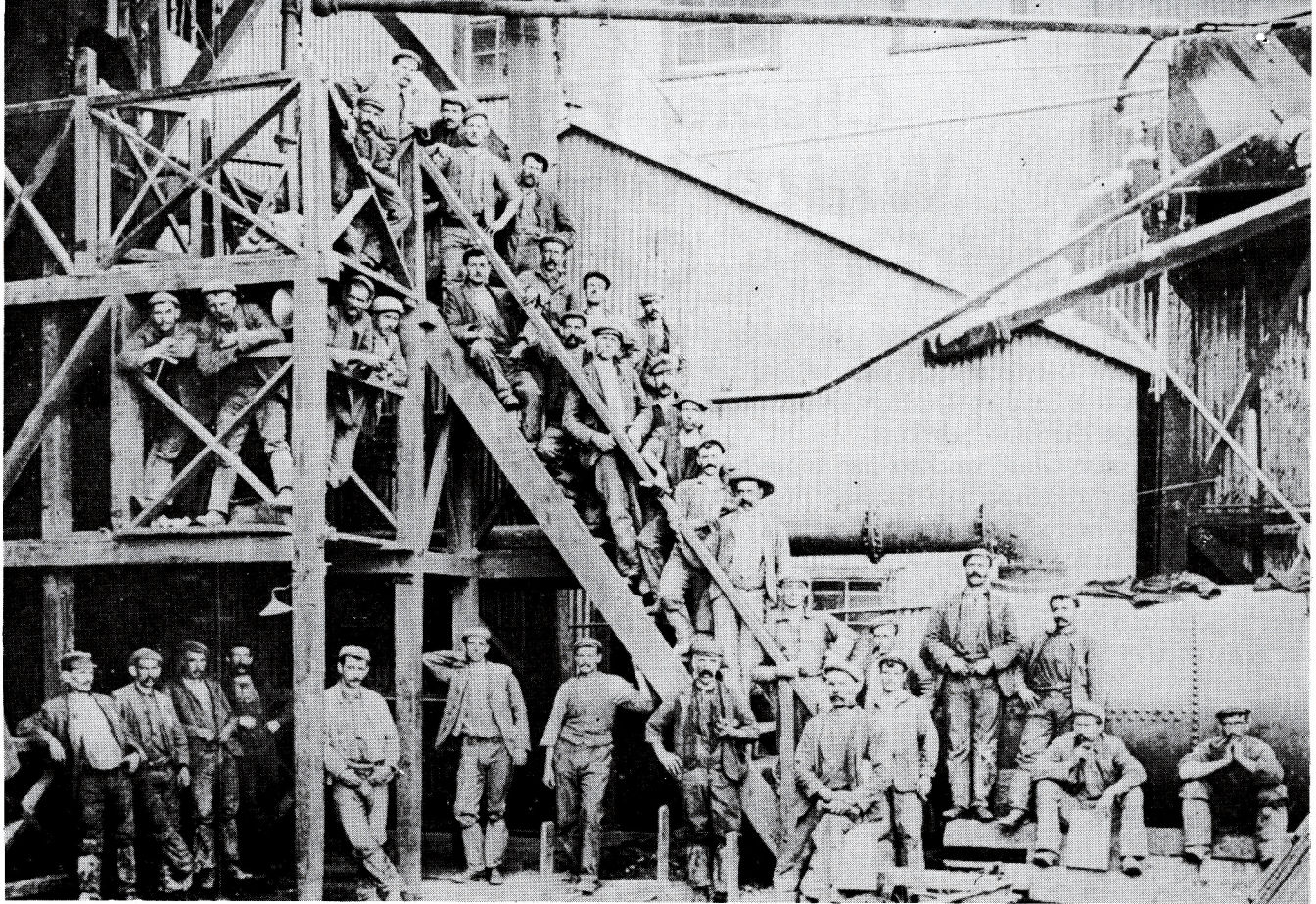
(2) *Strong Unions* – Most of these miners saw themselves as members of the working class. They organised themselves into unions soon after they arrived. They had experience of trade unions in the countries that they came from, and they knew how to bargain for higher wages and better working conditions.

In 1881 the carpenters and joiners on the Rand organised themselves into a union. In 1886 the engineering union was started. Other unions followed.

These early unions were all *craft unions* – only skilled workers qualified in a craft were allowed to join. The most important unions were the Engineering Union, with 3 000 members by 1913, and the Transvaal Miners'



Skilled miners were extremely important to the mines. In the first twenty years of deep-level mining most were recruited mainly from Britain and Australia – at high wages.



*White miners at the shaft-head. To protect their jobs, the skilled miners reorganised themselves. They changed their old craft unions to industrial unions, to allow all white workers to join. Black mine-workers were excluded from these unions.*

Association, with 6 000 members in 1913.

These unions became strong. The skilled miners knew how important the gold mines were to South Africa — and how important their skills were to the gold mines. They were in a good bargaining position.

In 1897, for example, the white miners at Randfontein went on strike. The manager had dropped the wage of the black miners and he tried to do the same to the white miners. The strike spread to the other mines, with the support of all the unions. The mining companies then announced that they would not drop the wages of the skilled workers.

This was the first strike on the Rand by the skilled workers, and they won it with very little trouble, that first time. The unions were able to fix skilled wages at more than one pound a day more for skilled workers. Within 15 years the unions had bargained for paid holidays, compensation for accidents and phthisis, overtime rates and shorter working hours.

But things began to change for skilled workers. As the years

went by, other workers began to learn the skills of deep-level mining. The mine-owners saw that they did not need the skilled miners as much as before. The skilled workers began to lose their strong position as the mine-owners gradually gave more and more of the skilled work to blacks — at the old rates of 15 to 20 cents a day. Or else they gave jobs to semi-skilled whites with some experience, for lower pay than the skilled whites were getting. Of course the skilled miners were very worried about losing their jobs. They took action to protect themselves against the mine-owners' attack on their bargaining power and on their wages.

### SKILLED MINERS FIGHT BACK

The skilled miners defended their position in various ways.

\* Firstly, they opened up their unions to all white miners. The old craft unions changed to *industrial unions*. Any white miner could join the industrial union. He did not have to have a blasting certificate to become a

member. In other words, the skilled miners decided to make themselves stronger by trying to unite all the white miners under one big organisation.

This was the turning point in the policy of the skilled miners. Previously, they had used their *skill* to unite them and give them strength. Now they were beginning to turn towards *race* to protect their workers' rights.

\* Secondly, they began to support *political parties*. The South African Labour Party and the Afrikaner National Party tried to persuade the government to make laws to protect white workers. White workers voted for these parties.

The shift from skill to race as a unifying force for workers led to a particular viewpoint in political outlook. The white workers saw these two parties as defending their position of racial superiority in the labour market.

White miners used these two weapons — their unions and their political power — to protect themselves against the mine-owners' attempts to undermine their special position. They found that they were caught in a trap. White miners were a privi-

leged group of workers, commanding good wages for special jobs — but their very privileges put their jobs in danger, for the mine-owners preferred to employ the cheap labour of blacks as far as possible.

The white miners resisted the mine-owners' attempts to replace them by calling for *job reservation*.

## JOB RESERVATION

What exactly is job reservation? Job reservation, or the *job colour bar*, reserves certain jobs for whites only.

The job colour bar goes back a long way in South Africa. Nearly 300 years ago, slaves were brought to the Cape to do hard labour on the farms, while their white masters supervised them. In later years, when there was a struggle for land, many blacks lost their land to the Boers and British. Blacks became farm labourers for white land owners. Once again, the work was divided racially — labourers were mostly black, bosses were white.

When the diamond and gold fields started in Kimberley and on the Rand, once again blacks did most of the hard, labouring

work. The first job colour bar law on the Rand was made in 1893. Although intended as a safety regulation to prevent accidents it made the assumption that blacks would never be skilled workers. The law said that engine drivers had to have certificates to show that they were skilled. It also added that no black person could hold this certificate. In other words, Africans could not become qualified engine drivers.

In the next few years more job colour bars were made. But in those first years in the mines, there were very few skilled blacks.

## UNSKILLED WHITES

Then came the Anglo-Boer War, and the gold mines closed down for two years. After the war there was a shortage of cheap labour. This was partly because the mine-owners tried to drop the wages of black workers. Thousands of men stayed away from the mines.

Mine-owners then tried using unskilled white labour, but the skilled miners were against this plan. They were worried that these unskilled whites would not

be properly trained and that they would take over the skilled jobs at lower wages. Then the mine-owners could lower the wages of all skilled miners.

In September 1902, about 100 skilled miners went on strike at the Village Main Reef Mine. They struck because they feared they would be replaced by unskilled white workers. The skilled miners' union, the Transvaal Miners' association, supported the strike.

(An interesting point to remember about this strike, is that the skilled miners were worried about *all* unskilled workers who might take their places. Workers of any colour who could work for lower wages could eventually take the place of the skilled workers. So skilled miners were against *white* cheap labour as well as *black* cheap labour.)

## 'THE YELLOW PERIL'

The Chamber of Mines then decided to import Chinese labour. You will remember that the white miners were against this plan as well. They said that the Chinese were 'devilishly clever' and would learn many of the

## Impressions of an Immigrant Mine Worker

His first day at work brought startling revelations with it. The head of the workshop, Jock Davidson, handed out his tools: 'Here's your hammer,' he said, 'and here's your chisel, shifting spanner, pliers . . . and here's a nigger.'

Andrews was taken aback. 'What's he for?' he asked.

'To carry your tools,' Davidson replied tersely, and dismissed the new hand.

A few years later at Randfontein, his helper was a strong young Zulu, who asked him how much he drew in wages.

'A pound a shift,' Andrews replied.

'And how much do I get?' asked the Zulu.

'What's it — two bob a day?'

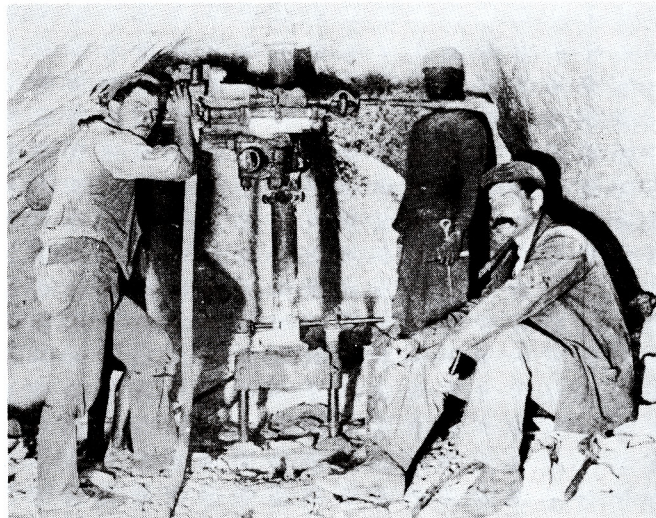
'Yes. And is that right?' the Zulu wanted to know.

'Who does all the hard work, who lifts the iron into the machine, who carries your tools for you, and hands you your tools? I do.'

As far as he was able in kitchen Zulu, Andrews put forward the argument that he got the pay of his trade because he was trained to do it. Although his 'boy' did all the heavy work, only the trained man could finish the job because of his acquired skill.

But all these arguments were unavailing. The Zulu shook his head vigorously and remained absolutely convinced on the injustice of the position . . . Andrews was deeply impressed by such incidents and turned them over frequently in his mind.

Extracts from *Comrade Bill — The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers' Leader.*  
by R.K. Cope



White miners at the drill, assisted by a 'faceless' black worker.



A protest meeting, held at Boksburg, against the decision of the British government to allow Rand mine-owners to import Chinese labour. The mine-owners were able to break the 1907 strike with the help of Chinese and Afrikaner labour.

mining skills just by watching the skilled miners. Soon, they would take over the skilled jobs at 'slave wages', the white miners thought.

There were many meetings and demonstrations to protest against the coming of the Chinese. The newspapers at the time were full of discussions of the 'Chinese Question'. Mine-owners wrote articles in the papers, explaining that white miners did not need to worry. The Chinese would only do the unskilled work on the mines. But the miners did not trust the mine-owners.

*'Unskilled... that is what they ask,' said one skilled miner. 'But how long will they consider certain work as skilled? Only as long as it takes John Chinaman to learn it — say for instance running a rock drill or sharpening drills for these machines. John Chinaman is clever and the best imitator born in this troublous world.'*<sup>1</sup>

The skilled miners realised that already they had 'lost' some of their skills to black labourers, and they feared that they would lose even more to the Chinese.

There were many objections to the Chinese from other groups too, as we saw in the last chapter. Eventually the Transvaal government passed the *Labour Importation Ordinance* for the sake of the skilled white miners. The Chinese were to be em-

ployed *'only on such labour as is usually performed in mines in the Witwatersrand district by persons belonging to the aboriginal races or tribes of Africa south of the Equator,'* said the Ordi-

nance.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the Chinese were allowed to compete with black labour only, and not with expensive, skilled white labour — for the time being.

## The 1907 Strike

In 1907 there was another re-organisation of the work to save more costs for the mines. The mine-owners instructed the white miners to supervise three drills instead of two. This led to another strike. Within three weeks, more than 4 000 miners were on strike on the Rand. But the mine-owners were prepared. With the help of the government, they sent out notices to all unemployed Afrikaners to go down to the mines and take the place of the British workers. The unemployed

were desperate for jobs. They did not really understand the skilled miners' complaints. The strikers picketed the mines — they stood outside the mines and told workers not to go down.

*'Timbermen! Let the scabs protect themselves! Boilermakers! Leave holes in the boilers!'* urged a pamphlet.<sup>3</sup>

But the government called out the army. The army beat up the strikers and protected those who went to work. The strike was broken. Unskilled Afrikaners and



Members of a craft union on an outing, with their two black retainers.

experienced Chinese kept the mines going. Slowly, the skilled miners went back to work. But ten percent of the miners lost their jobs, and the mines saved a quarter of the costs of breaking rock with the new system.

After the strike, the Transvaal government appointed a commission to listen to the complaints of both sides. The commission interviewed mine-owners, managers and white workers to hear their opinions. It was quite obvious that mine-owners and managers felt that they no longer needed the skilled miners as much as before. They made it clear that they wanted more black labour in the mines and less white labour.

The manager of Geldenhuis Estate Gold Mining Company, for example, told the Commission:

*'We have some of the Kaffirs who are better machine-men than some of the white men. I have boys who have been working on the mine from twelve to fifteen years, and they are better than many on the Rand nowadays.'*

Question: *'Can they place holes?'*

Answer: *'Yes, they can place the holes, fix up the machine and do everything that a white man can do, but, of course, we are not allowed to let them blast.'*

Question: *'If the law was not what it is, do you think they could blast with safety?'*

Answer: *'I do not think; I feel sure about it. I have had experience with natives since 1879, and I know what a native can do.'*<sup>4</sup>

Another manager said: *'The trouble with the mines is that underground the white labour so-called is not labour at all; it is merely supervision... We have far too many whites employed on the mines. In my opinion two men are employed underground doing work one man could do easily. The white man underground is not a working man at all; he has not to work as in other countries where there is no large supply of unskilled coloured labour.'*<sup>5</sup>



*Inexperienced Afrikaners learnt a great deal from black miners 'on the job', both during and after the 1907 strike.*

And a mine-owner, Sir George Albu, wrote in the *Mining Review* at the time of the strike:

*'Why not make the Native the real miner... and thus save much of the money paid to White men for work they never perform?'*<sup>6</sup>

This kind of talk worried the white miners. It seemed to them that in order to fight the mine-owners they would also have to fight the black workers. They saw black workers as 'the tools of Capitalism against the white workers'<sup>7</sup>. But to keep their privileged position they would have to unite all the white miners in one strong organisation. They would also have to try to build up their political power.

## POLITICAL ORGANISATION

The white miners were able to defend their position with a weapon denied to black workers — they had the vote.

After the 1907 strike, many miners began to show a greater interest in politics. Most of them had had the vote since the British won the Anglo-Boer War. Many white miners hoped that their voting power would help their position at work. But the white workers were not all united in their ideas of what they wanted. Some saw themselves as mainly British, others as Afrikaners first. Many white workers did not regard themselves as workers at all.

Hundreds of workers voted for the governing *Het Volk* party. Later, when the Afrikaner National Party was formed, most

Afrikaner workers voted for it.

But many white workers supported the new Labour Party, which wanted to represent the white workers.

### THE LABOUR PARTY

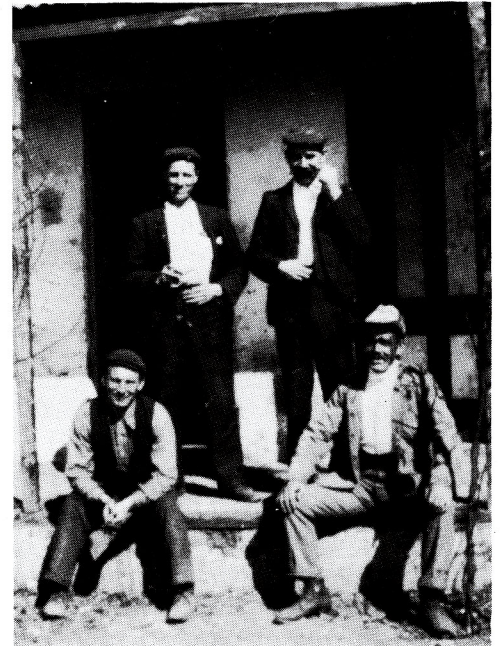
In the 1910 elections, the South

African Labour Party managed to get four of its members into parliament. The Labour Party aimed to make the government pass laws to protect the white workers

- \* from employers;
- \* from the competition of cheap black labour.

The South African Labour Party was a white workers' party.

Their members talked about a 'civilised labour' policy. This really meant jobs for whites only. It is interesting to note that the Labour Party had a kind of apartheid policy before the Afrikaner National Party developed it. They argued that South Africa should be divided into different areas for the different races.



*Above: White miners outside a boarding house.*

*Above left: There were very few white women in Johannesburg's early years.*

*Left: An all-male picnic on a day off.*



*After the Anglo-Boer War, mining companies built houses to accommodate their white staff. White miners were fortunate in being able to settle in the towns with their families.*



They believed that:

\* Blacks should be left alone to farm on the reserves. They did not really need wages. The mine-owners were forcing them to leave home to go to work.

\* All the immigrant 'Asiatics' should be sent back to India. They should not be allowed into South Africa.

\* 'Coloureds' would gradually disappear if mixing of the races was prevented. 'Coloureds' would then become part of the black race and live separately from the whites.

With this policy, the Labour Party hoped to keep all mining and factory jobs in the towns for whites only. Then white wages would not drop, they hoped.

The Labour Party turned out to be mainly a party for some of the English-speaking workers, plus a few dissatisfied lawyers, teachers and shopkeepers. They had no direct power to change laws to help white workers, because they had so few members in parliament.

Nevertheless, the governing party realised that many white workers had voting power, and the government tried to satisfy some of the needs of the white

worker.

### THE 1911 MINES AND WORKS ACT

In 1911 the government passed a law to protect white workers. The Labour Party supported this law, although they complained that it did not go far enough to protect white workers against cheap black labour.

The Mines and Works Act set aside 32 types of jobs in the Transvaal and the OFS for whites. No blacks could qualify for certificates in these jobs. The law prevented thousands of blacks, especially 'coloureds' from getting skilled wages as engine drivers, carpenters, blasters and other skilled positions in the mines. The Mines and Works Act was the first job colour bar law in the newly formed Union of South Africa.

Nevertheless, the Mines and Works Act did not stop more and more skilled jobs going to blacks in the mines — but at black wage rates. For example:

*\* In 1907, the Chamber of Mines employed 2 234 white*

*miners to supervise 1890 machines.*

*\* In 1913 the mines were employing 2 207 white miners to supervise 4 781 rock drill machines.<sup>8</sup>*

These rock drills were being handled by Africans. White miners were supervising six to ten black drillers. They also had black 'boss boys' to help them. In other words, the mines were employing more workers for more jobs, but these jobs were going to blacks, not whites, at cheap black wages.

At the same time, mine-owners felt that white miners were being paid too much for the work that they were doing. After all, they argued, they could get the work done much more cheaply by blacks. One mine-owner complained that the white miners 'were allowed to earn an exorbitant amount of money.'

### THE 1913 STRIKE

In 1913, white miners went on strike again. The strike had a small beginning at New Kleinfontein Mine. In May of that year,

## The Killer Silicosis

Silicosis is a disease of the lungs, caused by breathing in the tiny, sharp particles of dust created by the drills of deep-level mining. Silicosis was usually followed by other lung infections such as TB and pneumonia, leading to a quick death.

Silicosis was not generally recognised as a deadly problem until after the Anglo-Boer War. When the gold mines closed down during the war, many skilled miners returned to their homes in Britain, only to die there, coughing in agony.

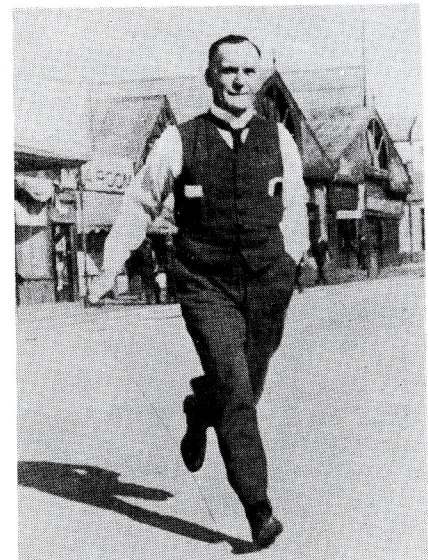
After the war, mine-owners began to call for skilled miners to return from Britain. They discovered that many of these miners had died and were forced to face the problem. Prizes were offered for the best inventions to prevent silicosis, but these brought their own dangers (such as the water spray, which gave the men pneumonia) or else the mine-owners were not prepared to pay large sums for the more expensive equipment.

Silicosis became an important issue in the 1907 strike, when white miners were instructed to supervise three drills instead of two or one. This meant that the miners were exposed to more dust and the danger of silicosis was therefore greater.

It was found that the Rand rock driller could hope to live for only five years — he died at an average age of 37 years. Records show that in 1902 the mines employed 1337 white rock-drillers — in just over two years, 225 of those workers were dead.

Silicosis also attacked the blasters, the trammers and the lashers. In fact, all underground workers were in danger of getting this disease.

We do not know how many black workers died from silicosis. After their contracts, many migrant workers went home again, never to return.<sup>9</sup>



*Tom Mathews (above) the militant trade unionist in action during the 1913 strike. Detested by Smuts, he was also outspoken against the mine-owners' failure to reduce silicosis underground. 'We consider that our health is to us more important than your dividends,' he challenged them. Tom Mathews died from silicosis in 1915.<sup>10</sup>*

the New Kleinfontein mine-owners appointed a new manager to get more work out of the white miners.

The manager decided to re-organize the working hours. He ordered five underground engineers to work on a Saturday afternoon. When they refused, the management fired them and replaced them with five other miners who did not belong to the Transvaal Miners' Association, the miners' union. The union then sent one of their officials to speak to the mine manager, but the mining company refused to negotiate with the union. The miners then went on strike and the strike spread to other mines.

On the East Rand, groups of strikers marched from mine to mine urging miners to stay away from work. The strike spread to 63 mines, with more than 19 000 miners out on strike.

The mines were *picketed* — the strikers held up signs urging people to stay away from work. Some strike-breakers, or 'scabs', were even beaten up by the strikers. Armed police were sent to guard the entrances to the mines, to protect the strike-breakers.

The government claimed to be neutral in this struggle between white miners and the Chamber of Mines — they said they did not want to take sides. But as the strike spread to Johannesburg



Strike meeting in 1913.

and the West Rand, they sent 3 000 soldiers and policemen to the Rand.

On 4 July, the police and army broke up a banned meeting in Market Square in Johannesburg, beating people with batons, pick-handles and swords.

### THE GOVERNMENT STEPS IN

At this point, the government decided to stop the strike. General Louis Botha the Prime Minister, and General Smuts the Minister of Defence, had a meeting with the union leaders in Johannesburg. Botha and Smuts

promised that the strikers would get their jobs back, with an eight-hour working day and no work on Saturday afternoons. They also promised that the unions would be recognised. In a few days, the miners went back to work.

But the strikers were soon disappointed. The government did not pass new laws to protect the white miners. Instead, in 1914 the government passed the *Riotous Assemblies Act*. This law gave the government the power to ban outdoor meetings. All picketing was also banned. Trade union officials could be charged if any illegal action was taken by



During the 1913 strike, the government sent 3 000 troops to the Rand. Soldiers and police used strong-arm tactics, shooting down unarmed men, women and children in a demonstration outside the Rand Club.



the trade unions. In fact, soon after the act was passed, trade union leaders were arrested and sent back to England.

So, in the end, the white miners lost the strike. They had struck for the right to bargain as a union and not just as employees of any one or other mining company – and for the right of their unions to bargain with their employers.

They realised that the power of white workers would be further eroded unless their trade unions were strong and united.

To unite the white workers against their employers, they tried to prevent scabs from working.

They wanted their trade union to be recognised, but the government had come out on the side of the mine-owners. The trade

unions lost the battle in 1913.

### THE MINES AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In August 1914, Britain and Germany went to war. This was the start of the First World War. All of the British Empire – including South Africa – was at war against Germany, which had developed into a powerful rival in trade and colonies.

The First World War was a good time for the Chamber of Mines. The war brought a business 'boom' to Britain and Europe as factories were busy making weapons – guns, tanks, bullets and bombs, as well as other goods needed for the war. Britain needed more capital for its growing factories and banks. The

price of gold went up and the Rand mines prospered.

### A 'DEAL' WITH THE UNION

In 1914, the Chamber of Mines decided to recognise the trade unions. It held meetings with the South African Mineworkers' Union and came to a number of agreements. The Chamber of Mines offered white miners bonuses, more overtime pay and paid holidays. The Chamber also agreed not to increase the number of black workers or machines that white miners had to supervise.

At first, the Chamber of Mines would only deal with each mining union separately. They came to an agreement with the mechanics' union, for example, and a



*Soldiers in a trench in the First World War (1914 – 1918). A large number of English-speaking Rand miners joined the South African armed forces, leaving a shortage of white mining skills on the Rand. An important result of this shortage was the increased bargaining power of the remaining white workers.*



*By the Status Quo Agreement between the Chamber of Mines and the white Mineworkers' Union in 1918, the mining companies undertook not to employ black workers unless they increased the number of white workers correspondingly.*

separate one with the engine drivers' union.

But after the unions refused to make any more agreements without the South African Industrial Federation, the Chamber of Mines began to include the SAIF in the discussions. From 1917, the SAIF played an important part in settling disagreements between white miners and management.

*Why did the Chamber of Mines decide to recognise the white trade unions?*

After all, the white miners had lost the 1913 strike and the government had passed the Riotous Assemblies Act to control strikes.

There were a number of reasons why the mine-owners wanted the co-operation of the white miners:

\* Firstly, the war had caused a greater shortage of skilled labour. Most of the skilled miners were English-speaking and many of them had left to fight in the war against the Germans in Europe. The mine-owners wanted to avoid disagreements with the miners who were left in the mines – they could not afford interruptions of work through strikes or disputes. Britain was paying a good price for gold, and the mine-owners were anxious to keep the mines running smoothly.

\* Secondly, the Chamber of Mines began to realise that the trade unions could be useful to the mine-owners. They realised that trade union officials did not always react in the same way as the workers did. They saw that trade union officials could sometimes be persuaded to make agreements with management when workers would be too angry to settle a quarrel with their employers.

As one manager said:

*'The (trade union) official is more likely to take the business point of view and examine the situation calmly than the workman who has some personal grievance rankling in his mind.'*<sup>11</sup>

So the mining management hoped to draw the trade unions a little closer to the employers and a little further away from the workers' point of view. They realised that they could get the unions, including the SAIF, to control the miners for them.

\* There was also another important reason why the Chamber of Mines moved towards working with the trade unions – they were worried about the growing dissatisfaction of the black mine-workers.

The black workers had gone on strike in 1913 after the white

miners' strike. (The next chapter gives more details of the strike.) The mine-owners felt that strikes by white miners were having a serious effect on black workers. If all the 200 000 black workers went on strike the gold industry of South Africa would be crippled. It was important therefore to keep them strictly controlled.

So the co-operation between the Chamber of Mines and the white unions was a success for the mine-owners. There were few strikes during the war years, and even these were small and quickly stopped, with the help of the unions.

## THE STATUS QUO AGREEMENT

In 1918, the First World War ended. In that same year the South African Mineworkers' Union negotiated with the Chamber of Mines to protect the jobs of the white miners. The mine-owners agreed that for every 17 black workers on the mines, they would employ two whites at skilled wages. This was called the *Status Quo Agreement*. It meant that if the mines wanted to employ more black workers, they would also have to employ more whites.



## NEW LABOUR PROCESS

After the war, however, the situation began to change. The factories in Britain and Europe slowed down. The price of gold dropped to the old rates. Profits were smaller. To make matters worse the price of heavy machinery used in the mines was three times as much as it had been before the war. So the expenses of the mines went up.

Many mines were struggling to make a profit. The Chamber of Mines declared that 24 mines would close unless they could save money somehow. Mine-owners began to think of new ways of cutting down on their costs.

Mine-owners looked again at the job colour bar. They could not drop the wages of the black miners—they were so low already. But they could save another way. The Chamber of Mines announced that they were going to reorganise the work in the mines. They were going to introduce a new machine drill, called the *jack-hammer*. It could drill between 20 and 40

holes per shift, instead of the four to six of the old drill.

However, the use of this drill would make hundreds of white miners redundant. It would 'de-skill' their jobs, and the new semi-skilled jobs could then be given to experienced black miners — at the same low 'black' wages!

This new labour process would therefore mean more black and fewer white miners. It would go against the Status Quo Agreement, but the Chamber of Mines argued that if the mines could save money, they would not have to close down.

The Chamber spent many months with the SAIF bargaining for these changes. The SAIF agreed to some small charges but no more. In December 1921 the Chamber announced at last that they could not wait any longer as they were losing valuable profits. They dropped the wages of many of the white miners and laid off many more. They also declared that they would have nothing further to do with the SAIF.

*These two photographs show the change in the labour process underground. Above left: In this early photograph a white miner operates the drill with a black 'helper'. Below: Years later the job has been 'deskilled' — black workers operate complex machinery at the same low wage they were getting before. It was the low wage of the black workers — the wage colour bar — that encouraged mine-owners to reorganise the work, and threatened the jobs of the white miners.*



# The 1922 Strike

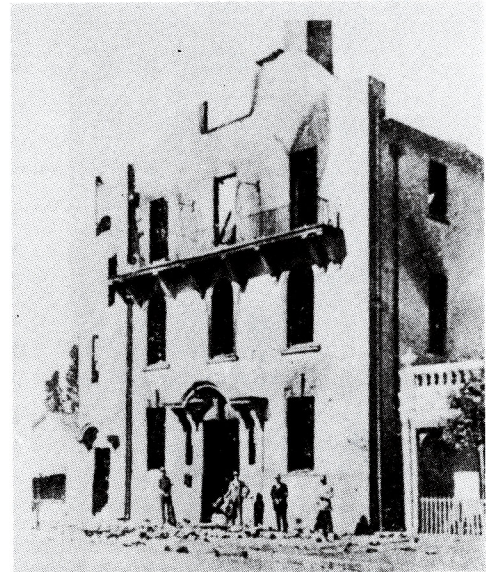
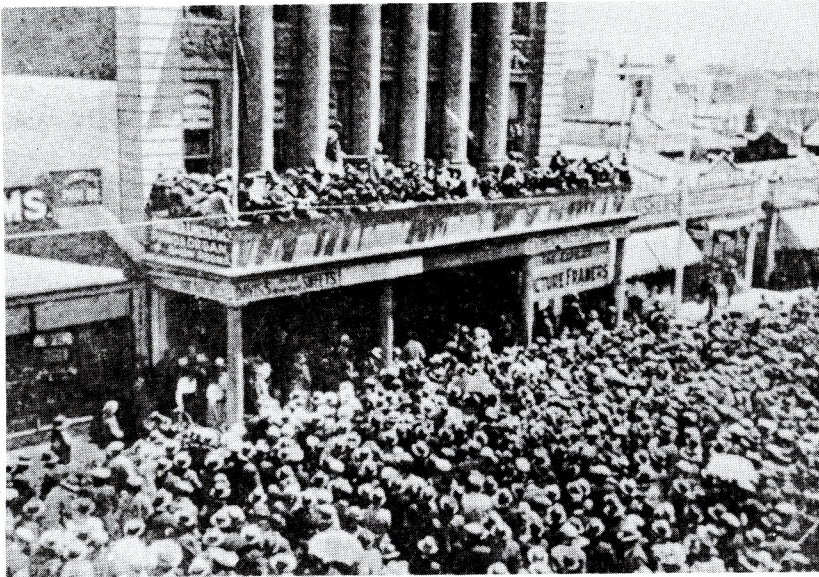
In January 1922 the unions declared a general strike by all white miners.

In the next few weeks, about 25 000 miners stayed away from work. The strike leaders demanded a return to the old *Status Quo* job colour bar agreement of 1918 but the Chamber of Mines refused.

Strikers began to 'pull out the scabs' who were going to work. They armed themselves with guns and took over the mines. They refused to allow blacks to go down the mines to work.

The Prime Minister, General Smuts, then called in the army. Aeroplanes dropped bombs on Benoni and Germiston. There was shooting and fighting in the Johannesburg streets. After four days of armed struggle, the strikers were beaten.

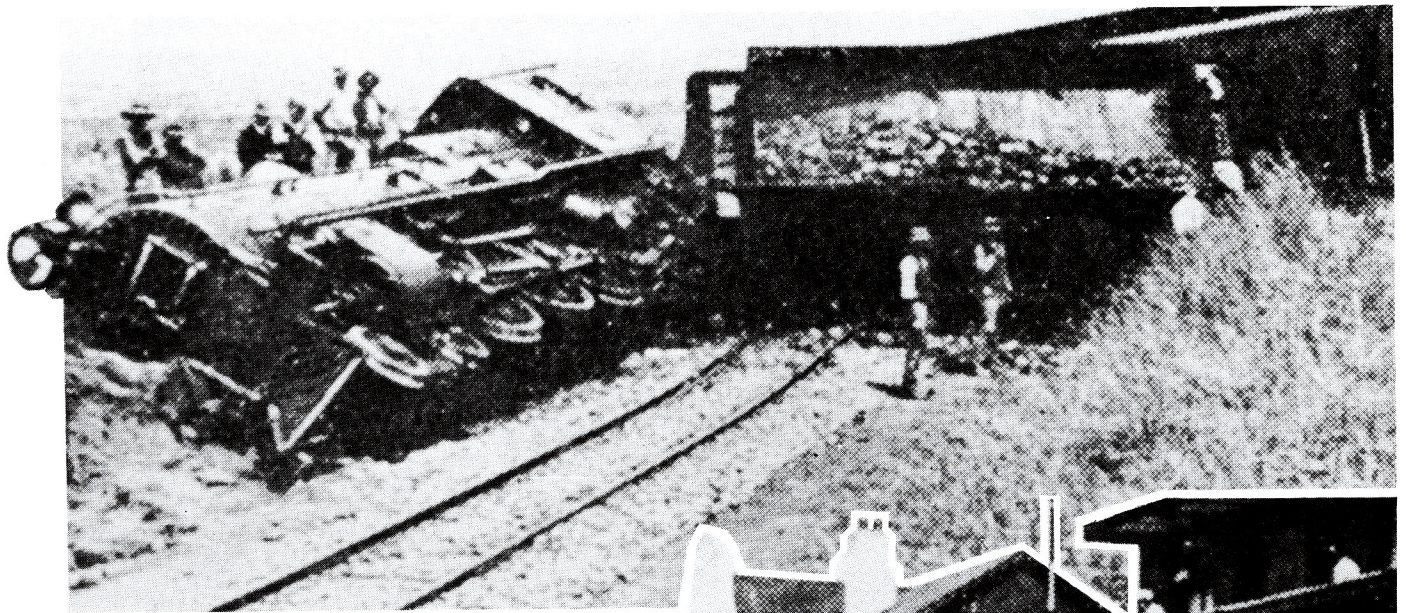
One hundred and fifty-three people were killed and over 500 were wounded. Five thousand strikers were arrested and were imprisoned or fined. Four men were sentenced to death and hanged. By 16 March 1922 the mines were operating again. The white miners had lost the strike.



*THIS PAGE: (Above left) A meeting and outside the Trades Hall in Rissik Street, on 6 March, the day a general strike was declared. (Above right) The Fordsburg police station, burnt out by strikers. (Below) Mounted police rush strikers in Rissik Street.*

*OPPOSITE PAGE: (Top) Sabotage – the mail train, derailed at Union Junction. There were several attempts to wreck railway lines during the strike. (Centre) The Brakpan Commando. The strikers' access to guns enabled them to form 'strike commandos', which engaged in open battles with policemen and troops. They also used force to 'pull out the scabs' who were not on strike. (Bottom) Troops occupy the trenches in Market Square, Fordsburg. The strikers had their headquarters in Market Buildings, and held 50 policemen captive for three days.*





## THE RESULTS OF THE STRIKE

The white miners went back to work for a wage cut of 25 to 50 percent less than they had earned before the strike. They also lost two paid holidays. More important, many whites lost their jobs to blacks — at much lower wages. Blacks took over semi-skilled manual work such as drill-sharpening, waste-packing, engine driving, pumping and carpentry. Whites spent most of their day supervising these black workers.

The mine-owners also saved more money by allowing black workers to start the working day without their white supervisors — whites worked an eight-hour day only while blacks did a ten-hour shift. So in this way the mines saved money on white wages, while production continued.

Those were the immediate results of the 1922 strike. But the strike also had far-reaching results for the whole country.

## A NEW GOVERNMENT

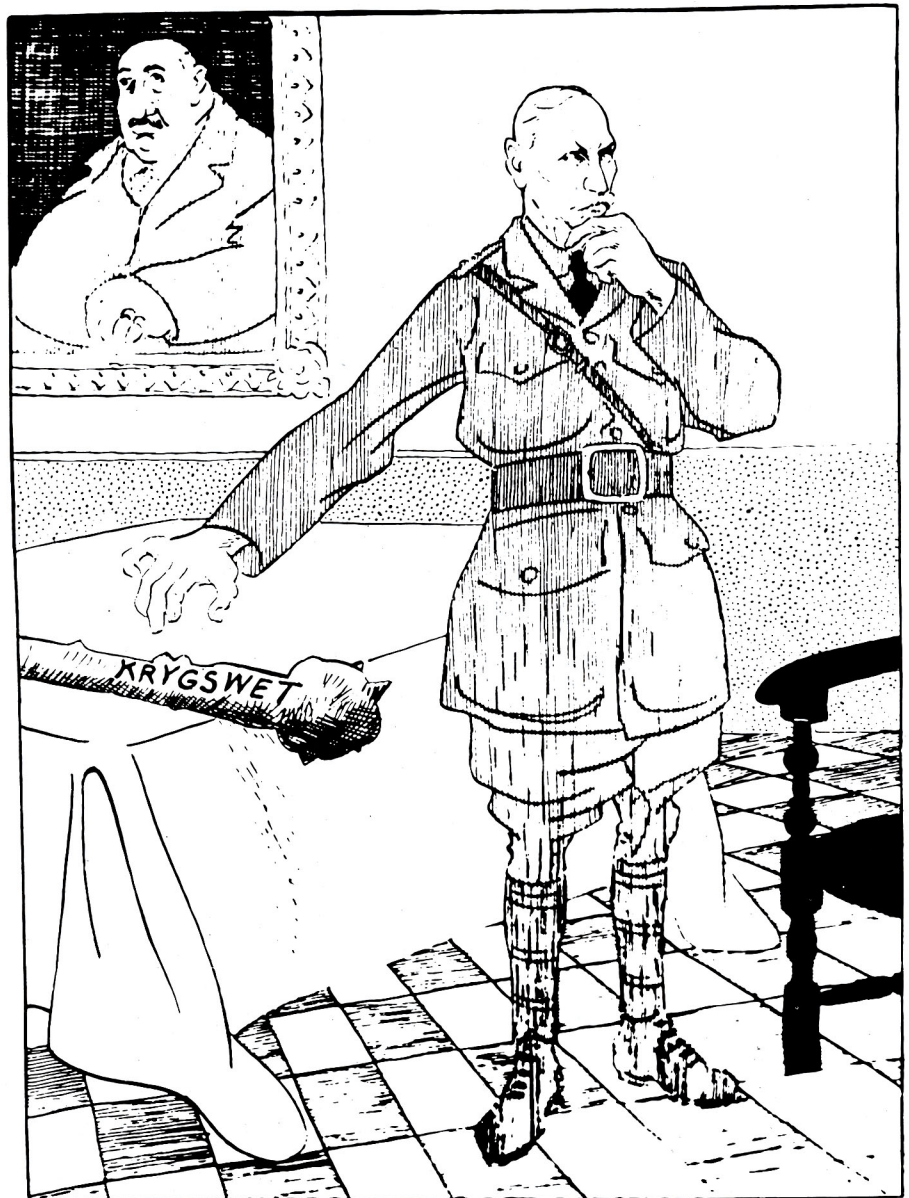
The white workers had lost some of their jobs and suffered a drop in wages. But they still had one weapon left — the vote. In the next elections, in 1924, the white workers and their supporters voted against the Smuts government. They felt that the Smuts government was on the side of the capitalists, the mine-owners.

A new government came to power. It was a government of two parties — the Labour Party and the Afrikaner National Party. The Labour Party got its votes from many English-speaking wage-earners, while most Afrikaner workers voted for the National Party. The Afrikaner National Party disliked the power of those 'foreign capitalists', the mine-owners. They wanted to see Afrikaner capital in its place.

The new government was called the *Pact Government*. The Pact Government promised to bring back 'law and order' to the



*Prime Minister Smuts addresses the troops outside Park Station, after the revolt had been put down.*



*A cartoon showing Smuts about to do the dirty work of the mine-owner whose portrait hangs behind him. Mine workers were deeply suspicious of the Smuts government. They felt that it had become the tool of the mine-owners — the ruling class.*



The National Party was hostile to capitalism – most capitalists were non-Afrikaners in the early 1920s. In the cartoon above industrialisation results in the evils of war and revolution, bribery, destruction, trade unions, a poisonous press and a relaxation of the job colour bar.

country and control 'communists and agitators'. At the same time the new government looked after the interests of the white workers – for example, by the Mines and Works Act of 1926:

Under this law, no Africans or 'Asians' were allowed to work in jobs that needed certificates. In addition, the Pact government introduced the 'civilised labour policy', which gave job preference to white workers.

The government thus established the job colour bar for the whole country.

### JOB RESERVATION WINS

After 1924, job reservation became a part of South Africa's economy. The job colour bar was used in factories all over South Africa as well as in the mines. The Pact government realised that white workers were resisting employers mainly because they were afraid of losing their jobs to the cheap labour of the blacks. They realised that the way to stop this resistance was to make the white workers feel more secure about their better-paid jobs. As the years went by, more and more whites changed their positions from skilled and semi-skilled workers to supervisors.

Job reservation separated the white workers from the rest of the workers and brought them closer to management. As supervisors, whites played an important role for the managers – they helped to control the black workers.

So, after thirty years of resistance, the white workers won the struggle to keep their wages high and to reserve privileged jobs for themselves. In time, many white mine workers became less opposed to capitalism because they saw how they themselves were benefiting from the system.

### THE REAL COLOUR BAR

*'The white man has less and less of a chance if the mines obtain so much power over their blacks.'* Member of Parliament, S.A. Labour Party.<sup>12</sup>

The resistance of white miners finally led them to demand – and obtain – job reservation.

Why did they feel threatened by black workers?

Because of the migrant labour system, the mine-owners were able to exploit black workers by paying them extremely low wages.

As we saw in Section II, the Chamber of Mines fixed the wages of black workers at a maximum of 22½ cents a shift – no African worker could get more, regardless of what work he was doing, or what skills he was using. This was the real colour bar – the *wage colour bar*, based on ultra-low wages for black workers.

As time went on, the mine-owners wished to replace 'expensive' white mine labour with the 'cheap' labour of the blacks.

The wage colour bar was created by the mine-owners, not the white workers – and it was the *wage colour bar* that led to the *job colour bar* – through which white miners chose to defend their interests, according to the colour of their skins.

### THE 1922 STRIKE – BEFORE AND AFTER

	1920	1925
White and black wage costs	£17½ million	less than £14 million
Average white miner's wage	£485 per year	£375 per year
Increase in gold production	nearly 8 million oz.	nearly 9½ million oz. <sup>13</sup>

# How Afrikaners



*Afrikaner road workers. Jobs for unskilled whites were few as employers preferred black workers at low wages.*

For about twenty years, English-speaking miners held the top jobs in the mines. But as time went by Afrikaners began to get jobs in the mines, too. These Afrikaners, or their fathers, had once been farmers. But thousands lost their land, like so many black farmers, and were forced to go to the towns to look for work. They became wage-earning workers, and many of them managed to join the mines. This is how it happened.

In the 19th century, the Afrikaners, or Boers as they were called, managed to get control of most of the land in the Transvaal and the OFS. The governments of the Transvaal and the Free State were Boer governments. Black farmers had to become tenants of these Boer farmers or stay in the areas that the Boers allowed the chiefs. So in the early years, there was plenty of land for the Boers. They also had lots of labour, for the black tenants had to pay for Boer 'protection' and the use of land by sending part of the family to work for the landlord.

But as time went by, things began to change:

## HARDSHIP ON THE LAND

\* Firstly, there was less land for the Boers as their population began to grow. Boer families were large – it was usual to have eight to ten children. When the children grew up, they wanted their own farms. The land was divided into smaller and smaller pieces, too small to farm properly.

\* Droughts and cattle diseases brought great hardship to many of the smaller farmers. In 1896, for example, rinderpest killed thousands of cattle in South Africa. This disease ruined many small farmers, black as well as white. The black farmers had to go to the towns to earn wages. White farmers were luckier. Some managed to hold onto their land by borrowing money – at least they owned the land that they farmed. This land was their surety if they could not pay back the loan. But many could not survive the great loss of their stock. They sold their land to richer farmers and became their tenants. These tenants, or squatters, were called *bywoners*. By the time minerals were discovered, there were many white squatters on the richer Boer farms.



*Boer families were large. As the land became too small to farm productively, thousands of Boers were forced to leave the land and seek jobs in the towns.*

## COMMERCIAL FARMING

\* The discovery of minerals made things worse for many *bywoners*. The diamond and gold mines brought industrialisation to the Rand. In 15 years, Johannesburg changed from a bare piece of veld to a city of 100 000 people. These people had to be fed. The Rand began to need commercial farming to supply its people with food. Chapter 6 on the 1913 Land Act describes how industrialisation brought more power to the Boer farmers with the most land. These rich Boers started to use more and more of their land to grow crops to sell. Many of them raised the rents of the *bywoners*, or asked them to leave. Hundreds of families left the land and started other jobs. Some became transport riders, taking fresh food to the towns by ox-wagon. Others became wood cutters to supply the towns with fuel.

\* The Anglo-Boer War destroyed most of the *bywoners* who were left on the farms. As you know, the British burnt the farmhouses in the Transvaal and put Boer families into concentration camps. After the war, about 10 000 Boers had no land to go back to. They had to move to the towns, mostly on the Rand, to look for work.



# became Workers



*Doornfontein, where many poor whites lived in later years. This scene shows the influence of the transport services, which many Afrikaners provided before railway and motor transport became common.*



*Poor white children queue up for free soup, 1908. According to a government report, a quarter of school-age white children were deprived of education because of poverty.*

## 'POOR WHITES'

Soon the towns were crowded with poor, hungry white families. Most of the men had no skills suitable to an industrial life. Even the ox-wagon drivers found that they were no longer needed — the railways had taken their place. They could not be employed as skilled miners either, because they did not have the experience. There were thousands of unemployed Afrikaners. Hundreds of families were living in desperately poor conditions in the slums of the towns.

The government wanted to find jobs for these unemployed whites.

\* The war was over, and the new government wanted to reconstruct white society. They were anxious to help Afrikaners to recover from the war.

\* As the mines were very short of unskilled labour at this time, the government asked if unemployed whites could be used as unskilled workers on the mines.

## UNSKILLED WHITE MINERS

In 1903, a mine manager named Cresswell tried to help jobless whites at the Village Main Reef Mine in Johannesburg. He gave them certain unskilled jobs for five shillings (50 cents) a day. This was

more than twice as much as a black unskilled worker could earn. (The highest wage for a black worker was 22 1/2 cents a day.)

Cresswell hoped to show that whites could work better and harder than blacks. But Cresswell's experiments failed. The white workers could not produce more than twice as much ore as black workers.

Mine-owners found that if they paid unskilled whites five shillings a day, the mines would lose profits. It was cheaper and easier for mine-owners to employ blacks, so Cresswell's programme was stopped.

## AFRIKANERS ENTER THE MINES

In 1907, the skilled miners went on strike. The mine-owners used hundreds of unemployed Afrikaners to break the strike. With the help of experienced black and Chinese miners, the labour of the Afrikaners kept the mines operating. They were given emergency lessons in rock drilling and given the role of 'supervising' black and Chinese drilling. From that time on, more and more Afrikaners joined the mines.

Within ten years, there were as many Afrikaners as there were English-speaking miners working on the Rand, and the special position of the early skilled miners was changed.