

Chapter Sixteen

Black Workers' Resistance on the Mines

From the beginning, the struggle of black workers in South Africa was shaped by particularly difficult conditions. But the history of workers all over the world shows us that there are many ways in which exploitation can be resisted.

STRIKES

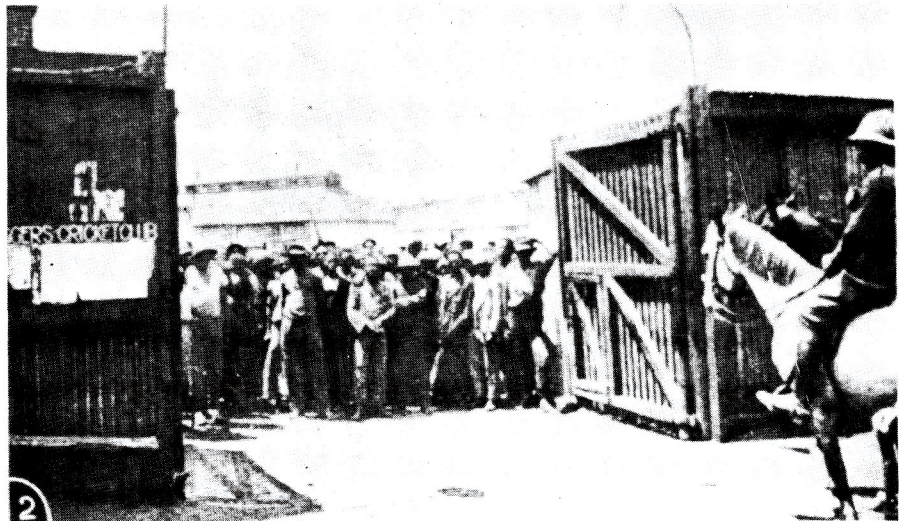
The clearest form of resistance is the strike. In a strike, workers unite to withdraw their labour — they refuse to work. The employer needs the workers to produce the goods that he sells — without their labour, his mine, factory or business cannot operate. If a strike is successful, the employer is forced to come to an agreement with the workers to improve their conditions.

A strike fails if the employer decides that he does not need to bargain with the workers. This can happen when:

* There are other workers ready to take the place of the strikers in the mine or factory. In times of great unemployment and poverty, for example, large numbers of people are desperate for jobs. They are usually prepared to work for the low pay that the strikers are fighting against. Workers who take the jobs of the strikers are called 'scabs'.

In the 1907 strike on the mines, unemployed Afrikaners 'scabbed' when skilled miners went on strike. White workers fought for job reservation because they were convinced that blacks would be happy to take over white jobs at lower pay — blacks could easily become 'scabs', argued the white workers, and 'scabs' could cause strikes to fail.

* Strikes also fail when the employer has the power to force the strikers back to work. Usually, this happens with the help of the government. The government sends the army and the police to stop the strike and



A scene from the 1920 black miners' strike — the biggest in the history of the Rand.

to 'restore order'.

Governments also support the employer by making laws to prevent strikes and to punish strikers. (For example in South Africa the State created the pass laws and the contract system to control workers and punish them if they stopped work without the employer's permission.)

So strikes do not usually succeed unless the workers have at least some power.

1. They need to have the power to prevent other workers from 'scabbing'. The skilled miners in the early mining years had this power — their skills were so scarce that no one else could replace them.

2. They need the power to organise in large numbers, as in trade unions. (If *all* workers went on strike, for example, there could be no scabbing.)

3. They need political power. In South Africa, the white workers used the vote to help get the Smuts government out after the

1922 strike.

INFORMAL RESISTANCE

When workers have very little power to improve their wages or working conditions, they often use other methods of protest. These methods are usually not direct. They are not obvious forms of protest. This other way of resisting is called *informal resistance*.

In South Africa in those early mining years (and in later years too) workers developed many kinds of informal resistance.

THE JOB BOYCOTT

* The simplest form of resistance was to look for better jobs in the first place. For example, after the Anglo-Boer War, thousands of black workers boycotted the mines because the mines dropped the wages. They



Resistance through strikes and desertion was punishable by law.

looked for work on the railways or in the towns instead. A government official in 1907 saw this very clearly. He said that the black worker 'would sooner go to the sea port and work for the harbour board or the diamond mines . . . failing that he comes to the Rand and, failing domestic service here, he goes on the mines. It is the most uncongenial class of work, and is practically the last resort of the native.'

* As one mine-owner said:

*'The native method of striking is very simple. It must be remembered that he is not a permanent workman. He is always going home, and if he is not satisfied with conditions of employment, he simply does not come out again.'*¹

The boycott of the mines after the war led to a serious shortage of labour in the mines. The Chamber of Mines was forced to raise the wages of black workers slightly and they had to look outside South Africa for cheap labour.

DESERTION

* Another form of protest was *desertion*. Workers could not im-

prove their jobs because it was against the law, so they simply left. We have seen in chapter 10 how the large number of deserters caused problems for the Chamber of Mines. Desertion continued in spite of the pass laws, the contract system, finger printing and other methods used to keep workers on the mines.

Desertion was highest in compounds where conditions were worst. For example, in 1908 a government report compared conditions at different mining compounds. Here is what the report said about the best and the worst compounds:

* *'Jumpers Mine: Standard of feeding, adequate. Soup issued in early morning. No punishment by stoppage of food. Very few cases of ill-treatment . . . Attitude of officials towards natives - good.'* The result was that only three men deserted the compound in 1908 out of 2 000 workers.

* *'Simmer Deep: Feeding only fairly adequate. No hot (drink) issued in the morning. Inefficients (loafers) punished by stoppage of meat rations. Several complaints received as to inaccurate marking of tickets . . . Continuous ill-treatment underground. Reasons for desertions, ill-treatment and unsympathetic*

*attitude of officials.'*²

The result was that at Simmer Deep, 1 236 men deserted out of every 2 000 workers in 1908.

NON-COOPERATION

Many workers tried to limit their work by cooperating as little as possible. They deliberately worked badly, broke their tools and were careful not to do any more work than they had to.

The workers felt that they were being cheated. Firstly, their pay was so low. Secondly, they felt that they were tricked by the loafer ticket system and by broken promises. As one worker said:

*'I drilled a hole, even if it was only 24 inches: I get no pay. But my master charges and blasts the hole all the same: and he gets paid for the rock broken by it.'*³

A white mining engineer once tried to improve the work by offering to pay double for extra work. He said: *'I once tried it on the Ferreira Mine, and persuaded several boys to drill two holes instead of one. They were paid double for their work and we were all pleased, but they suddenly stopped, and when the*



A worker who was able to avoid the mines. His job was to look after the tramline points — his home, in Market Square, consisted of old boxes and tin from the rubbish dump.

mine foreman wanted to know why, they said: "It is all right putting in two holes now, but presently the boss will think that two holes is the day's work" . . . They saw what we were up to. They saw as well as some of the white men we have had to deal with, only the native was more honest about it. He stuck to it too.⁴

Sometimes, workers managed to get less work done by pretending not to understand their orders. A lot of the time they really did not understand. White supervisors could not speak African languages and used 'fanagalo', which was nobody's language, anyway. But often workers very cleverly acted 'stupid'.

For these workers this was another form of resistance against doing work which they felt they were not paid for. They felt that the mine-owners, their managers and supervisors were cheating them. They did not have the power to organise themselves into unions. But there was little management could do about informal resistance.

BEATING THE SYSTEM

Some workers used the government's pass law system and the Chamber of Mines' recruiting system to find themselves better jobs. Men would join up with the WNLA recruiters and travel with the other mine-workers to the Rand mines. But they would secretly get off the train at Pretoria station. They would

then apply for a pass at Pretoria and either get work there or travel to the Rand and look for jobs in the towns or in the better mines.

Workers got to know that the Pretoria pass offices were not as strict as the Rand. Pretoria was not marked as a labour area where Africans had to be jailed for six days to find out if they were deserters.

More and more people began to 'beat the system' in this way.

One mining manager reported in 1902:

*'It appears that particularly in the case of North Basothus and Tsongas they are well informed that on arriving in Pretoria, and making a statement that they wish to go to Johannesburg in order to find employment, passports are freely issued to them without question; they are fully conversant with the fact that this means they can obtain work in Johannesburg at higher rates of pay . . . officials assume that natives applying for passports have just arrived from their homes.'*⁵

Those workers who were caught had to make statements. Here is the story of one deserter who tried to beat the pass system:

'I deserted from the New Unified on or about 20 November 1906 and proceeded to Pretoria on foot. When asked by the Pass

*Officer at Pretoria where I came from, I stated that I had been working for a contractor who had discharged me, and the following night I had been robbed, pass and everything taken from me. I was then given a travelling pass and I proceeded to Johannesburg by train.'*⁶

ORGANISED RESISTANCE

After the Anglo-Boer War, more and more mine workers were caught for deserting or trying to get false passes. The new British government in the Transvaal made the pass laws stricter and trained more police to help control the mine's labour system.

But at the same time, mine workers were becoming more experienced. Migrant workers were beginning to understand the compound system and they could do their work in the mines better. As they became more experienced, mine workers also used more organised ways of protesting — namely through work-stoppages, or 'strikes'.

The earliest recorded black miners' strikes occurred in 1896, when the Mine Managers' Association decided to 'reduce wages, as it were, by force and at the point of the bayonet.'⁷

Just after the Anglo-Boer War there were a number of strikes. But in many of these, not all of the workers in any compound stopped working. Often a certain group of workers from the same tribe went on strike.

For example, one of the strikes on the mines was at Vereeniging Estate Coal Mine, in September 1901. One hundred and sixty-two Sotho workers refused to work unless they were paid for the five weeks that they had to wait at Aliwal North for rail permits. The recruiter had promised them that they would get paid for their time on the journey. But the manager said



they would only get their money at the end of the contract.

The workers decided to go home and crossed the Vaal River. Soldiers surrounded them and tried to force them to go back across the river. The workers armed themselves with sticks and stones so that they could escape. The soldiers shot nine workers dead and 15 were wounded.

There was another strike in the following year at the Geldenhuis Estate Mine where 448 Pedi workers went on strike.

They said that they had signed for a six-month contract and their contract was finished. They wanted to go home but the manager insisted that their contract still had another week to go, because they had not finished all their shifts. The strikers were arrested and sentenced to a two pound fine or one month's hard labour. The mining company offered to pay for the workers' fines if they came back to work on the mines to finish their contracts but more than a hundred workers refused, and went to jail instead.

Not all strikes were 'tribal' strikes. Sometimes all the workers in a compound acted together in solidarity. In the Langlaagte Deep Mine, the workers were very unhappy about the compound manager. In June 1902, 1 100 workers broke down the compound gates and marched to the Village Deep to complain about their treatment. Mounted police brought them back.

There were more strikes in the same year. All of them were stopped with the help of the army or the police.

Although wages were not improved, the strikes did cause some people from the British government to look at conditions in the compounds. The Chamber of Mines was forced to make some small improvements in the conditions of the compound workers.

During the next ten years we do not hear of black workers going on strike. Their bargaining power had been weakened by the importation of Chinese labour.



Strikers arrested during the 1913 strike.

1913 STRIKE

In 1913, black miners went on strike — in the same year as the white miners. When black miners tried to hold a meeting to discuss their complaints, policemen were called to stop the meeting. Leaders were arrested and sentenced to six months' hard labour. The strike grew.

Nine thousand compound workers in four mines refused to work. A notice was pinned on the office door of one compound to explain the workers' complaints. It said:

'We want to know what are the laws about our pay and our position in the compounds.'

*'We do not see the miners who kick us underground. They are away and we have to work. Why should we be sent to work underground without knowing the black man's position?'*⁸

The government called in the army and the compounds were surrounded. The workers were forced back to work — the strike failed.

Nevertheless, the Chamber of Mines was worried about the strike. Thirteen thousand black miners had struck in three days. They had acted together as workers and not just as tribesmen.

The mine-owners realised that black workers could disrupt

production more effectively than white workers could. As one mine-owner said, the black worker was 'the true labourer of this country'.⁹ Even if half the white miners went on strike, the black mine-workers could keep the mines going, as they had done during the white miners' strike in 1907.

The government set up a commission to look into the complaints of the mine-workers. The commission brought about a number of changes. Compound food, medical care and living conditions were improved. Working conditions in the mines also improved. For example, the mines had to put in larger lift cages and provide fires for heating while the workers were waiting to go down in winter time.

These changes improved the mine-worker's day-to-day life in many ways. But the problems of low wages and the system of labour control remained.

The basic complaints of black mine-workers continued.



GREATER HARDSHIPS

The reserves were getting more and more crowded after the Native Land Act of 1913. They were becoming poorer and less able to support their families. To make things worse, prices were rising. During the First World War, from 1914 to 1918, prices in South Africa nearly doubled. Yet black miners' wages stayed the same, while white miners' wages went up by 40%.

During the war, unrest amongst black workers continued. There were a number of strikes in the mines. Some mine-workers started to go to the Transvaal Native Congress and socialist meetings in the towns. It was then that the union of Industrial Workers of Africa was formed. It was led by men such as the journalist Saul 'Msane; Bud Mbelle, later to become a prominent member of the South African National Congress; Talbot Williams, also secretary of the largely 'coloured' African People's Organisation; and Grenon, editor of *Abantu Batho*, one of the first black newspapers in South Africa and the mouthpiece of the SANNNC.

One police official reported:

*'The natives have started holding meetings, resorting to picketing and are in fact organising in the same manner as the miners did on the 1913 and 1914 strikes.'*¹⁰

But the police were always called. They arrested and jailed the leaders and the other workers were forced to go back to work.

BOYCOTT

By 1918 prices had gone up so much that the mine workers decided not to buy from compound stores — they boycotted the storekeepers because of high prices. For example:

* In 1913 an outfit of clothes cost R1,80 and boots cost R1,25.

* In 1918 the same clothes cost R3,80 and boots cost R2,00.



The SANNNC deputation to London, 1918.

From left to right, back: J.C. Gumede, L.T. Mvabaza, R.V. Selope Thema. Front: Solomon T. Plaatje, Rev. H. Ngcayinya.

The S.A.N.N.C.

— the forerunner of the ANC²⁶

South Africa's first national movement was founded in January 1912. At a meeting in Bloemfontein there gathered royal chiefs from many parts of southern Africa, ministers, lawyers, teachers, clerks, leaders of the Transvaal and Natal Native Congress and other organisations from the Free State, the Cape and the Transvaal.

The meeting declared its aims: to unite all the different black organisations, as well as the many chiefdoms in South Africa.

'We are one people,' declared Pixley ka I. Seme, the founder of the movement, 'These divisions, these jealousies are the cause of all our troubles and of all our ignorance today.'²⁷

Why was the SANNNC formed in 1912? The new government of the Union of South Africa had passed a number of discriminatory laws against blacks.

- The 1911 *Native Labour Regulation Act* made it a crime for Africans to leave their jobs.
- The 1911 *Mines and Works Act* reserved skilled jobs for whites in the mines.
- The 1911 *Dutch Reform Church Act* excluded Africans from the DRC in the Transvaal and the OFS.
- The 1913 *Native Land Act*, limiting Africans' right to own land, was being prepared.

The SANNNC aimed to speak to the government on behalf of the African people, demanding equal rights and justice for all. One of its first actions was to present a petition asking the government to stop the Land Act. The petition was politely received, but it failed to change the law.

Other petitions followed — to the British government, to the Peace Conference in Paris after the First World War, and several to the Prime Minister. These, too, failed.

Many people began to feel that the SANNNC policy was not getting results. There were few workers in the organisation. It was led by educated men who believed in the power of words — one of their most outstanding achievements was the establishment of a national newspaper, *Abantu-Batho*. But the SANNNC made little difference to the everyday lives of blacks in the early years.

The SANNNC united the rulers of chiefdoms of South Africa. It also encouraged Africans to start seeing themselves as one nation. That was the most important achievement of the SANNNC in the first years of its life.

The workers blamed the storekeepers for over-charging. But they were only partly right. Prices had gone up a lot during the war. At the same time, the stores continued to make high profits. The boycotts forced the mine managements to improve the compound stores, and some of the prices dropped a little. But the workers found that they still could not afford to buy what they needed.

They stopped the boycotts because they saw that what they needed was more pay to keep up with the higher cost of living. Their wages were worth even less than they had been before the war.

THE WAGE CAMPAIGN

In the same year as the boycott, white electricity and gas workers went on strike in Johannesburg. They forced the City Council to give them a 25 percent pay rise. Then black municipal workers followed their example. These were the 'bucket boys', who collected the refuse in buckets from the toilets of white families. They had the dirtiest and most unpleasant job in the country. They too were suffering from rising prices, and demanded a rise of sixpence a day.

However, the 'bucket boys' were not as successful as the white municipal workers. The

black strikers were arrested under the Master and Servants Act for breaking their contracts, and sentenced to two months' labour. They had to do the same jobs as before, and as their punishment they had to work without pay for two months. They were watched by an armed guard, ready to shoot if they tried to run away or did not do their work properly.

Blacks on the Rand were furious at this treatment of the workers. The Transvaal Congress, the African People's Organisation and the Industrial Workers of Africa held angry meetings to call for action.

** 'God gave you Africa to live in,' said one Congress speaker to a meeting of about 1 000 people. 'He gave you anything he knew was necessary for you. He gave you a land and gold which you gave to other people... Today you are carrying passes. Today you have got no place. Today they are telling you that you will get a place in heaven. There is one thing sure my friends, it is this, if you have no place on earth you will have no place in heaven.'*¹¹

The next day, after a meeting of about 10 000 people, the flag was torn up. Cars and trams were stopped. A riot nearly started.

* Congress and the APO called for a general strike for 'a shilling a day' increase in all black workers' wages and a general strike for higher wages.

The IWA

The First African Trade Union

The Industrial Workers of Africa (the IWA) was the first African trade union in South Africa. It was formed early in 1918 and was to play an important part in the restless post-war period of black resistance. Influenced by the largely white International Socialist League, the IWA claimed to be 'not a political body but an industrial organisation', whose aims were to organise the workers and plan strike action for higher pay.

The IWA printed pamphlets in Sotho and Zulu for the workers: *'There is only one way to freedom, black workers. Unite as workers, unite!'* it urged. *'Forget the things that divide you. Let there be no longer any talk of Basuto, Zulu or Shangaan. You are all labourers, Let labour be your common bond.'*²⁸

IWA members travelled along the Reef, organising workers in the compounds. They influenced the Transvaal Congress, pushing it towards more militant action and towards workers' concerns for a while. In later years an open split developed between the two organisations. While Congress leaders accused the IWA of being dominated by white communists, the IWA criticised the TNC for its middle-class leaders, who refused to see what lay behind the racist system in South Africa, neglecting the interest of the workers.

The IWA was eventually overtaken in the 1920s by the ICU (see page 98) and the Non-European Trade Union Federation.

Mass meeting at Newtown, calling for a strike.



'The white workers do not write to the Governor-General when they want more pay. They strike and get what they should. Why should we not do the same?' said a Congress leader.¹²

The response to the call was great — but the workers were unorganised. The Prime Minister, Louis Botha decided to hold a meeting with members of the Congress. He promised that he would see what could be done about the low wages. He set up a commission to look into the wages of black workers. In return, the Transvaal Congress agreed to call off the strike.

But the Prime Minister's Commission did not support higher wages for all black workers. They said that the wages of the compound workers in the mines did not need to go up. Workers got free board and lodging and the higher cost of living 'was not causing serious hardship' to compound workers.¹³

In the meantime, some mine-workers went on with their strike. As they had been locked up in their compounds, they did not know that the strike had been called off.

On 1 July black miners from Crown Mines, Robinson Deep and Ferreira Deep refused to work unless they got higher pay. Mine managers called in the police and the strikers were forced down the shafts at gun point. Leaders of the ISL, including Cetyiwe, Letanka and Mvabasa were arrested.

So the wage campaign failed. But workers continued to fight for higher wages in other ways.

ANTI-PASS CAMPAIGN

People began to turn their attention to the labour system in general. They began to say that low wages were part of the whole system of labour control, and to call for a 'free labour system'.

'The object of the contract system is to obtain cheap and forced labour,' said the Transvaal Congress in a statement to the government.¹⁴

'The Pass Law is nothing but



SCENES FROM THE ANTI-PASS CAMPAIGN, 1919.

*(Above) Outside the pass office, men collect discarded passes in large sacks.
(Below) Resisters march to the pass office to hand in their passes.*



slavery and forced labour. It was made to force the natives to work,' said the Vice-President of the Congress, D.S. Letanka, to the Minister of Justice.¹⁵

'There is one thing that binds us down, and that is the Pass Law, and that law we must abolish. We must organise all the natives, after which we can fight not by arms and killing anyone but by striking for what we want,' declared H. Phooko, Chairman of the Industrial Workers of Africa.¹⁶

At a big meeting one day in 1919 workers decided to take action against the pass laws. About 1 000 men marched to the Johannesburg pass office and handed in their passes.

The police began to arrest leaders. But people continued to organise. 'We must all be leaders,'¹⁷ as one speaker said. Groups of Africans organised themselves and spread the anti-pass campaign to other parts of the Rand. Bags of passes were collected all over the Rand and handed in at pass offices.

As the meetings continued, fights broke out between workers and police. Hundreds more Africans were arrested.

Meanwhile, the unrest on the mines continued. On 6 November 1919, 300 mineworkers marched to Johannesburg from Rose Deep Mines in Germiston to protest about their food. The

next month, workers boycotted the New Modderfontein compound stores.

Worried, the Chamber of Mines called in chiefs from the reserves to come and talk to the men in the compounds and ask them

not to 'cause trouble' because their families needed their wages.

A month later the Chamber also instructed mine managers to raise the top wages of black workers from two shillings (20 cents) to two shillings and three pence (22½ cents) a shift. The Chamber also announced that all workers who worked 180 shifts continuously without staying away for sickness would get a bonus of five shillings (50 cents).

However, some mines gave the rise to the workers and some did not. Those who did not get the increase became even angrier. In any case, black miners felt that these improvements in pay were too little and came too late.

MINERS' STRIKE

Work stoppages continued in mines along the Rand.

There was evidence of organised resistance by the IWA. At the Consolidated Main Reef mine, in compound No. 3, for example, a Native Constable Arthur reported that he saw 'a strange well dressed native there in No. 40 Room lecturing to about 25 others upon the benefits they would enjoy if they would all unite against their employers and refuse to work until they got their rights.'¹⁸

The District Commandant of the East Rand reported that 'at present there are 24 educated natives visiting the Reef compounds who deliver leaflets and preach socialist propaganda to the mine natives.'¹⁹

Then on 16 February 1920 two Zulu miners, Mobu and Vilikati, were arrested on an East Rand Property mine for moving around in the Cason compound, urging workers to stay away from work. The next day, 25 000 Cason compound workers went on strike.

They refused to go back to work unless

* the two arrested men were released;

* there was an increase of three shillings a day in wages to keep up with the rising cost of living;

* there were certain improvements in the working conditions.

The strike quickly spread to other parts of the Rand, to other mines on the East Rand, through to Johannesburg and along the West Rand as well. In the 12 days the strike lasted, about 71 000 black miners went on strike and 21 mines had to stop working during this time.

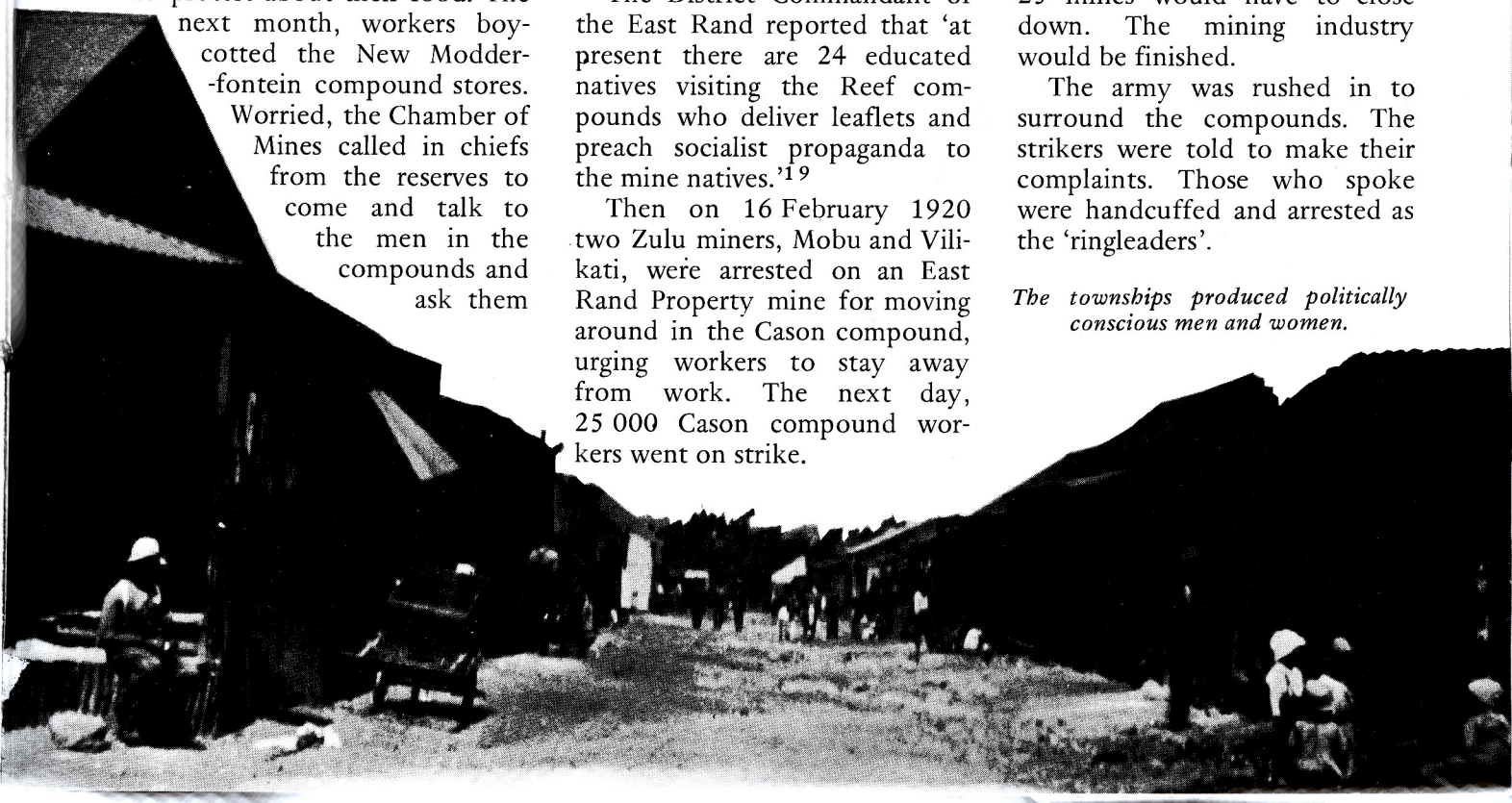
It was the largest strike in the history of South Africa. The President of the Chamber of Mines said that the strike had 'practically paralysed the industry.'

'There was for the first time,' he continued, 'a native strike in the true sense of the word . . . an absolutely peaceful cessation of work.'²⁰

But the Chamber of Mines and the government did not respond peacefully to the strike. The mine-owners refused to raise the wages of black miners. They said it was impossible to give even the smallest wage increases. They argued that mines would lose their profits if expenses went up. One mine owner said that if wages increased to three shillings, 23 mines would have to close down. The mining industry would be finished.

The army was rushed in to surround the compounds. The strikers were told to make their complaints. Those who spoke were handcuffed and arrested as the 'ringleaders'.

The townships produced politically conscious men and women.



One striker at Knights Deep Mine said: *'The White man goes below, does no work and gets big money. The African gets all the gold out of the ground and gets very little money. How is that fair? The extra three pence (2½ cents) a day is not enough.'*²¹ He was arrested.

Workers were ordered to get back to work or they would be sent to jail. All over the Rand, workers were beaten and driven down the shafts.

The compounds were dealt with one at a time. Workers were told that the men in the other compounds had gone back to work. One by one, the compounds were subdued by the managers and the army.

Then only Village Deep compound was left. Workers refused to go underground. The army tried to force them but the workers still refused to work. The strikers cut down trees and armed themselves with sticks. When soldiers broke into the compound and fired on the strikers, three were killed and 40 were wounded. The remaining

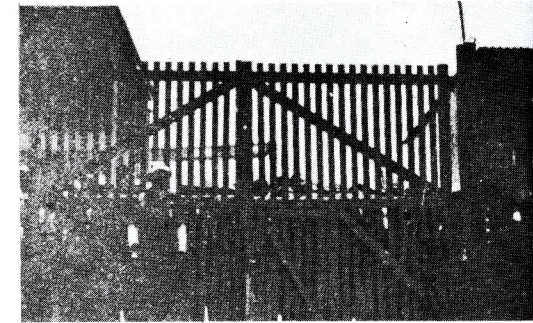
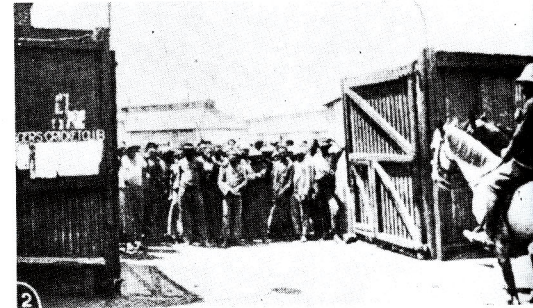
workers went back to work. The strike was over.

RESULTS

It was 25 years before so many mineworkers went on strike again. The mine-owners had used all their power to crush the resistance of the workers. But once again, the strike had the Chamber of Mines and the government worried. They saw that the workers had been organised and united. They were also aware of the growing numbers of black workers living with their families in the towns. Many of these townspeople were joining political organisations. The Transvaal Congress, for example, had played a part in the strike, sending letters of protest to the government and holding meetings with workers in Witwatersrand towns.

Said one police inspector, *'The cause of this strike is purely industrial, due to increased costs of living . . . (But) if some steps are not taken, it will be playing*

Scenes from



(Top right) Mounted police outside the compound. (Middle right) Police confront workers at the compound gate. (Bottom right) The compound gate is closed to keep the workers inside. (Below) Police and soldiers 'persuade' compound workers to abandon the strike.



the 1920 Strike

*into the hands of the native agitators and so-called National Congress which will undoubtedly bring about another strike, probably much better organised than this which may have the most serious results.'*²²

* Both the government and the Chamber of Mines were concerned about black workers' growing awareness that they had power in numbers. 'You cannot imprison millions,' the resisters declared during the anti-pass campaign.²³ Black workers as well as the more educated teachers, ministers and traders were beginning to protest together.

The Chamber of Mines and the government were determined to prevent strikes in future and to assert their control over black townsmen. They did this in a number of ways:

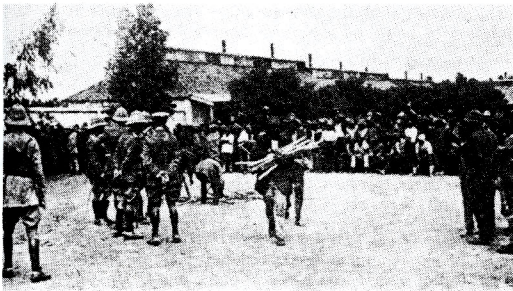
* The government tightened up the pass laws for blacks living in towns. And even if people did have their passes in order, they could be sent away to the reserves if they were found to be 'idle, disorderly or dissolute' — in

other words, if they were 'troublemakers'. The government also passed a law that all contracts for black workers in towns must be registered.

* The Chamber of Mines was not prepared to raise the wages of black workers. But it did realise that black miners had real grievances which could not be suppressed by force. So it tried to improve workers' conditions in small ways.

A few months after the strike the Chamber of Mines asked all compounds to improve their food, for example. Some did, but some did not, saying they could not afford to spend any more money on food.

The Chamber of Mines also started a black newspaper for those clerks and workers who could read. The newspaper said it aimed 'to educate white and black and to point out their respective duties... to foster a spirit of give and take, to promote the will to co-operate, to emphasise the obligations of black and white to themselves and to each other.'²⁴



(Top left) Workers gather inside the compound. (Middle left) The army surrounds a compound. (Bottom left) Police supervise the confiscation of strikers' sticks and kieries.

(Below) Arrested strikers are marched from the compound by mounted police.



The Chamber of Mines hoped to draw the most able blacks away from thoughts of organising workers and demanding higher pay. The Chamber decided to give more of the semi-skilled jobs to blacks, because they wanted black workers to feel that there were real opportunities for them on the mines.

'The semi-skilled native justly treated should prove a useful asset to the industry in assisting to guide the mass of unskilled labourers,' argued mine offici-

als.²⁵ In other words, the mine-owners hoped to be able to separate the most able workers from the others, thus 'buying them off'. If they were promoted, they might stop 'causing trouble' amongst the rest of the workers.

The strike therefore made the mine-owners decide to loosen the job colour bar slightly. It was partly this move that led to the white miners' strike of 1922. And it was the 1922 strike that brought down the Smuts govern-

ment.

The fall of Smuts in 1924 marked the end of an era — after this date, more and more capitalists made their wealth from other industries — from factories, from property, from business and from commercial farming. Although the mine-owners continued to be very powerful from 1924, they had to share this power more and more with other, growing interest groups.

THE ICU — THE BLACK RESPONSE TO THE TURBULENT TWENTIES

The ICU started off as a dockworkers' union in Cape Town in 1919. After a 400-strong strike later that year, the movement developed into a general union for black workers under the name *Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa* with the founder, Clements Kadalie, as its secretary.

The early 1920's were years of upheaval and hardship for blacks in South Africa. The rising prices since the war and the overcrowded land resulted in more people being forced to become migrant workers. Unrest amongst the low-paid farm workers, strikes, riots and evictions from people's homes were common.

Against this background, the ICU grew rapidly. By 1927, it boasted 100 000 members, workers in the towns and on the farms.

One of the most important achievements of the ICU was to stop black labourers being dipped like cattle when they entered the municipality of Durban. But the movement did not make any other positive gains for its members. Although its numbers were high, ICU organisation was weak and lacked a clear direction. Faced by government persecution, the leadership split between the activists and the 'hamba kahle' group. There were also regional differences. A.W.G. Champion formed his own break-away ICU in Natal.

The ICU began to decline after 1927. By the end of the decade the great mass movement was no more.

(Top right) The letterhead of the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union.

(Middle right) The leaders of the ICU.
(Bottom right) General Smuts inspects black troops during World War I — black soldiers were not permitted to carry guns. The Smuts government was ousted from power in 1924 by the Afrikaner National Party.

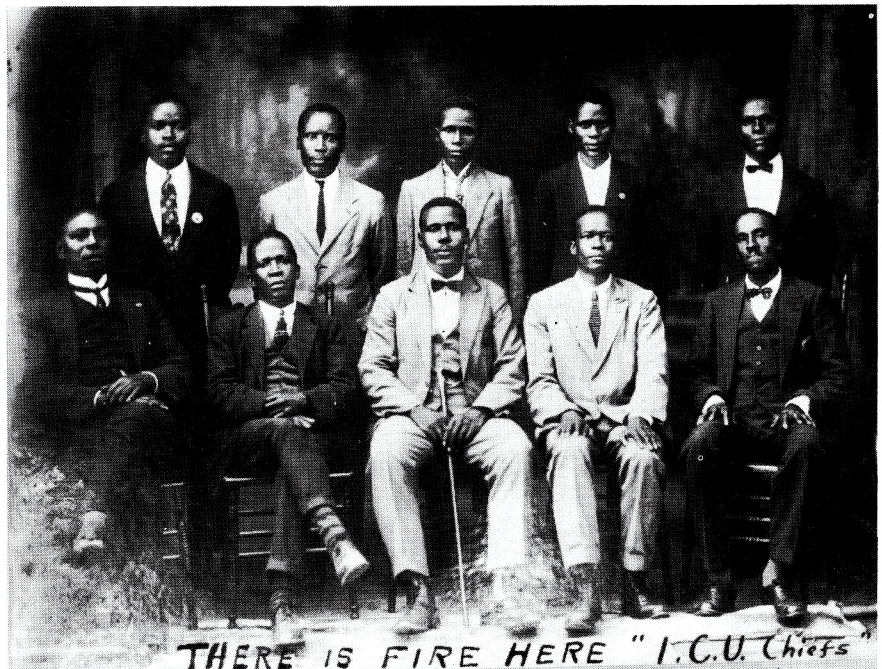


INDUSTRIAL & COMMERCIAL WORKERS UNION OF AFRICA.

Established January, 1919.
Branches throughout the Union of South Africa and South-West Protectorate.
All Correspondence to be addressed to the General Secretary.

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THERE IS FIRE HERE "I.C.U. Chiefs"

