

*A Salute by the
South African
Communist Party
to South Africa's
Black Mine Workers*

A DISTANT CLAP OF THUNDER
FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1946 MINE STRIKE

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INTRODUCTION

Over fifty thousand dead. More than a million permanently disabled. Hundreds of thousands diseased through inhaling the poison dust. Millions displaced from their homes, separated from their families and locked into a chain of guarded, high-walled labour camps. These are not the casualty figures for a major war; they are the price already paid by black miners for digging gold and coal from the bowels of South Africa's earth.

Sol Plaatje, the first Secretary General of the African National Congress, paid a passionate tribute in 1914 to the *"two hundred thousand subterranean heroes who by day and night, for a mere pittance, lay down their lives to the familiar 'fall of rock' and who, at deep levels ranging from 1 000 to 3 000 feet in the bowels of the earth, sacrifice their lungs to the rock dust"*.

No monument has yet been built to these fallen heroes of labour. The fruits of their sacrifice can still only be seen in the massive wealth accumulated by a tiny minority who came from foreign parts and enslaved the whole nation.

In the hundred years since gold was discovered in our land, class battles have raged continually between those who own nothing but their power to labour and those who exploit their labour because they own everything — our mines, our factories and our land.

And in the story of these class battles there is no chapter more inspiring than the 1946 Mine Strike which *Toussaint* has so graphically and excitingly described in the following pages.

We South African Communists can be truly proud of the role our members played in this great event. It is a role which once again illustrates our Party's unrivalled contribution to the building of the black trade union movement as a vital instrument of struggle against the bosses and their racist state.

As far back as 1930 communists like TW Thibedi and SP Bunting made a pioneering attempt to set up committees in the mine compounds. In 1941, when the Mine Workers' Union was revived on the initiative of the SACP and the Transvaal ANC, our late Chairman, JB Marks, became the President and led the 1946 battle.

Today, our black working class, the creator and owner of all our country's wealth, is in the forefront of the mass forces which are poised to deal a death-blow to the tyranny of race rule and its roots in capitalist exploitation. And within this working class, the mines undoubtedly constitute the backbone of a rapidly growing Trade Union movement which has already demonstrated its massive potential in the liberation upsurge.

A Distant Clap of Thunder is a salute by our Party, the vanguard of our proletariat, to the heroes of the 1946 Mine Strike. Their courage must serve as an inspiration to all our workers to unite and to march shoulder to shoulder towards a liberated South Africa which can begin to lay the foundations for a society free of all exploitation of man by man.

Joe Slovo
Chairman, South African Communist Party

A DISTANT CLAP OF THUNDER

Fortieth Anniversary of the 1946 Mine Strike

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Big Events Have Small Beginnings

The beginning of the first real mass trade union for South Africa's black miners was a small event — so small that history records very little about it, save that the initiative came from a meeting of the Transvaal African National Congress Executive in 1941. The records state that a proposal to sponsor the organisation of such a union was put, and carried. Its proposers were Gaur Radebe, a well known trade unionist and public speaker, long time member of the ANC and a communist in the process of drifting out of the Party; and Edwin Mofutsanyana, a studious and intellectual figure, former mine clerk, and also a veteran ANC and Communist Party member.

History does not record the reason for the proposal at that precise time, or the views of Executive Committee members in the debate. The decision was scarcely in keeping with the ANC character of that time, an organisation with only a small membership, steeped in a tradition of quasi-parliamentary type politics, without a great impact on the national political scene, and certainly with little direct connection with working class or trade union affairs.

Perhaps it can be explained by a combination of two factors — the general political atmosphere of the times, and the internal politics of the ANC. It was war-time. Everywhere the rhetoric of 'freedom' and 'democratic rights' was being used to whip up support for the war; declarations by statesmen at home and abroad spoke of war aims of an undefined 'freedom from want' and 'freedom of opinion'; some of the heady atmosphere of hope and the anticipation of a better world coming rubbed off, even in South Africa, remote though it was from the centre of the war and bitterly internally divided into pro- and anti-war factions.

In that atmosphere of rising expectation, a new surge of life was rising in the ANC itself. A young generation, deeply committed to national liberation, had grown up under the leadership of Anton Lembede. Of that new generation — Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Duma Nokwe, Govan Mbeki and others — had burst their way into the leading ranks of the organisation, particularly in the Transvaal; it displaced an old generation which had failed to move with the new times and tides of feeling. On the Transvaal Executive of the ANC, the militants of the ANC youth league formed a natural working partnership with the militant veterans of an earlier period, particularly the communists like

Radebe, Kotane, Mofutsanyana and Marks, who were already in the leadership ranks. Perhaps it was the natural consequence of such a partnership that the small decision — lost in the records as just one decision amongst so many — was taken to sponsor a mine workers' trade union.

It may be assumed that those who took this decision had some forebodings or doubts about their abilities to carry out that task successfully. They had chosen for themselves the most formidable political and organisational task the country presented; and men deeply engaged in politics as these must have known just how formidable it was. There were two massive mountains to climb in building a mass union of black miners. The first lay in the nature of the miners themselves. These men, some 340 000 at the time, were not the stable urbanised workers with which the black trade unions of the time were familiar — men in regular jobs, living in urban townships with families and with deep roots in all the aspects of black urban life. These miners, on the contrary, were rural men, recruited from rural areas and reserves for a limited contract period of less than a year, and who returned to those rural areas and agricultural pursuits at the end of their contracts. Even those who came back to the mines for a second contract, did so on average only after some years away. Leaving behind their families and dependants to scratch the soil as best they could, the families would look to the men on the mines to help sustain and supplement their incomes. On the Witwatersrand, the black miners lived not as part of the black community, but a life apart, closely corralled within their compounds, with only the sleazy eating-house cum 'native store' complexes around the compounds as an alternative to compound life. They were, in the main, men who understood nothing of the cities, which lay like foreign territory well away from the mine shafts — not even how to get around or find one's way within them. Unlike the urban industrialised workers, these were men deeply steeped in tribal lore and cultures. They brought to the mines many old tribal animosities and rivalries, which were assiduously fostered by employers who lived by the 'divide and rule' maxim. Few of them could have heard of the new ideas of African nationalism, still less have been influenced by them. And wider ideas of Africanism even could hold little currency in a community most of whom were not South Africans but Mozambicans, Tanganyikans, Angolans, Nyasas, recruited from afar, or Basotho, Bechuana or Swazis recruited from what were then still 'British Protectorates' — sharing neither a single language nor a single political creed.

Building a miners trade union required the welding of this divided and basically rural corps of men into a single united body, and to create that unity out of a group of whom perhaps one in every ten left each month for far-off places, to be replaced in turn by new recruits, totally without industrial experience, strangers in that strangest of worlds — the underground tunnels which led, on the surface, only to closed compound encampments in a life apart from the rest of the country. It was like trying to build a solid structure on shifting sands.

The second mountain to be faced was the Transvaal Chamber of Mines — the employers' cartel. Here was concentrated the greatest single combine of economic, industrial and financial power in the country. Though nominally composed of a considerable number of different mining companies, it was in essence a closely knit and tiny cartel of a handful — perhaps five really separate — distinct mining 'groups'; each of these groups managed and controlled a stable of subordinate companies through a heavily intertwined network of

interlocked finances and share-holdings, and incestuous cross-relations through financial and technical exchanges and shared directorships. What was in essence the tiny closed shop of a handful of multi-millionaire monopoly corporations was the direct employer of the largest body of black and white labour in any single South African industry (308 000 black and 36 000 white). It was the heaviest contributor by way of taxes and mining royalties to the state revenue (contributing £27 500 000 in direct payments to the state), and to the gross national product (16% of the total national income). It was the main supplier of foreign revenue through gold exports (60% of the total), the largest single purchaser and consumer of the country's agricultural and industrial products. It controlled directly the operations and policies of a train of subsidiary industries — coal, platinum and diamond mining — supply and service industries, engineering, cement, newspapers publishing, breweries and many more. It controlled directly the two organisations with a total monopoly to the legal right to recruit black labour both inside South Africa and abroad — the Native Recruiting Company (NRC) and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA); and through them it controlled the labour contract system, maintained a closely monitored wage control system, and suppressed all competition for black mining labour. It was said in South Africa — with good reason — that when the Chamber of Mines sneezed, the government caught cold. Though it no longer entered directly into the political seats of power — as its forerunners had done in the days of Cecil John Rhodes, Abe Bailey and others — it remained the grey eminence behind the government, the true economic power and the true arbiter of the nation's destiny. Some would call it a 'state within the state' and others 'the reality of state' with the government and administration representing the Chamber of Mines at politics.

Perhaps, in this context, there was a third consideration which must have weighed on those who took on the task of organising the black miners — the character of the Prime Minister Field Marshal Jan Christian Smuts. This grey haired, goatee-bearded man enjoyed a reverence and respect in the world outside which was somewhat different from that within South Africa — especially within black and working class South Africa. To the world outside he was the major Boer statesman who had been big enough to pass from successful guerrilla commander against the British in the Boer War, to ally and father figure of the British Empire; he was the deep and venerable philosopher wrapped in the arcane mysteries of 'holism'. To South Africans, on the other hand, he was remembered as the tough, relentless militarist who had used martial law to crush the 1913 white miners strike and deport its leaders without trial; he was the imposer of martial law again in 1922, and drowned the white miners strike again in blood both in pitched military assault and later on the gallows; and he had been the instigator of the Bulhoek Massacre, in which 190 black men, women and children had been mown down by troops in 1921 after they refused to leave some land to which they had been guided by a prophetic religious visionary. That incident, Smuts told Parliament, would teach every part of the population that '... the law of the land will be carried out in the last resort as fearlessly against black as against white'.

The Union Emerges

In the face of these formidable obstacles, the ANC pressed ahead. On the



*Left: JB Marks
President of the African Mine
Workers Union at the time of
the strike.*

*Below: JB Marks
(with back turned to camera)
distributing leaflets outside
a mine compound.*



3rd August, 1941, 81 elected delegates of organisations met in Johannesburg; they came mainly from trade unions, Communist Party branches, and social and political organisations on the Witwatersrand. There were few miners present, and the few there were mainly surface workers and clerks — the men with longer experience of urban and industrial life who were outside the compound and repatriation procedures which applied rigorously to underground workers. Some of these had been members of incipient trade unions which had been started — often still-born — in earlier years; some were members of the small African Mine Clerks Association, which still survived.

The Conference set up a working committee to bring the union to a reality. The Committee included James Majoro, a leading member of the Mine Clerks Association; TW Thibedi, a founder and survivor of a 1936 attempt to build a union and the first black member of the Communist Party, JB Marks, a veteran member of both the ANC and the Communist Party, and Gaur Radebe.

The Union grew slowly, painfully slowly. It needed to break through the barbed-wire curtain that cut the miners off from the world outside; it could do so only by means of painstaking contact with individuals and small groups of miners during their off-duty hours in the recreational areas around the compounds. Meetings of more than a handful could only be held secretly. Organisers were harried and harassed by the private mining company police, who ran the mining properties with an ubiquitous authority without defined limits, almost like an army in occupation of foreign territory. Union contacts themselves, when identified or suspected, were victimised by having their contracts terminated and being deported back to the territories from whence they came. Secrecy and word of mouth were the main organising techniques.

And yet the union grew. But slowly. By 1944 it could count its members in thousands, perhaps as much as four thousand — yet little enough in a sea of over 340 000. But a beginning.

It was war time. Social and economic conditions in the country were getting worse; everywhere there were steeply rising prices of goods in the shops, and growing shortages of commodities — especially some foodstuffs; the appetite of the enormous Allied armies had first call on the supplies. Companies increased the pressure on their workers, intensifying the rate of exploitation, reducing rations, and allowing standards of services, recreation and welfare to fall. In the industrial world outside the closed encampment of the mines, workers' struggles against falling standards and rising costs had forced some government action. From 1943 automatic 'cost of living allowances' had become standard for all industrial workers, compensating them in part for rising shop prices. But agricultural workers and black miners had been excluded from the legislation, on the specious grounds that their cost of living was met by employers who provided their accommodation and rations. On the same specious reasoning, the Chamber of Mines refused to pay any such allowances even to those mine clerks who were not contracted labour. The bitterness of feeling among the clerks became a source of support and strength for the Union.

The Union tried repeatedly to meet the Chamber of Mines to discuss its members' grievances. But the Chamber, characteristically, had taken a policy decision to ignore the Union's very existence. Letters from the Union went deliberately unanswered; attempts at intervention by go-betweens, such as the then existing Native Representatives in Parliament and the Senate, were given

a brusque brush-off.

When the Union turned to government for intervention, the response was much the same; which was the Master's Voice and which the servant is not clear. Union demands for a Wage Board investigation into the industry — pressed on the government in Parliament — were just as summarily turned down, although the Wage Board had been set up by statute specifically for the purpose of making such investigations in industry, and of recommending minimum standards of wages and conditions.

Against the background of government and employers' resistance to any change, discontent built up on the mines and began to spill over in sporadic action. On several mines, disputes over treatment by mine officials and over food and conditions sparked off a growing wave of minor — unorganised — strikes and stoppages; demonstrations in compounds and dining halls erupted into riots, with the vandalising or burning of kitchens and other mine buildings. Police and company reprisals against the offenders failed to stem the tide of miners' anger. The pressure either had to be headed off, or an explosion on the Reef would almost certainly erupt.

The government chose to try and head it off. Probably on the initiative of the Chamber of Mines — though this was never admitted — the government announced the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry into the wages and conditions of the black miners. It was hoped that this would signal to the miners that their grievances were going to be remedied if only they would be patient and go quietly on with the work in the old conditions. By the time the Commission reported it was thought the 'troublesome' generation of miners would have ended their contracts and been sent home; and a new, hopefully more tractable, group would be installed to replace them.

History and the Mine Workers' Union frustrated those hopes. As soon as the appointment of the Commission under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Lansdowne was announced, the Union seized the opportunity it presented. Meetings of miners were held up and down the Reef to tell the miners of the Inquiry, and to ask them to collect and formulate grievances and demands which the Union would take to the Commission. The idea caught on; the state's safety fuse was grasped and turned against its makers. As the idea spread, meetings of miners grew from small group affairs to mass gatherings at which the men 'spoke bitterness' — as the Chinese say of public denunciations of conditions of life. Every weekend in central Johannesburg, large gatherings of articulate miners from every Witwatersrand shaft gathered to give the Union organisers chapter and verse of the day to day detail of life and conditions of work on every part of the Reef. From these meetings came a massive, detailed and fully documented memorandum from the AMWU to the Commission.

The miners unions turned the Lansdowne Commission on its head. What had been designed to be a full justification of the policy of the Chamber of Mines became instead a massive public denunciation. The Chamber's legal representative, who had taken the front seat at all sessions of the Commission, cross-examining and contradicting witnesses, found his starring role eclipsed by the deep and detailed evidence presented by the Union. Against the Chamber's claim of its inability to afford anything more than the existing rate of between 2 shillings/1d and 2 shillings/3d per shift, the Union demanded a minimum wage of ten shillings (one rand) per day, and sweeping improvements in con-

ditions generally, including paid holidays and overtime working, clothing and boot allowances, and improved feeding.

The demand for ten shillings a day minimum wage — by today's standards so paltry as to be laughable — was treated by the Chamber and its supportive national press and Parliament as a fantastic and irresponsible dream. The men's wages, the Chamber argued repeatedly, were really only part of the family income; the main part of that income was derived from family crop and livestock production in the reserves. The Union challenge to the Chamber thus had to deal not only with the conditions on the mines themselves, but also with the alleged farming incomes of the miners families in the reserves. Prompted by the Union, other organisations and experts came forward to testify about the conditions of the people in the reserves; and a formidable body of health and social researchers exposed the reality of starvation and near-starvation in almost all areas; of soil erosion and falling productivity which had made the reserves nett importers of food from outside; of large and growing numbers of totally landless families; and of alarming levels of malnutrition and infant mortality rates.

In the face of desperate efforts by the Chamber of Mines to present an alternative picture, the real face of the mining industry and of its impact on the lives of 340 000 men and hundreds of thousands — perhaps millions — of their dependants, was systematically exposed to the public gaze for the first time in South African history. Where the Chamber attempted to paint a picture of higher wages leading only to steep decline for all the Reef towns and all the service industries and the farmers who supplied their needs — thus a real national and near fatal disaster — a new picture emerged of an actual disaster, already coming into being and built on the gross exploitation of the miners.

The Commission took a year to digest all its evidence. It could scarcely be expected that any inquiry by such white establishment figures as these would find in favour of the 'fantastic', 'irresponsible' and 'revolutionary' demand for ten shillings per day. But it was impossible for the Commission not to find that improvements were imperative. Its report, when finally issued, conceded much criticism of the industry, but little substance for the miners:

- That surface workers be paid an extra four pence per shift, and underground workers five pence;
- That a 'boot allowance' of one penny per shift be paid;
- That Sunday working and overtime working be paid at one-and-a-half times the normal rate;
- That long term workers get two weeks paid holiday per year;
- That rations and catering services be improved.

The mountain had heaved and produced a mouse; even that mouse proved too much for the combined stomachs of Chamber and government. While government dithered and delayed its decisions, the union carried on with mass meetings of miners, telling them of the concessions already proposed by the Commission, and organising them to carry the campaign for a minimum wage still further. Late in 1944, the government made its decision. The recommendations of the Lansdowne Commission would *not* be implemented. In place of the recommended improvements, only a small wage increase 'in lieu of all other recommendations' would be introduced, giving the princely rise of four pence per shift for surface workers and five pence for underground. The bitterness on the mines grew worse.

The Commission had found that the industry was able to pay the full costs of the improvements it had recommended; yet the government chose to pass the full costs of its own decisions on to the tax payer through a refund of a tax known as the Gold Realisation Charge.

The miners had reached a watershed. There was no further way forward through any process of conciliation, argument, debate or bargaining. From here on, clearly, they would have to go forward using the withdrawal of their labour as their weapon — or they would go under.

It was in this mood that the annual Conference of the African Mine Workers' Union met in August 1944. There were 700 delegates from the mines; 1 300 other miners without delegate credentials 'observing'; and a large turn-out of political leaders and trade unionists from other industries, plus the President General of the ANC, members of the Natives Representative Council, and chiefs from several areas from which miners were recruited. Delegates demanded strike action; the union leaders advised caution, and time to seek once again to meet the Chamber of Mines for discussions, while delegates returned to the mines and spread the union organisation further in preparation for whatever lay ahead. The union leadership carried the day — but the miners remained angry and rebellious, and sporadic clashes and disturbances began all along the Reef.

On their part, the Chamber and the government acted in concert to try and destroy the Union; whether this was an agreed conspiracy or simply an identity of views is not clear. The Chamber declared the mining areas no-go areas for the Union, and advised compound managers that no union organising whatsoever was to be allowed on mining property, either during working hours or when the men were off duty; meetings were to be totally prohibited regardless of the size, and union activists singled out and repatriated regardless of any uncompleted contracts.

For its part, the government stepped in with a new War Measure, promulgated under special war emergency powers — Measure 1425 of August 1944 — which banned any gathering of any sort by more than twenty people anywhere along the 'proclaimed' mining area of the Witwatersrand.

The Union was driven to shift its meetings away from the shabby 'concession stores' and canteen areas adjacent to the compounds, to secret places, usually on the mine dumps, and under cover of dark. But the private police, aided and abetted by state police, were everywhere; victimisation of activists, arbitrary sackings and deportations of identified or suspected Union members was widespread. Union membership declined under the assault, its income from membership subscriptions fell to crisis point.

By 1945 the Chamber of Mines felt confident enough to seize advantage of the food shortages developing in the country, and cut the already unacceptable level of rations in the mine canteens. Canned meat was substituted for fresh, and the quantity and quality of the food was deliberately reduced without any attempt to explain or to meet with the miners. In protest food demonstrations, riots and violent attacks on the mine kitchens began to flare up all along the Reef. The explosion that had long threatened was clearly coming; but state and Chamber, confident that they had emasculated the miners and brought their Union to a low ebb, ignored all the signals.

1946 opened with the Union general meeting in Johannesburg, with some 2 000 members present. They again drew up a list of demands — ten shillings

BATON CHARGES BY POLICE

Top: Mine workers before the police charge. Bottom (right): A small-scale engagement between miners and police. Typical of hundreds which took place on the Reef during the strike. Bottom (left): An Afrikaans miner being battered in the ground.



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STRIKE DIARY

BY MICHAEL HARMEL, JOHANNESBURG GUARDIAN JOURNALIST

JOHANNESBURG.—IT IS DIFFICULT, AFTER THE TREMENDOUS AND HISTORIC EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEK TO SIT DOWN AND WRITE A CALM AND CONSIDERED REPORT FOR READERS OF THE GUARDIAN. AS REPORTER FOR READERS OF THE I WAS CLOSE AND NEAR TO MANY OF THE THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED. THE NEWS OF THE WEEK MUST BE READ AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE MAIN IMPRESSIONS AND TRUTHS OF THIS STRIKE. TRUTHS THAT I AND EVERY THINKING WORKER WILL RETAIN IN OUR MINDS AS LONG AS WE LIVE.

Fresh, was the glorious heroism, unity and determination of the African mine workers, over two hundred thousand of whom, at one stage or another during the week participated in the strike democratically decided upon through their trade-

Let us remember that these men live in compounds of scattered over the miles of the Witwatersrand with communication between mines almost impossible. That the organization of their Union was of the very slightest, hampered by the normal terrorism practised on the mines. That they speak many different languages and have been indoctrinated from opportunity of imperial play upon tribal differences has ever been missed by the Chamber of Mines.

Then, remember what it meant to strike last week. To face, unarmed, police batons, bayonets and rifles. Thousand heads bashed in, their bones broken. Reliable reports show that at least three have been so dead or seriously killed. So, dear reader, you can appreciate what these miners have done for the common cause which these miners have man and his destiny.

Secondly, there was the naked, open and brutal intervention of the State and its repressive instruments, the police and the Express Department, in an industrial dispute for the narrow purpose of forcing the men back to work in the presence that the...

ready-made plans and wanted to preserve "Hitler's" reputation? On Monday afternoon the Johannesburg District and the Transvaal Provincial Council of the Transvaal Indian Congress, both the miners at special meetings. The Star was forced to admit that some police were old style.

Monday it went out fully. Miners and Sub-African parties. The Star reported that the strikers were orderly and disciplined but minor rioting in most of the night.

UNION OFFICES SEARCHED
 TUESDAY Calling at the Union office in the morning I found the place swarming with C.I.D. They carried away every file document they could find. My informant was told that the office was also taken, however it was only a matter of time before they could be convinced. The following day the following day the following day the following day...

that was only the beginning of a long list of what the Chamber of Mines had set to work. At the time of the strike the Mail reported that the strike was a success. I have still not been able to find out whether the names of those who have been arrested in the strike. The Mail reported that the strike was a success. I have still not been able to find out whether the names of those who have been arrested in the strike.

It is known this will not sit well personally from the workers. The West Spring were not coming in. There were no fight anybody were not concerned with. Hand Hints Mail. I know this will not sit well personally from the workers. The West Spring were not coming in. There were no fight anybody were not concerned with. Hand Hints Mail. I know this will not sit well personally from the workers. The West Spring were not coming in. There were no fight anybody were not concerned with. Hand Hints Mail.

a day minimum wage; family housing in place of compounds; long service gratuities; and the repeal of War Measure 1425. The tone was angry; again there were rank and file calls for strike action; again the Union leadership held back. Letters containing the demands were sent to the Chamber. No response.

On May 19th, the Union called an open-air meeting at the Newtown Market Square, to report back to the miners what had — and what had not — happened to their demands. JB Marks took the chair and reported. Calls for strike action were made loud and clear by miners in the audience. Finally, a miner stepped up to the platform, and formally moved that a general strike be called on all mines. The proposal was put to the vote and carried almost without dissent. No date was set. The Union executive was to make one final attempt to meet the Chamber. The Native Commissioner and the Director of Labour were both at the meeting, together with uniformed and plain clothes police. No one, apparently, appreciated that a fuse had been lit, and the flame was racing towards the point of explosion*.

On the 4th August, again at the Market Square, a much larger audience of miners gathered to hear the executive's report. They had nothing to report, save that the Chamber had blankly refused to speak to them or answer their letters. At once, from the audience, came a call for immediate strike action. This time a date was set — one week ahead, Monday, August 12th. Marks cautioned all present against provocateurs, and warned that violence would achieve none of their objectives. What was needed was unity, discipline and determination. All present were to go back to their mines and use the next week to prepare their fellow workers for a Monday morning stoppage throughout the industry.

There had never been an attempt at an organised industry-wide strike before. There had never been such a frontal confrontation between the worst paid, compounded and contracted black workers and the most powerful bosses cartel with major influences in the state. It was a step into the unknown.

The Great Strike

The Union spent the week after the last mass meeting spreading the word about the strike to its contacts all along the Reef. It was a task far beyond the real capacity of the four or five Union organisers. The shafts and compounds — all now policed, patrolled and wire-enclosed like concentration camps — were scattered along fifty miles of the Witwatersrand, generally in isolated areas of veld surrounded by a no-mans-land of unused scrubland, difficult to approach by road except along the company's own private roadways, inaccessible by passenger rail.

The word spread — but how far, and how many miners had heard nothing of the strike before it actually started has never been clear. The Union office, which should have been a hub of activity during the week, was generally quiet, often deserted, as all hands left headquarters for the task in the field. By the end of the week of preparation, there was little real organised preparation for headquarters operations once the strike had started. The strike would stand or fall, finally, on the self-initiative and self-direction of the miners, concentrated in a multitude of separate and isolated compounds. The Union would be less a general staff of the strike than a reporting centre and observation post.

*Footnote: * From the evidence of Detective Sergeant Boy at the Miners' Strike Trial, September 1946.*

The separation of Union offices and Union officials from the closed world of the compound was to remain throughout the strike, despite many clandestine operations by which organisers penetrated the compounds, and made isolated contact. The separation grew more serious as Union officials were arrested and locked up within the first few days of the strike. As a result, there has never been an 'official' account of the strike — of how the strike actually developed, written by anyone on the inside. The participants and strikers had an intimate knowledge only of that tiny segment in which they participated personally; none had an overall view, which could provide a comprehensive picture.

Perhaps the only fairly substantial account, then, has to be derived from the daily newspapers of the time. Their accounts were never complete, were neither always objective or true; they viewed events always from behind the police lines — and then only those events they were told of by police or permitted by police to see. Their reports are heavily coloured by their origins in unattributed police statements — as subsequent court case testimony showed — and overlaid by an overwhelming editorial bias against the strike and in defence of the class interests of the mine-owners and shareholders.

Nevertheless, the press gives the flavour — if not the historic truth — of the miners' strike.

Monday: August 12

From the Rand Daily Mail

Several Injured in Skirmishes: Police Take Swift Action:

*Attempts were made last night * at several mines on the Rand to prevent the native shifts from going on duty. Swift action by mine officials and contingents of police, who had been standing by all day, resulted in the shifts going down for their normal duties. A number of natives who were on their way to work are believed to have been injured in the skirmishes. The police have made a few arrests, and many more arrests are expected ...*

At City Deep ... some of the agitators attempted to storm the main gates to the mines in an effort to prevent the natives going on duty. The mine officials acted promptly, and policemen from Johannesburg were sent to the area to assist them. On the arrival of the police everything became quiet, but the police made an arrest.

At Robinson Deep a number of agitators shouted insults and catcalls, attempted to induce the miners to return to their compounds. Once again the officials stepped in quickly, and soon had the backing of a strong force of policemen. The shift went on duty ...

It is thought that yesterday's trouble was a sequel to a meeting held a week ago at the Newtown Market Square, when 1 000 natives agreed to call a general strike of native mine workers ... A number of meetings were held on various mines yesterday to confirm this decision. The natives are demanding better conditions and an increase in the daily wage to ten shillings ...

From The Star

There is a total stoppage of work at West Springs, Van Dyck, Van Ryn, Vlakkfontein, New Kleifontein, and Modder B; and a partial stoppage of work at Brakpan, City Deep, Robinson Deep, Nourse Mines and Sub-Nigel. Generally natives

*Footnote: * The strike started at 3am, when the shifts changed over.*

are remaining quietly in their compounds.

The arrest of three natives in connection with the mine strike in the Benoni area resulted in a demonstration of several thousand natives outside the Benoni Police Station ... Police reinforcements were sent from other centres ... About 200 police assembled with rifles and fixed bayonets; they dispersed the natives to their compounds. There were a few minor casualties ...

Tuesday August 13

From the Rand Daily Mail

45 000 Natives Strike at 11 Mines.

Police in Baton Charges Disperse Benoni Mob.

Late last night there were indications that further compounds were likely to join the strike early this morning ... It is estimated that between 45 000 and 50 000 natives are already on strike for a daily wage of ten shillings ... Eleven mines are involved. Some have closed down, while others are only partially affected.

... The strike is likely to spread. Strong police detachments are being sent to danger spots this morning to prevent this development. A Rand Daily Mail representative who toured the area found the strikers treating the occasion as a Sunday. They sat or lay about in blanketed groups, sunning themselves behind compound walls out of the wind ... The only sign of abnormal conditions were the lorry-loads of armed police arriving from training depots at Pretoria, from Johannesburg and elsewhere.

At Vlakfontein, twenty natives who refused to go to work were arrested ... When night shifts prepared to go underground at several of the East Rand mines ... police were on the spot and made several arrests. On State mines ... police drove the malcontents back to their rooms, and order was restored. The largest number of arrests was made at Springs Mine No. 1 Compound, where 400 natives were rounded up. When they intimated they were willing to return to work, however, they were released. At City Deep about 100 agitators had gathered near the main gates ... About twenty arrests were made.

Mine Strike Discussed by Cabinet

The Prime Minister, General Smuts, presided over a full meeting of the Cabinet at Union Buildings yesterday ... The meeting was not called because of the strike ... but it is understood that the matter was discussed.

From The Star

It is the opinion of observers that the great majority of the strikers are anxious to return to work. The mines on which there is a complete stoppage today are Van Dyck, Van Ryn, Vlakfontein and Modder B — all totally stopped the previous day; and Brakpan, City Deep and Nourse Mines — all partially stopped the previous day; and Marievale — where there was no stoppage the previous day. There has been a partial return to work at New Klipfontein, Sub-Nigel and Springs — all totally stopped previously. Robinson Deep is still partially stopped and Simmer and Jack and Rose Deep — where there were no stoppages previously — are also partially stopped ... A handful of natives went on strike at Sallies mine this morning ... An attempt described as half-hearted was made to picket the shaft head at Government Areas mine last night and

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1946.

PRICE 1d.

1/6 Increase for White Miners

JOHANNESBURG. — Following negotiations between the Chamber of Mines and the Mining Unions' Joint Committee, representing nine trade unions of European workers employed on the mines, an increase of 1s. 6d. per day cost of living allowance will be paid to all European workers on the mines. The Joint Committee had originally asked for 12½ per cent. increase, but agreed to accept the c.o.l.a. increase instead, "on the understanding that it was made as a result of the investigations conducted by the Gold Producers' Committee before the unions' request was made."

The unofficial organ of the Chamber of Mines, the "Rand Daily Mail" makes a big point of the sacrifice involved to the mine owners, of £1,000,000 a year more. But its financial columns last Saturday, the mining editor of the same paper wrote: "After four very dull days, with prices sagging most of the time, the share market almost staged a grandstand finish yesterday with prices in all sections marked up. This new lease of life was brought about by the agreement reached between the Chamber of Mines and the Joint Mining Unions."

SUPPORT FOR FLEET

JOHANNESBURG. — At a meeting of the executive of the South-Transvaal Branch of the S.A. Dressers' Employees' Union a motion of full confidence and a hearty moral support for secretary, Mr. Ronnie Fleet,

POLITICAL TRIAL OPENS

Case Against Fifty Communists

JOHANNESBURG. — LAST MONDAY, IN A CROWDED COURTROOM OF THE MAGISTRATE'S COURT, THE BIGGEST POLITICAL TRIAL IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY BEGAN. AMONG THE FIFTY-ODD ACCUSED ARE THE LEADERS OF THE AFRICAN MINE WORKERS' UNION — J. B. MARKS, ITS PRESIDENT, AND SECRETARY, J. J. MAJORO; MOSES M. KOTANE, GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY, AND MEMBERS OF THE PARTY'S JOHANNESBURG DISTRICT COMMITTEE, TOGETHER WITH OTHER INDIVIDUALS OF ALL RACES, COMMUNIST AND NON-COMMUNIST, WHO INCLUDE AMONG THEM SOME OF THE BEST KNOWN FIGURES IN THE LABOUR AND PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT OF THE RAND.

The case against the 50 Communists opened on Monday morning before the magistrate, Mr. de Villiers Louw.

Hundreds of people of all races thronged the corridors, intending to be spectators at the trial, but only a handful were able to gain admittance to the courtroom which was crowded with the 50 accused, their attorneys and counsel, the police and press. Petitions were handed into Court from people seeking admittance, but on the grounds that there was no room inside, they were not allowed in. Many remained in the corridors all day.

THE CHARGES

dence between the Central Executive Committee and the Districts of the Communist Party comprised a considerable proportion. Not only letters from Danie du Plessis to Moses Kotane reporting the situation on the mines, but the widest range of subjects including Port Elizabeth Anti-Pass campaign, opposition to the Ghetto Act in Pietermaritzburg, statistics on trade unionism, the biscuit union dispute in Durban, the proposed ballot for strike on the food issue conducted by the Trades and Labour Council, the campaign against Franco Spain, the recognition of African trade unions, and many other matters.

The Guardian, 5 September 1946.

the shifts were late this morning.

Police escorting natives to work at Betty Shaft of Sub-Nigel Mine were attacked by 1 500 strikers this morning. Armed police opened fire on the strikers, picking their targets and six natives were wounded. The strikers dropped their weapons and made a rush for the compound. 'The police were forced to open fire in self defence', a police official told the Star, 'and six natives were wounded. Six other natives were crushed to death in the ensuing panic'. At 11 o'clock, the natives at this compound had already decided to return to work.

Wednesday, August 14th

From the Rand Daily Mail

On Monday, the workers of Nol Shaft, City Deep, after being driven out of their compound, went underground, where they held a 'sit-down' strike.

Hundreds of police with drawn batons fought the native strikers at the Robinson Deep and Nourse mines at 6.20am, when they refused to go to work. During the night strikers were told that they were expected to go on shift. But they refused and took up so threatening an attitude towards mine officials that the police were called in. About 320 policemen were sent to Nourse Mines ... and a fight took place. Simultaneously, 290 police were sent to Chris Shaft, Robinson Deep Mine, where they were also involved in a fight with the strikers. A baton charge was made into the rooms in the compound ... At Nourse Mines the police had to baton charge against 700 Shangaans who had changed their minds after setting out for the shaft, and tried to return to the compounds.

4 000 Strikers Try to March on Johannesburg

Armed with choppers, iron bars, knives and an assortment of other dangerous weapons, 4 000 strikers forming a six-mile long procession attempted to march on Johannesburg from West Springs yesterday afternoon ... They were intercepted by police near Brakpan. When they refused to turn back they were attacked by police. Three of them were seriously injured and scores received minor injuries. The purpose of the march is not known. All available policemen on the East Rand and in Johannesburg were ordered to intercept them on the way and drive them back to their compounds ... Reports were received that the natives were making straight for their compounds and had decided to return to work.

From The Star

General Smuts told the Transvaal head committee of the United Party in Pretoria today that he was not unduly concerned over what was happening on the Witwatersrand gold mines, because the strike was not caused by legitimate grievances but by agitators. The government would take steps to see that these matters were put right ... The agitators were trying to lead the natives and the country to destruction. The natives had to be protected from these people.

Thursday, August 15th

From the Rand Daily Mail

Yesterday about 4 000 natives from Simmer and Jack began a march on the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association's compound in Johannesburg, where they intended to demonstrate in support of their claims for an increased wage.

The column was intercepted by two forces of police. One body of police charged the main group of strikers. Most of the natives escaped ... but ... many natives hiding in the holes in the vicinity were rounded up. The second body of police cornered 800 natives in the angle formed by a deep donga and an old ash dump ... Eventually the whole group indicated its willingness to surrender, putting up their hands.

500 strikers from Van Ryn ... set out from Benoni yesterday morning on a march to Johannesburg 'to see the Chamber of Mines'. They were met by police near Elandsfontein. A fight ensued, in which the natives were routed and sent scurrying over the veld ... A number of strikers were injured. At Chris Shaft, Robinson Deep ... when there was no move by the natives to go on duty, the police were ordered into the compound to clear the rooms. The Pondos ... leaned out of their doors laughing and jeering and hurling insults. A detachment armed with rifles with fixed bayonets and revolvers appeared, the attitude of the Pondos changed, and they returned to their rooms ... The police were ordered to clear the rooms. Many of the natives adopted a defiant attitude, and in some cases the police were compelled to use force. Hundreds of natives streamed out of the compound gates ...

At Nourse Mines ... When all the natives willing to work were underground, the police began to clear each room of malcontents, driving them in sections to the centre of the compound. Large numbers of natives were seriously injured ... Mr Lawrence (the compound manager) addressed the strikers. He gave them a further half hour to dress and proceed to the shaft heads ... If they did not do so the police would not only deal with them seriously but might counter any offensive movements with rifle fire.

From The Star

All but two of the Rand's 45 producing mines are now working normally ... There is total stoppage at one, Nigel, and partial stoppage at one, Robinson Deep.

Strikers Sit at Bottom of Two Shafts

There was trouble at City Deep this morning, when one compound refused to resume work. Police cleared the compound, and batches of natives were escorted to the shaft heads. At two shafts, the first batches of natives staged a 'sit-down' strike a mile under the ground and refused to let any further batches leave the cages ... There has been similar experience at Nigel mine this morning ... There has been no violence. The natives say they will maintain their sit-down strike at the bottom of the 2 700-foot shaft until four o'clock this afternoon when they are due to come up.

Friday, August 16th

From the Rand Daily Mail

More than 400 policemen went 1 000 feet underground in the Nigel gold mine yesterday to deal with 1 000 natives who were staging a sit-down strike. This is the first time in South African history that the police have been compelled to take such action ... A fight developed in the stopes. They drove the natives up, stope by stope, level by level, until they reached the surface ... Afterwards the strikers indicated their intention of resuming work. They were sent



Living conditions for miners in the 1980's. (Consolidated Main Reef Mine)

underground, and no further trouble occurred.

5 000 natives at the Main compound, City Deep, were involved in a fight with police yesterday, and afterwards went underground readily.

At noon, the police chased strikers at Chris Shaft, Robinson Deep, off nearby dumps. They surrendered, and said they would return to work.

Some native strikers were injured in the main compound of the Rose Deep mine yesterday as a result of a baton charge by about 200 policemen. The police moved forward to the attack, and using batons and heavy sticks drove the natives back ... They decided to return to work. In batches of about 100 they were marched to the shaft heads; there was no further trouble.

More than fifty natives and two policemen were slightly injured in a clash between 400 policemen and 5 000 strikers at the main compound at City Deep yesterday.

Native Mine Strike Likely to Peter Out

There is every prospect that all Rand Mines will be working normally today.

From The Star

There was trouble at New Pioneer mine this morning when all the natives there refused to work ... About 70 police arrived and tried to arrest the ringleaders. There was an intense struggle for about an hour, during which time twenty natives were injured ... The worst elements scattered into neighbouring dumps, and the rest of the natives started work.

The strike of native mineworkers on the Rand has ended. In all, seventeen mines were involved in varying degrees ... Only Robinson Deep was affected throughout the whole period. It is estimated that at least 1 000 000 man hours were lost in the strike ... The Deputy Commissioner of Police had at his disposal 1 600 men to deal with the situation ...

In an interview, the Director of Native Labour and Chief Native Commissioner for the Witwatersrand, Mr JM Brink, said: 'My chaps were on the spot from the word go ... to point out that the stoppage was illegal and a breach of contract; that the affair was instigated by agitators; that they could not possibly expect ten shillings a day ... Whenever police action was finally taken, it was only after repeated attempts to get the workers back in terms of their contracts by other means'.

These reports, it should be repeated, can not be taken as historically accurate in detail. They do, however, give the authentic atmosphere of the strike.

The atmosphere was not that of a labour dispute, as the term is understood elsewhere in the civilised world. It was rather that of a civil war; it was a war fought by police equipped like an army, with rifles and fixed bayonets; its operations conducted like military offensives against an enemy, ending in 'surrender' signified by raising of weaponless hands; the surrenders followed up by the 'rounding up' of stragglers in hiding.

How many were killed and injured in this war against the black miners has never been established. The figures are contradictorily reported, and have never been carefully investigated. On their part, the only seemingly hostile act reported of the miners are attempts to 'march on Johannesburg', with flesh-curdling stories of armaments, like choppers and iron bars, none of which have

ever been alleged to have been used. Even the foreboding dread inspired by the lurid treatment of these 'marches' served only to obscure the reality — admitted obliquely in some reports — that the marchers were on their way to the offices of the recruiting corporations who held their contracts, and thus held the apparent custody of their conditions and rights. Whether the marchers were for the purpose of negotiating on conditions, or to seek the ending of their contracts and their repatriation, has also never been made clear.

The total failure of the press to investigate deeply into anything connected with the strike reflected the total bias of their owners against the miners and all their demands.

The Rand Daily Mail editorialised thus on the second day of the strike: *'No newspaper has regarded native aspirations more favourably than the Rand Daily Mail, or been more insistent in its plea for a fair deal for the native population. It is precisely because of this sympathy, and because of our desire that the native should achieve a better position in this community that we have no hesitation in condemning this movement ...*

*The natives ... emerging from barbarism to civilisation, do not know which way to turn ... These simple people have as leader the intemperate Mr Marx *, with his wild speeches and absurd demands; and his associates, many of whom are closely connected with the Communists. These people have now led the natives into one of the most foolish strikes we can remember'.*

And two days later:

'Two days of the native mine strike shows some natives dead; many injured; some policemen injured. None of the organisers of the strike or of the European communists who are supporting it has so far been killed or injured.

It has been proved that this is not a labour dispute in the ordinary sense of the term. It is more like a war ...

We do not see what else could be expected. The mine natives are as raw as any to be found in Africa ... How can such people know anything of trade union procedure or the orderly conduct of strikes?

We would like the average Johannesburg citizen to consider what would have happened if those 4 000 natives from Springs, all of them armed with some weapon or other, had not been intercepted by the police ... The city might not have presented a pretty picture.

We also hope that the Cabinet sub-committee which is handling the matter will not be weak ... If there is weakness now, there will be worse trouble later.' The Rand Daily Mail's cartoonist, Bob Conolly, picked up the mood. One cartoon shows a black miner, arms outstretched, striding out to grab a glowing bowl in the sky labelled 'Ten shillings a day'. His feet are on the edge of a precipice; an agitator tries to push him over into the dark depths below, labelled 'Chaos'. Caption: *The situation at a glance.*

And another shows miners in blankets like Mexican peasants at a fiesta, marching away from a mine dump. In their midst, overshadowing them, a gigantic shadowy figure labelled 'local communism' dangles a note labelled 'ten shillings a day', encourages them on. Caption: *The march on Johannesburg.*

And his final sally after the strike had ended: the corpse of the agitator, still

*Footnote * On this day, the Rand Daily Mail changed the spelling of Marks to Marx — and continued to do so throughout the strike. 'A spectre is haunting ...'?*

dangling its ten shilling note, being pushed along in a coco-pan into a dark cave. Caption: *Getting rid of the debris.*

By Saturday the strike was over. It had been — by any reckoning — an heroic confrontation between the most exploited black workers in the country, and the most powerful of employers allied to the state machine. In the course of it, the miners had pioneered a course which would serve the whole working class in the future; they had forged and maintained an inter-tribal and international unity in the face of tremendous provocation; they had discovered for themselves new weapons of struggle — the sit-down strike and the stay-at-home (although here it was the compound which had to serve as 'home'); and the protest march to the seats of the power which controlled them. If in the end they were beaten back to work with none of their demands won, they had made one fact clear to the Chamber of Mines and government alike — a fact which they and their press still failed to take on board — that here, in the mines and compounds, there were men who had grown to the consciousness and organisational capacity of the most advanced sections of the country's working class — a real proletariat which had felt the strength of its muscle, and could never again be disregarded or contemptuously ignored.

The strike had been fought and lost. But much had been proved for the future. It had been a dramatic clap of thunder, which should have told South Africa that storms of a new kind lay ahead.

The Week Outside

Because the mining compounds and the black miners live a life segregated from the rest of South Africa, it has been possible to tell the story of the actual events of the strike without reference to the rest of the country outside. But an event of such dimensions, so shaking to the economic foundations of the society, so new in its revelations of the spirit growing up inside that life part — such an event cannot happen without sweeping much of the society about it into the turmoil.

On the Monday when the strike started, the Union organisers had been out along the Reef all day. At night, those who were not already in custody returned to the Union offices. Somehow, they decided, they must let the strikers in the disparate mine compounds know that they were not alone, that others too were on strike; and also they must carry the news of the mass scale of the strike to those shafts where there had been no stoppage. Hastily during the evening a Strike Bulletin of whatever information they had at hand was drafted, and arrangements made to cyclostyle it for distribution to the mines.

But the handful of Union officials could not possibly cope with a task this size. A call went out to the other black trade unions, the ANC and the Communist Party to provide assistance. It was in emergencies such as this that the close-knit organisation of the Communist Party proved invaluable; used to quick contact by word of mouth between the Party office and its branches in various areas, the call was passed on. Throughout the night groups of Party members and trade unionists, ANC members and a few non-compounded miners drifted into the office, helping to run the machines and carry bundles of completed Bulletins off to cars which were assembled nearby. A quick plan of distribution was improvised; the key target would have to be the non-strikers, who would pass out of the heavily encircled compounds across the veld between

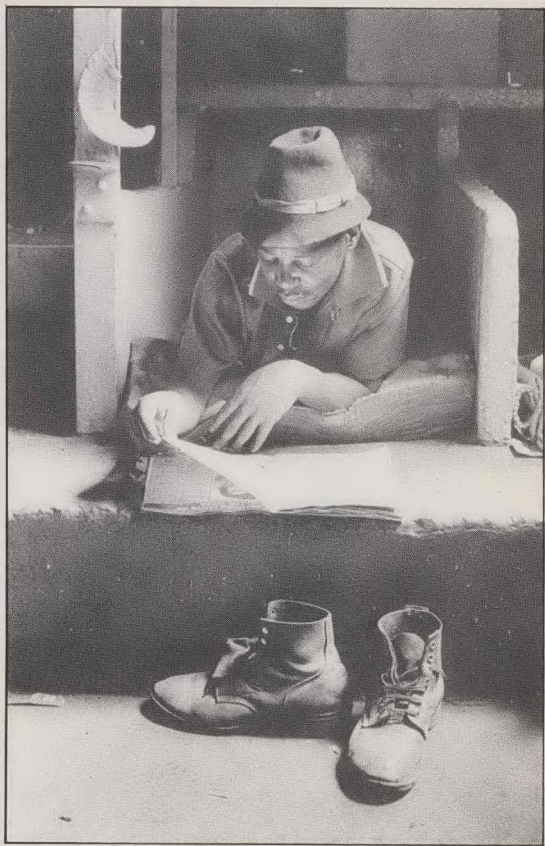
two and three a.m. as the shifts changed. Teams of volunteers, many of them dressed in blankets to look as much like miners as possible — black and white — set off to distribute the leaflets. Not all of them returned. By the following morning, information was coming through of volunteers arrested in several places, and leaflets seized. But the majority had got through.

On Tuesday morning police raided the Union office, and seized all the remaining Strike Bulletins and Union records, office machinery and duplicators. During the day, new plans had to be laid for a clandestine assembly point for volunteers and new supplies of paper and cyclostyling equipment laid on for the evening's activities. Again by word of mouth the new venue was made known, and that evening Bulletin No. 2 went out — again with arrests and casualties; but again most of it got through. Thus it was the strike was maintained through the week; and thus it was that new shafts came out on strike from day to day, even though the Union was virtually immobilised, its organisers under arrest, its offices under seige.

On Tuesday at midday, a hastily summoned meeting of all black trade unions on the Witwatersrand met under the auspices of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions. JB Marks, the President of both the Council and the AMWU, presided. There was a single topic of discussion: what solidarity and support could the rest of the black trade union movement give to the strikers? For several hours the discussion drifted in desultory fashion; there had been no pre-planning, and no one had a clear proposition which could command general support; there was some discussion about the calling of a national strike in support of the common demand of all unions for a ten shilling minimum wage. The meeting was drifting to an inconclusive end when police burst in, arrested JB Marks, and dragged him away. The effect of the intervention — whether so intended or not — was to enrage the delegates present. In a short time a proposal had been put and carried unanimously to call a general strike of all workers on the Witwatersrand, ... 'to commence within forty eight hours'. A strike committee under the chairmanship of James Phillips of the Garment Workers' Union was elected, and the meeting dispersed.

The decision taken in haste, came to be argued over in leisure. When, for example, did the committee intend the strike to start? And for how long was it to be carried on? Leaflets calling the 'General Strike' were rushed through to printers, but the answers remained unclear. Some unions thought the strike was to be on Thursday morning, others Friday. Leaflets calling a mass meeting of workers at the Market Square at noon on Thursday, intended to be the first shot in the General Strike campaign, gave others the impression that that was the starting time and indeed, on Thursday towards noon, several groups of workers from Johannesburg's industrial suburb of Industria downed tools and set out to march to Market Square. They were intercepted by police, baton charged, and the marches broken up. Few of the marchers reached the Square; and no one knew then whether their strike was still on or off.

On the Wednesday night, police had raided two printing works where strike leaflets were being printed, and seized all the available copies and the type. Only a small fraction of the necessary handbills had by then been collected by the unions and distributed, so the call to the Market Square meeting where confusions might have been set straight reached very few factories. Long before Thursday noon, lorry-loads of police arrived at the Market Square, and ringed



Concrete bunks for beds.



the perimeter; reinforcements in trucks and on foot stood by in neighbouring streets. The approach to the square had to be made through a heavy and menacing police cordon. Several hundred workers had, nonetheless, assembled around the truck which was to serve as a speaker's platform shortly before noon, when the Chief Magistrate came forward in a posse of armed police, mounted the platform and announced that the meeting had been prohibited in terms of the Riotous Assemblies Act. He gave the audience five minutes to disperse '... otherwise action will be taken to disperse you'. Speaking in English, in a quiet voice without aid of any public address equipment, his words could not be heard by anyone beyond the front rows. An attempt by one of the meeting organisers to address the audience over the loudspeakers and explain what had been said was stopped by the police. In a tense and anxious few minutes, the trade union officials moved rapidly amongst the audience, explaining, and urging them to leave the Square fast. Within minutes the Square was empty — empty, that is, save for an army of police. The call to the General Strike had been made; but the confusion about when, how, for how long remained unresolved.

That evening, the Witwatersrand's white trade unionists were meeting under the auspices of the Witwatersrand local committee of the South African Trades and Labour Council. The secretary reported of contacts he had had with the AMWU before the strike, and of assistance he had given them in their attempt to place the miners case before the Chamber of Mines. Late in the evening a resolution was adopted, expressing the Council's concern at '... the violent intervention of the government to force the workers back to work at the point of a bayonet ... The Committee proposes that immediate, direct negotiations be opened between the AMWU and the Chamber of Mines'. It stated its support for the AMWU in their struggle. The secretary took the resolution to the offices of the Rand Daily Mail personally. It was never published.

On Wednesday too, the state sponsored Native Representative Council — the so-called 'advisory parliament' of the black majority — met in Johannesburg under the Chairmanship of the Under-Secretary for Native Affairs. Councillor Paul Mosaka moved a formal motion that 'The Chairman makes an official statement on the events leading up to the present disturbance on the gold mines; the number of mines and labourers affected; extent and nature of the disturbances, including the numbers of persons killed, injured or arrested; the steps which the government is taking to deal with the situation; and whether any negotiations have been entered into with the African Mine Workers' Union, and if not, why not'.

The Chairman said the position was uncertain, and he would like the matter deferred until a later meeting. Councillor RH Godlo then moved that the Council does not proceed with the agenda until it received a full reply to the questions. Africans, he said, had tolerated the government's actions for a very long time. 'We would regret to reach the stage where we lose our tolerance'. He was supported by Professor ZK Matthews and others.

The Chairman refused to accept the motion. It savoured, he said, of a threat to the government. By way of reply Councillor Moroka moved that the Council adjourn. 'Since its inception', his motion stated, 'the Council has brought to the notice of the government the reactionary nature of the Union's native policy of segregation ... It deprecates the government's post-war continuation of

a policy of fascism, which is the antithesis and negation of the letter and spirit of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Charter ... It calls on the government forthwith to abolish all discriminatory legislation'.

The motion was seconded by Councillor Paul Mosaka. 'How long must gold be rated above human values?' he asked. The motion to adjourn was put, and carried. The Natives Representative Council (NRC) — what a critic had once called the government's 'toy telephone' through which the black representatives spoke but received no reply from the other end — ended its session. It never reassembled.

From its small beginnings the miners strike had brought a chapter of South African history to a close. In 1937 General Hertzog had removed the last few surviving African voters from the common voters roll, and in its place substituted the NRC — a puppet show of representation without power. But puppet play was no longer possible in the new world of struggle and confrontation which the miners strike ushered in. From here on, black representation in the real seats of state power became the central issue of black South African politics. A new historical era opened in the country as the mine strike drew to its close.

That close — as is to be expected in times of defeat — was messy, undefined. By Thursday night, police harassment ensured that the Miners' Strike Bulletin could no longer be carried on; and on Friday, the miners' return to work became general and final.

On Friday morning, the favoured start time for the General Strike, it became obvious that this strike call, too, had failed in the confusion, and industrial workers from the townships began to bus into town 'to see what's going on at my factory'. Yet bus companies reported that passenger numbers were steeply down on normal days. The strike committee issued a new leaflet, calling the people once again to the Market Square on Sunday for a discussion of a general stoppage on Monday. But the conviction was running out, even amongst the strike organisers. On Saturday, the strike committee met in Orlando without its chairman and several others who were already under arrest; some of the committee members who had been vocal supporters of a general strike some days before had lost their courage, and called for the dissolution of the committee and the calling off of the fight. The committee dispersed in disorder without any decision. It never reassembled.

On Sunday, cold and windswept, perhaps as few as a hundred people assembled at the Market Square, again outnumbered by the police. Even many of the Union organisers and strike committee were absent. There was desultory chat; no one tried to formally open the meeting. In their hearts everyone knew that a signal had been given — and received. The Mines Strike was ended.

And yet still its aftermath rumbled on. On Monday, in the early hours before daylight, when the first queues were beginning to form at the bus and train depots in the black townships, there were still a few, diehard attempts to persuade people to stay at home for a general strike. But not even the diehards had their hearts in it. The people wavered, and then in response to the general mood, boarded the buses and drove off to work. That morning, Monday, police raided the offices of the Johannesburg District Communist Party and removed caseloads of documents. The District Secretary, Danie du Plessis, was arrested and taken away. Three days later, the entire Johannesburg District Committee of the Party was arrested; they included Dr YM Dadoo, who was brought from

a distant prison where he was serving a three months sentence for earlier Passive Resistance to the Group Areas Act — 'the Ghetto Act'. On Monday August 26th, the whole Party committee, together with all the men and women, Union organisers and volunteers, who had assisted the strike, were brought to court together in Johannesburg — 52 in all, of all races. They were formally charged with conspiracy to commit sedition — an offence which carried a capital penalty.

The case opened a week later, with the accused seated in the court's public gallery, as no dock could be found large enough to hold them all. The charge of conspiracy had been extended to include alternative charges under the Riotous Assemblies Act, and a charge of aiding and abetting a strike which was illegal in terms of War Measure 1425. After some weeks of evidence by police, Chamber of Mines Officials and compound managers, and the introduction of some hundreds of documents, there was a short adjournment while the prosecution offered the defence a 'plea-bargain', as it is known in America. If the accused would plead guilty to the charge under the War Measure, all other charges would be dropped. By that time the conspiracy allegation against the accused had been turned on its head. The state witnesses had, between them, provided evidence of a conspiracy — but one by State and Chamber of Mines against the miners — a conspiracy to deny the miners even the recommendations of the Lansdowne Commission, and to ignore, harass and persecute the Union in the hope that it would die; and finally, when the strike inevitably erupted, a conspiracy to use draconian force to drive the workers back to work regardless of their wishes or legal rights.

With some differences of opinion, the accused accepted legal advice to accept the deal. They had, in any case, no intention of denying that they had deliberately aided the miners in their strike — and would, given the same circumstances, do so again. All pleaded guilty — including Dadoo who had been in prison throughout the period, and Bram Fischer, a member of the Communist Party's District Committee, who had been on holiday in the Game Reserve throughout. Judgment was reserved till October 4th, when the Communist Party members and James Majoro, the AMWU secretary, were each fined £50 or four months hard labour — half suspended for a year on condition they do not participate in a strike during that period. The remainder got £15 or three months, two thirds similarly suspended.

But by that time the central stage had shifted. On September 21st, between the close of the case and the passing of judgment, the police had carried out simultaneous raids throughout the country on homes of political and union activists of all kinds, and on the offices of many organisations — including the Communist Party's Central Committee in Cape Town and all its District offices, on the newspaper *The Guardian*, the ex-servicemen's organisation the Springbok Legion, the Natal Indian Congress, and almost every black or racially mixed trade union in the country.

The strike certainly was ended; the AMWU had been weakened almost to the point of extinction. The clap of thunder had passed. And still the rolling reverberations of its passing rumbled across the country.

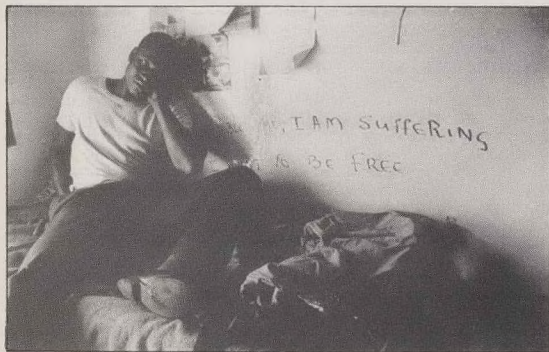
Summing Up

So much for the history of the strike, from its small beginnings in the Transvaal ANC to its end in court, after a reported but never accurately established five



Mine Compounds

Cramped conditions, isolated from families and the outside world.



deaths and 900 injuries and the end of the bravest ever attempt at miners' union building. What remained, apart from the debris and the bruises?

Even now, forty years on, it is difficult to sort out what was lost and what was won.

Certainly, the immediate demands of the miners were lost, and the strikers were driven back to work on precisely the same conditions over which they had come out. And their Union, built with such difficulty over several years was almost, if not completely, smashed and lost. The gains were less tangible, longer term, and to be found mainly in the consciousness and understanding of the miners themselves. They had gained — even in defeat — the knowledge that their unity could be established despite all the language, cultural and tribal divides; that that unity was the first condition for any successful challenge to the conditions of their lives, and to the combine of state and employers which fixed them. They had gained, too, the understanding that where state and bosses combine together against them, there could be no way forward without the miners too uniting with their natural allies outside — the black trade unions and the movement for political liberation of the whole country which lived beyond the compound walls. But above all, they had learnt the power to shake the social order which is in the hands of a working class once it is determined and ready to use it.

Outside the mines too, the trade union movement as a whole had suffered losses: the loss of prestige and confidence which followed its miscarried call for a general strike. But perhaps there too there were gains in experience and wisdom which would reveal themselves in the future — the wisdom that calls to strike are final weapons — not first; and that such calls succeed only where the masses have been fully prepared by solid organisational work, and their support has been argued for and won — not taken for granted. There was the experience too as a constant reminder to black organisation in South Africa that every mass action requires careful steps to preserve the organisational apparatus from certain state counter-attack, headed by the state's armed forces.

So far as the African National Congress was concerned, the strike and the building of the Union marked the real starting point of a new departure. Its decision to sponsor such a Union marked a decisive turn away from its traditional sources of support — the educated elite and professional classes — towards a new constituency in the black working class, which is the majority of the urban population. In thus becoming an active participant in the events of the strike and after, it had turned decisively from a past tradition of parliamentary-style pleading with government, and set out on a new path of mass mobilisation of people for extra-parliamentary mass action.

The dramatic decision of the Native Representative Council only serviced to underline that turn. It, too, drew a curtain over the politics of the past. It announced the ending of uneasy African participation in dummy institutions of government as the forum for expressing black dissent, and the beginning of the new period, in which mass unity of the black majority would move into frontal confrontation with the white minority state.

From all of this, there could be no going back. Nor has there been. The miners strike is long lost and ended; but the gains and new advances have been invested and harvested with profit by the whole national movement — unions and politicians alike.

The strike brought together in a working partnership the three main forces of that national movement — the ANC, the black trade unions and the Communist Party. It was a working partnership which had not been seen, or tried perhaps, since the great days of the ICU under Clements Kadalie before 1930. Such a partnership existed at the time of the ICU, smashed to pieces in bitter factional disputes and internecine war. The miners strike provided a new type of partnership, based on mutual respect for each others special ideology, and mutual trust. That new partnership has grown steadily, uninterrupted from that time on. It has become the stable foundation stone for the united alliance which today dominates the political scene in our country, and which heads the entire nationwide struggle for liberation forty years on.

The Communist Party and the ANC had entered the period of the strike from a long experience of legal operation. They had formerly been slightly harassed from time to time, but had been able to rely on 'legal rights' in their own defence. The open police-state atmosphere of the strike period marked the beginning of the end of all that. During the strike members of both organisations who had joined the corps of volunteers to support the strike, had been driven into improvising new, non-legal ways of political work — clandestine meetings, evading the police, disguise. Thus began the process of discarding illusions of a guaranteed 'legality' and of preparing members — though they did not then know it — for the period of total illegality which lay ahead of them.

The learning period was vital to their political survival only a few years later, when the Suppression of Communism Act drove the Communist Party underground and prepared the way for the outlawing also of the ANC. So too was the experience of how to behave in a mass political trial, which began with the Mines Strike case in Johannesburg and continued through a still unended series of trials — the 1956 Treason Trial, the Rivonia Trial, and many more recent trials of militants and leader of the UDF throughout the country. In the Mines Strike case, the accused pleaded guilty, so unwittingly opening the way for a following prosecution of the Party's Central Committee on a charge of Sedition. It was a mistake, made from inexperience, to allow political decisions to be overruled by legal advisers. It was a mistake the movement never repeated. That, too, was a gain.

All that, and much more, must be put down to the credit account of the miners strike. The accounting can go on and on. It had been a strike with small beginnings. But it had boomed out through the whole country, shaking much, changing much. Looked at from where our country stands today, it might seem but a distant clap of thunder which has passed into silence.

It often happens in the build-up to a major storm that the first single clap of thunder is followed only by a long silence. And then, long afterwards, the reverberations begin to echo back from distant places, rumbling on and on to mark a storm spreading outwards from its first origins, to cover the whole country.

So too in politics. Perhaps in the great rolling storm of the Passive Resistance Campaign of 1946 we were hearing the echoes of Gandhi's first act of defiance, his clap of thunder of the 1908 march across the forbidden provincial boundary. And in today's powerful and spreading consumer boycott of white-owned shops, do we perhaps hear the reverberating echoes of the Alexandra bus boycotts of 1943 and the potato boycott against the Bethal farm labour savagery

of the late 1950's?

Today — everywhere in South Africa — we are living through a wild and growing storm, which can no longer be ignored. All the old landmarks of white supremacy are being washed away, and the old groundwork of black subjection and silence is being overturned. It is a new age, heady with new people's confidence that every obstacle in their way can be climbed, and overcome. It is a new age, in which the trade unions of the black workers — miners and industrial workers alike — rise in strength under the united, uniting banners of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). It is a new age, in which the armed forces of the state no longer rampage at will against a stick-wielding but otherwise unarmed population; but one in which the armed units of Umkhonto we Sizwe join forces with those who resist heroically with only stones and petrol bombs. It is a new age, in which a firm alliance of the illegal ANC and Communist Party unites with the mainstream legal mass movement of the United Democratic Front to challenge the whole age-encrusted racial supremacy and contempt of the old ruling class — the Chamber of Mines no less than its state apparatus. Today we stand at the threshold of the final struggles to dismember the old order.

Everywhere about us there rumbles the storm which was first signalled by that clap of thunder of August 1946. It was a small beginning forty years ago. And its end is not yet in sight.

But it will be! With the coming of freedom and of people's victory in our lifetime!



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