Gilles Dauvé
White Riot, 1922
Class & Race in 20th century South Africa
2018

Retrieved on 26 April 2018 from http://troploin.fr/node/93
This is an enlarged version of an essay published in French on the *DDT 21* blog: https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=2015.

theanarchistlibrary.org

White Riot, 1922

Class & Race in 20th century South Africa

Gilles Dauvé

2018

Contents

Marx, *Notes on Friedrich List*, 1845: http://hiaw.org/defcon6/works/1845/03/list.html

Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins. On Nationalism, Ethnicity & Non-Western Societies*, University of Chicago Press, 2010: http://abahlali.org/files/Anderson%20-%20Marx%20at%20the%20Margins.pdf

Mihail Sebastian (Romanian writer, 1907-1945), *Journal 1935-1944: The Fascist Years*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. A quote from November 19, 1944. His best-known novel, *Two Thousand Years* (1934), is set on the backdrop of anti-Semitism in Romania.

> "It was the old story of the class struggle
> but with the colour bar as a complicating factor." (Norman Herd)
>
> "What remains vital for the historian, then, even in stressing the centrality of race to the dispute, is not to lose sight of that which became attached to race.
> Let us be old-fashioned and call it the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." (Jeremy Krikler)

On April 18, 1922, Lenin sent a "Top secret" phone message to Zinoviev, head of the Communist International, asking him to send "several correspondents from the Comintern to South Africa to collect the most detailed information and the fullest set of local literature, both legal and illegal, relating to the recently suppressed workers' uprising. This should be done as soon as possible, and not otherwise than with the maximum precautions because the British

[1] Language is never neutral. –– "No true account really of Black life can be held, can be contained, in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based. But they won't let you do that." (James Baldwin's interview, 1987: https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/02/24/james-baldwin-the-last-interviews/) –– Just to quote a few writers mentioned in this essay. Marx wrote the word "Negro". So did W.E.B. Du Bois (*Negro Slavery*, 1935). In 1910, as we will see in § 2, Tom Mann spoke of the "Kaffir" (a derogatory term for Blacks). They were using the languages of their times. "Native" was common in anarchist or communist speech a century ago, with no idea that it might be offensive. Later, when Edward Roux opposed "negrophobia" to "negrophilia", he meant those who promote racism against those who fight racism. For a long time in South Africa, Roux explained in 1963, "Bantu", "Native" and "African" referred to the same people: in the 1960s, "the only acceptable term becomes African. A means to supersede the opposition (played upon by the regime) between Zulu and Xhosa particularly." –– English capitalises proper names, noun or adjective: Lutheran ideas (as opposed to traditional ideas). Now, what is a proper name? Black and white designate more than colours. In this essay, we have chosen to capitalise Black, White and Coloured whenever we refer to human groups. In the same way as we would write "Kim's wearing a green dress", but "The Greens are having their convention".

are sure [to do everything] to prevent the slightest possibility of any contact between us and the insurgents who have not yet been shot or jailed."

A worker insurrection had indeed just happened in the Rand, resulting in over 200 deaths. This "Red revolt", however, had been a White miners' struggle to counter the Chamber of Mines' move to change the proportion of Blacks and Whites in the mines, in order to replace Whites with cheaper Blacks.[1] Furthermore, of the 40 Black casualties, most were killed by White strikers. So, what were the insurgents targeting? the bosses? the Blacks? both? When a struggle is explicitly fought in the name of class *and* race, what is left of the meaning of both "class" and "race"?

1) Imperialist competition

The southern tip of Africa was the battleground of two settler colonisations, a Dutch one against an English/British one, competing to be in the best position to exploit the colonised African population. The Blacks suffered two rival dominations: from the 16th century onwards, by the *burgers*, who originated in the Netherlands, usually farmers (*boer* in Dutch); and from the 19th century, by mostly British settlers, much better integrated in modern capitalism. In the late 19th century, the discovery of gold and diamonds shifted the centre of economic and political gravity in South Africa from a traditional rural world to an industrial urban society. The conflict between Boer settlers and imperial Britain was the last round in a series of Dutch-British wars, most of them fought in the 17th century, except that this time Britain was a "superpower" that ruled most of the world. After two wars, first in 1880-1881 and then in 1899-1902 (when the British counter-guerrilla relocated civilians to camps where many internees died), the Boers' defeat led in 1910 to the Union of South Africa as a "dominion" of the British Empire,

Also Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, Norton, 2003. Mass massacre of civilians by the air force is a constant of colonial or neocolonial powers. In the 1910s and 1920s, it was common practice by Italy in Libya, by France and Spain in Morocco, by Britain in Egypt, the North-West Frontier (now part of Pakistan), Somaliland, Iraq… Today's drones have stepped up the killing techniques.

ANC documents, 1943 to 2001: https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/index.htm

For a sunny afternoon in Jo'burg: Kathy Munro, *Take a drive & see the sites associated with the 1922 Rand revolt*, 2016: http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/take-drive-and-see-sites-associated-1922-rand-revolt

Statistics South Africa, *Employment, Unemployment, Skills & Economic Growth (1994-2014)*: https://www.statssa.gov.za/presentation/Stats%20SA%20presentation%20on%20skills%20and%20unemployment_16%20S

Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, 1983-1996: https://libcom.org/files/immanuel-wallerstein-historical-capitalism.pdf

Amadeo Bordiga, *Factors of race & nation in Marxist theory*, 1953: https://libcom.org/library/factors-race-nation-marxist-theory-amadeo-bordiga

David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race & the Making of the American Working Class*, Verso, 1991-2007. As historically stimulating as conceptually and politically inadequate. https://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/roediger-the-wages-of-whiteness-race-and-the-making-of-the-american-working-class.pdf

Noel Ignatin, Ted Allen, *White Blindspot*, 1967 and 1976: https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/whiteblindspot.pdf

The "blind spot" concept goes back to W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1963): Noel Ignatiev, *"The American blindspot": Reconstruction according to Eric Foner & W.E.B. Dubois*, 1993: https://libcom.org/files/The%20American%20blindspot,%20Reconstruction.pdf

Baruch Hirson, *The General Strike of 1922*. By a Trotskyist South African activist and historian, critical of the CP, and of ANC's «Stalinist methods». https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/supplem/hirson/1922.html

Keith Breckenridge, *Fighting for a White South Africa: White Working Class Racism & the 1922 Rand Revolt*, 2007: https://wiser.wits.ac.za/sites/default/files/Breckenridge - 2007 - Fighting for a White South Africa White working-c.pdf

John Philips, *The South African Wobblies: The Origins of Industrial Unions in South Africa*, 1978: https://libcom.org/history/south-african-wobblies-origins-industrial-unions-south-africa-john-philips

Adam Tolcher, *How does the 1922 Rand Rebellion Reveal the Relative Importance of Race & Class in South Africa?*, 2011: https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=rand-rebellion-race-and-class.pdf&site=15

Helen Bradford, *Class Contradictions & Class Alliances: The Social Nature of the ICU Leadership 1924-29*, 1983: http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/8443/ISS-50.pdf?sequence=1

Wessel Visser, *The South African Labour Movement's Responses to Declarations of Martial Law, 1913-1922*, 2003: http://scientiamilitaria.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/157/203

Philip Foner, *The IWW & the Black Worker*, 1970: https://libcom.org/files/Foner_PS_-_The_IWW_and_the_Black_Worker.pdf

Peter Alexander, *Coal, Control & Class Experience in South Africa's Rand Revolt of 1922*, 1997: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.512.4227&rep=rep1&type=pdf

David Walsh, *Easington's Rebel Army Leader*, 2012. Short biography of Percy Fisher. http://republic-of-teesside.blogspot.fr/2012/02/percy-fisher-easingtons-rebel-army.html

Jonathan Clancey, "Gas, chemicals, bombs: Britain has used them all before in Iraq", *The Guardian*, April 19, 2003. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/19/iraq.arts

comprising Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange (the latter, two ex-Dutch republics annexed in 1902).

The 1910 Act of Union meant the prevalence of "British" mining and commercial interests over the agricultural community of those who called themselves *Afrikaners* and were far less adapted to managing an industrial and financial economy. In other words, the predominance of the global over the local.

As a reaction, the ex-Boers maintained an entrenched conservatism, with religious overtones, ingrained racism and strong dislike of "English" rule, which was perceived as a foreign constraint over "their people". This estrangement gave birth to a particular Afrikaner nationalism. Though the Union of South Africa functioned as an independent country, it was part of a constitutional monarchy under the formal authority of the British Crown. In the 20th century, many a South African politician made a career out of exploiting this resentment, and turned it into a call for a truly sovereign republic. It is significant that the word *boer*, as was named the free citizen of the ex-Boer republics, remained in common usage long after both States had left the historical stage, as if the inhabitants of these regions kept on defining themselves by what they used to be, or regarded themselves as: the pioneers of a rural, patriarchal, protected, civilised White enclave, amidst an ever-savage Black world of primitive darkness, subdued but full of destructive power.

Throughout the last century, a lot of South African politics boils down to the divide between "British" and "Afrikaners", with internecine feuds within the ruling elites, arrangements and compromises until the "utopian" racist experience of apartheid, after which the bourgeois were forced to realise where their interests converged, and an end was put to apartheid in 1991 (more on that in § 18 and 19).

As in the rest of the world, the struggle between workers and bosses about the profits/wages distribution implied a confrontation about who would be employed and in what job, but because of the

specifics of that country, this second issue implied the White/Black difference – i.e. race discrimination.

One major flashpoint of conflict was the 250-km-long Witwatersrand area ("white waters' ridge" in Dutch, shortened to Rand), in the Transvaal state, one of the world's richest goldfields, east and west of Johannesburg. The gold rush made a city spring out of the desert, with 3.000 inhabitants in 1886, 100.000 ten years later, and 250.000 in 1914. Before World War I, 40% of world gold production came from the Rand, and in the 1930s one third of the South African public budget depended on that region. Nearly all places named in this essay are located in the eastern part of the Rand. The West had less population, less mines, was less working-class, and played a minor role in the events.

2) Labour: White & "Native"

Wage-labour is the buying by a bourgeois of labour power from a proletarian deprived of any other means of existence, and therefore "free" to choose between selling it or starving. For what it's worth, such freedom, however, is often utterly inaccessible for the proletarian: in the majority of cases, the labour/capital exchange is far from being free.

Even leaving aside penal labour (not just Chinese-style labour camps, also the US convict lease system, which forces wage-labour upon inmates), there is no free covenant in bond or indentured labour, in peonage, in the hiring or firing of migrant (documented or undocumented) workers, in the modern forms of slavery disguised as wage-labour, or simply in a lot of casualised precarious jobs. In the 17th century, half of the White immigrants who came as workers or servants to what is now the United States were bonded to their employers by contract. Later, the British Empire transported about 2 millions of its Asian subjects (Indians, mostly) to work in its various overseas possessions as overexploited labour

Jeremy Krikler, *White Rising. The 1922 Insurrection & Racial Killing in South Africa*, Manchester University Press, 2005. Essential reading. If you only have time for one book, this is it.

Norman Herd, *1922. The Revolt on the Rand*, Blue Crane Books, Johannesburg, 1966. By an ex-trade-union official turned mainstream journalist. Descriptive in an anecdotal way.

Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope. A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1966. Only chapter XIV deals with the Rand revolt, but the book spans more than a century of the race question. A CP cadre until 1936, Roux hardly mentions the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist currents which played an important part in the first decades of the 20th century, including in the International Socialist League.

Lucien van der Valt, *Between racial capitalism and revolutionary socialism: Revolutionary syndicalism, the national question and South African socialism, 1910-1928*, 2001: http://www.struggle.ws/africa/safrica/history/rev_syn_nat.html

– *Anarchism & Syndicalism, South Africa*, 2009: https://lucienvanderwalt.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/van_der_walt_-_anarchism_and_syndicalism__southern_africa.pdf Enlightening essays.

Stephen Ellis, Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid. The ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile*, Indiana University Press, 1992. Ellis was a White journalist, and Sechaba a Black ANC (where he held "sensitive positions" in the underground) and CP member. Neither hostile nor apologetic.

Irina Filatova, *Communism in South Africa*, posted on-line in 2017. A short but documented synthesis. Useful bibliography. http://africanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-82

Mia Roth, *The Communist Party in South Africa. Racism, Eurocentricity & Moscow, 1921-1950*, Partridge, 2016. Informative, yet "heavily biased" (Irina Filatova), so not 100% full proof.

neither French, nor English, nor German, it is capital." But seventeen years later, he wrote that in the United States "The Irishman sees in the Negro a dangerous competitor". The ultimate proletarian interest is multi-racial solidarity: the immediate interest is for a particular proletarian group to care about its vested interest.

Proletarian disunity is no planned policy on the part of crafty bosses manipulating rival social or ethnic groups, it results from labour competing with itself for jobs and better conditions.

The relevant question is how this inevitable division process could be overcome. As long as proletarians fight for work, especially in today's context of high unemployment, they fight for a place within capitalism, against the boss, but it can also be against competing proletarians. Though there are numerous examples of workplace or neighbourhood conflicts where different – and sometimes previously rival – groups act together, the proletarians remain divided as long as they fight primarily as labour.

Our time is not the first deeply fractured and contentious period, but it forces us to live in an in-between situation. The old worker movement is on the wane, and so far nothing emerges from it all, with no revolution in the offing. Disenchantment is setting in and, as "it's difficult to live in refusals" (Mihail Sebastian), class blindness is inevitable. It is tempting to replace (for post-Marxists) or to complete (for those who hold on to Marx) class by an addition of minorities, small or large, each of which supposedly could provide "a struggle front" based on its specific domination.

The Rand "white" riot was over on March 13, 1922. But we're not finished with classes… nor with "race".

G.D.

Bibliography

devoid of rights. In the capitalist past, these situations were the norm rather than the exception, they still prevail in many parts on the world, and indeed in some economic sectors of "modern" countries. True, the owner of capital and the owner of labour power never meet on equal terms. But in these cases, a specific power relationship aggravates an already asymmetrical relation.

In South Africa, one of the main factors of inequality was the *colour bar* which gave White workers a de facto monopoly over skilled jobs. This was complemented by the *pass*, an internal passport. The country was divided between "native" and white parts, and every adult African had to carry a pass when outside an African area. Passes doubled as employment booklets where the (White) employer would mention how long the bearer had been employed. Failure to show one's pass was tantamount to "vagrancy", and often led to arrest, jail or deportation to a restricted "native" zone. The combination of the colour bar and the pass denied Africans the right to live and look for work where they wished.

Passes were more than a blatant form of racism that impinged on Africans' and Coloureds' rights: they helped to control workers' mobility and to allocate migrant labour where it was most convenient for capital. The pass system had a long history in South Africa and was codified by apartheid in 1948. It was repeatedly resisted and led to protest, repression and bloodshed, and was only repealed in 1986.

Therefore, in as much as there is such a thing as a free labour market, in South Africa it only existed for the Whites.

Dutch and British colonialism turned a sizeable part of the African population into proletarians by dispossessing them of their means of livelihood, in order to force them to work for the Whites on the land, in domestic service and in industry. When that was not enough, the Africans were subjected to such heavy fiscal pressure that they had to work to get money to pay their taxes. After the abolition by Britain of the slave trade in 1807 increased the cost of slaves, it started being more profitable to exploit the local Blacks,

and for instance the Cape colony tried to make it compulsory for the Hottentots (a derogatory Dutch name for the Khoikhoi people) to toil for White farmers. By the end of the century, in order to get the best exploitable manpower, the bourgeois even thought about importing supposedly more reliable Italians. The option was discarded, and instead the land divided into lots, each of them run by a village council tasked with collecting a tax from any native who failed to work for a white employer 3 months out of 12. Besides, the Whites appropriated the best lands, and obliged the landless Blacks to work for them. This went on until the early decades of the 20th century: in the Transkei region in 1929, "the people have just a little land per family, and are taxed just so much, that they can only subsist by sending their men to the mines." (Edward Roux). South Africa was developing its own special way to capitalist modernity.

Moreover, the lack of skilled and unskilled labour power resulted in the extension of "non-free" labour to other groups. Particularly to Indians, often indentured labour in the sugar plantations as early as the 1860s. Some of them became servants, railway workers and small farmers, then shopkeepers started emigrating from India, and eventually the Indian population overgrew its economic usefulness and threatened the "ethnic" balance that was the basis of South African colonialism. In 1895, there were 400.000 Blacks and 80.000 Indians (both groups without a vote) in Natal, as compared with 40.000 Whites. To force the Indians out of the country, they were heavily taxed (up to 6 months' wages) and in Transvaal forbidden to buy land. In 1906, 50.000 Chinese were brought to the Rand, locked up in compounds, single-sex dormitory-hostels, with 5-year contracts. The Chinese is not as docile as he seems: those workers were less profitable than predicted, some resorted to petty crime, the experience was deemed a semi-failure and many of them were repatriated.

So, by and large, it was the Black population that provided the best available employment pool for the least skilled jobs, but it did not prove as pliable as expected. A few examples will suffice here.

will not be overcome by the common efforts of White and Black proletarians, but by the White proletarian *struggling against* his own Whiteness (providing he is able and willing to do so, which seems difficult), and by the Black proletarian *affirming* a colour identity (which we are repeatedly told is a social construct imposed upon him by centuries of capitalist history). At the end of the day, whether or not these theorists continue to talk about classes, class is demoted (perhaps temporarily) to a minor role, and race promoted to a main terrain of struggle.[11]

One feels like asking: Is capitalism first and foremost… capitalist, or is it *White*? Is the phrase "wages of Whiteness" to be taken literally? Is a White worker paid a wage because he is White, or because he brings profit to the company he works for? True, he often gets the job because he is White (or a better job than if he was Black): but is that what defines capitalism? Hence, what are we supposed to fight against?

It bears repeating that "class analysis" stands up to the test of time. At the very least, it is validated by South African history, which shows the relevance of the race (let's use the word for the moment) factor, but it also explains why race is not a prime mover: neither in the 1920s, nor later, nor in the demise of apartheid. Whenever class interests decisively conflicted with race determinants, class proved the constant, and race a variable.

Skin colour is only one possible divisive cause among many, for instance man/woman discrimination, place of birth, nationality, religion… The fact is, the exploited and oppressed have more often experienced disunion than solidarity, and fought between themselves as much as fought together. In 1845, Marx insisted that "The nationality of the worker is neither French, nor English, nor German, it is *labour*, *free slavery*, *self-huckstering*. His government is

[11] Noel Ignatiev (then writing under the name Ignatin) was one of the forerunners of this theory. He wrote in 1967: "The greatest ideological barrier to the achievement of working class consciousness, solidarity and class action, is now, and has been historically White chauvinism."

not maintain the privileged status of its own workers, whose dormant fighting spirit might hopefully be revived.

"Imperialism" as a neo-Leninist concept has gone out of fashion, but a new theory has emerged, as if a third world now existed *within* the old industrial metropolises: a large portion of the population, discriminated against because of skin colour or alleged religion, is presented as a new historical subject beside or in place of "national" proletarians, made passive by the advantages given by White colour or native birth rights.

The evolution from past Third Worldism to current race discourse means a lot more than just replacing a possible revolutionary group by another. Anti-imperialism was premised on the difference between profits (in Brussels, say) and super-profits (in a Katanga mine), and the idea of a value transfer from the periphery to the centre: the Belgian proletarian could be exploited *less* because the Congolese proletarian was being *over*-exploited. However debatable it was, this thesis referred to value production, accumulation, investment profitability, labour as a commodity, etc., in other words capitalism as a mode of production. The new theorising comes with a complete shift in focus. The emphasis is no longer on exploitation, but on domination: society is not made of coexisting conflicting classes, but of subordinate groups and dominant groups, a major opposition being between colour and "Whiteness".

The Whiteness concept boils down to the notion that a White proletarian is more of a White person than he is a proletarian (equally, a Black proletarian is more of a Black person than a proletarian). This defines the proletarian by his function not in production relationships, but in domination (race) relationships. The White proletarian is not determined by his being exploited by a bourgeois (and opposing this exploitation), but at least as much – and perhaps more – by the predominance he enjoys because of his skin colour. (Equally, the Black proletarian is described as determined above all by his inferior status to White people, be they work colleague or boss). As a consequence, the theory goes, racism

In 1919, the South African Native National Congress, a sort of forerunner of the African National Congress, strove for better wages and organised a boycott of company stores where goods cost more than in ordinary shops. Passes were burnt in public (a frequent means of collective African resistance up to apartheid times). Despite intense involvement, mass woman participation and dozens of thousands of strikers, the movement was defeated. The following year, a strike by 40.000 Black miners was broken for lack of coordination, and because it was handicapped by White scabs: appeals to solidarity from the International Socialist League fell on deaf ears (on the ISL, see § 5). White land-grabbing was met with widespread periodic opposition, which in 1899-1902 escalated into an African peasants' war. Sometimes, as in 1921, revolt spoke a religious messianic language inspired by the Old Testament. Led by a neo-prophet, the Blacks regarded themselves as the Hebrews fighting for their land: their 1921 rising ended in a massacre. A year later, in Botswana, a rebellion against a tax on dogs was repressed by mass shootings and air bombings: 100 deaths. In short, a succession of defeats followed by fresh endeavours to resist and organise.

A crucial feature of those struggles was that they ran on parallel lines with contemporary White struggles but without links between them. Whites and Blacks did not share a working-class neighbourhood: whereas most Black miners were housed in compounds, White miners lived a family life in a different part of town.

And when they did meet in the workplace, they belonged to separate worlds. In 1922, in the Rand gold mines, 20.000 Whites supervised and controlled 180.000 non-European miners. Work was hard for all: White miners suffered from silicosis, and accidents took a heavy toll among the Blacks (dozens of thousands of fatalities in the pre-1914 years, yet Black lives were so expendable that no exact figures were compiled). The organisation of work was highly specialised and the labour force was run like an army, so much so that a mine inspector once compared White workers to NCOs.

The master/servant model was valid on the surface as well as underground: it was not uncommon for White workers to employ Blacks as home helps. Work hierarchy was racial.[2] Moreover, not only did the White miner act as a foreman, but his pay was linked to his (Black) team's performance, so it was his interest to pressurise them, and he did not hesitate to perpetrate violence against his subordinates. Only much later, in the 1960s, would the Blacks benefit from monetary incentives.

When visiting South Africa in 1910, the English trade-union leader Tom Mann observed that "the actual mining is done by the native, supervised by White man. Because the payment given to Kaffirs is so trifling, they are plentifully used as labourers and helpers to the White man [who receives his wages] at the expense of the native Kaffir."[3]

Like in most industrial countries at the time, South African unionism was structured on a *craft* basis, which excluded Blacks from (White) unions since few Africans practised a skilled trade. The skill divide was a racial one. Paradoxically, when technical progress gnawed at training and qualifications, instead of automatically equalising the respective conditions of White and Black workers, it made it more imperative for Whites to maintain their occupational superiority, so race inequality became even more of an issue. In the early 1920s, 21.500 Rand White workers received a total of £ 16 million and 180.000 Blacks £ 6 million.

However, in the capital/labour confrontation, nothing can ever be taken for granted, and any competitive advantage gained by one social group at the expense of another can be jeopardised by a shift in power relationships - as did happen.

[2] In the 20th century, in most United States auto plants, Blacks were given the dirtiest, most arduous and most dangerous tasks, under the supervision of White native-born Americans, or German, British and northern Europe immigrants. There as well, the skilled/unskilled differentiating factor was ethnic or racial.

[3] On "Kaffir", see note 1.

22) Colour or class blind? The class blindspot

Nearly one hundred years after the Rand "White riot", it would be naïve to believe that history has discarded what Bordiga in 1953 called "the factors of race and nation". Until recently, "race" discourse was outmoded, non-scientific, ostracized in public and academic speech, and only avowed racists would dare to use it. Now it appears to be the other way round: in some quarters, *not* speaking of "race" means you are aiding and abetting racism.

It is vital to restore agency to categories (ex-colonial subjects for instance) belittled or ignored by hitherto mainstream *white*washed history. The hitch is that this necessary reinterpretation has given birth to a misleading world-view that translates into objectionable politics. Class is de-emphasised, the proletarian/bourgeois contradiction ceases to be fundamental and is replaced by mutually dependent forms of oppression. Revolutionary change, we are told, will no longer result from proletarians acting in common, but from the intersection of **subjugated groups**, both rivals and allies, **each addressing its specific issue and yet at the same time interweaving with the others to get rid of all forms of domination**.

In a way, this is a return to Third Worldism. In the heyday of anti-colonialism, from the 1940s to the 1970s, anti-imperialist theory analysed capitalism as a "centre and periphery" system: like an octopus, its big (largely parasitic) North American and West-European body depended on its tentacles exploiting the rest of the world. Colonial or neo-colonial countries provided the central metropolises with cheap raw materials, foodstuffs and labour that brought in super- profits. This allowed the old industrial countries to grant higher wages, improved living conditions and welfare to the Western workers, causing an overall softening of a working class more and more "integrated" into capitalism. If, however, the octopus's tentacles were cut off by African and Asian national liberation movements and ex-colonies achieving real independence (that is, not becoming puppet States), the core of the system could

do away with former divisions, but rebuilds them according to its changing needs.

Wage-labour is a great equalizer (two similarly qualified workers are potentially interchangeable), and a great divider (interchangeability is governed by push/pull factors and rarely applied in full). In South Africa, White working class minorities were not totally mistaken when they regarded racial segregation and a "White" government "as their protector against exploitation by their employers on one hand and competition from non-European labour on the other" (Edward Roux). But what had been true at the beginning of the 20th century no longer prevailed to the same extent in 1922, and much less so fifty years later.

Even the "freest" labour mobility (switching professions, or moving from one country to another) does not abolish differences caused by skin colour. Two conflicting tendencies coexist: national and/or racial segregation (State frontiers and/or colour barriers) on the one hand, the bourgeois freedom to buy the cheapest labour on the other. Business interests are often quite favourable to immigration: they want border control whenever they need protective custom tariffs, but they want frontiers to open up to cheap migrant (even undocumented) labour.

The bourgeois could not live without a State which controls a community of classes on a certain territory, but he also wishes to be a "citizen of the world" (*kosmopolites*) who crosses continents to find the lowest production costs and the most beneficial taxation. On the contrary, since proletarian internationalism is usually difficult to put into practice, the worker often resorts to the (limited) protection given by a common origin, status, group solidarity or an identity card. And today, politically, in the European Union as in the United States, part of the ruling class supports immigration which lowers the cost of labour, while another part makes use of "ethnic" identity tensions for electoral purposes.

3) Class struggle, White & Black

No strict line could be drawn between the advantages the South African White working class acquired because of the mere fact of being White, and those it had conquered by its own militancy: class and race factors blended to produce undeniable vested interests and, in the early 20th century, White workers never stopped fighting for themselves… bearing in mind this *self* was White.

In 1907, work intensification (a White miner was now required to supervise three drilling machines – manned by his Black team - instead of two), a decrease in piece-rate pay and an increased proportion of Black labour caused a large strike. The bosses wanted to break the worker organisation, they refused to negotiate, the strike failed, yet White unionisation moved forward while management continued to ignore workers' grievances.

In 1913, a decision to force underground mechanics to do an extra 3 hours on Saturday afternoon triggered a huge work stoppage. Grass-roots organisation went beyond the union structure and pressed for a general strike. The management kept the mines in production by hiring (mostly Black) scabs. Widespread unrest developed, some strikers called for civil war and the premises of the *Star* newspaper – a staunch supporter of business interests – were burnt down. On July 5, White demonstrators were fired upon and 20 killed. Realising its inability to control "the mob", the government agreed to a "neither victory nor defeat" compromise: the strikers dismissed were reinstated. A little while later, however, Black miners who laid down tools were heavily repressed, some of them being given 6-month prison sentences.

The State had learnt its lesson. In January 1914, railway workers came out on strike with miners' support: rallying (mainly Afrikaner) small rural property against organised labour, the government called in 70.000 men from the *burger* commandos (the same scenario was re-enacted in 1922). The strike was nipped in the bud, miners jailed and "ringleaders" deported to Europe.

In those three events – 1907, 1913 and 1914 – the race factor was present but played no decisive part.

After 1914, the lack of manpower due to many White miners being called up as soldiers gave labour an advantage over management: the workers were granted two-week paid vacations, a war bonus, the recognition of the South African Industrial Federation, and a wage rise (pared down by cost of living increases, though). Yet at the same time, White prerogatives were being lessened by the hiring of more Blacks. In 1917, because the proportion of Black miners in semi-skilled jobs was increasing, the South African Miners' Union demanded such positions be reserved for Whites. The following year, a Status Quo Agreement, approved by a government who wished to avoid social strife in war times, preserved the situation as it stood: those semi-skilled Blacks that were employed would not be fired, but no more would be hired. Racial lines were frozen, yet this was going to prove no more than a reprieve.

For their part, Black workers were not stunned into mute passivity. Servitude did not entail servility. Born as a Black dockers' union, the Industrial & Commercial Union (ICU) set itself the uphill task in 1919 of organising the whole of non-European labour, and it was to act as an equivalent of a mass political movement for the Blacks, comparable in some ways to the African National Congress later (more on the ICU and the ANC in § 16).

In December 1919, 400 Black dockers in Capetown (where most port workers were Black) went on strike for better wages, and against the export of foodstuffs while prices were going up in local shops. Unsupported by White labour, the movement decayed after a few weeks. At the same time, in Kimberley, White scabbing smashed a Black drivers' strike. 40.000 Black miners stopped work in February, a mass revolt again broken by White scabbing, police cordoning off every compound and shooting Africans (8 were reported dead). The following October, the police fired on strikers at Port Elisabeth, killing 21 people. Throughout the country, people of colour stopped work and created unions, some short-lived, oth-

Unite & Fight for a White South Africa" slogan, declared in 1928 that "Every White man in South Africa is an aristocrat and people who are rulers and governors cannot be proletarians."

Demagogic Roos was not the only one to use the word "aristocrats" for the best paid and best treated part of the working class. "Labour aristocracy" is a misnomer: it suggests that such divisions as between the upper and lower proletarian strata reflect the resurgence of pre-capitalist realities. In reality, traditional societies were based on birth and origin distinctions that were deemed "natural" in a world where no human being was equivalent to another.

The racial "privilege" enjoyed by South African Whites had little to do with the condition of the "privileged-by-birth" groups in *Ancien Régime* France or in Jane Austen's England. In pre-1789 French society, there was an unbridgeable gap between a commoner and a member of the nobility: each of them belonged to a distinct community, with its specific rights and obligations. Ennoblement was rare, and the impoverished noble did not become a commoner. In South Africa, on the contrary, a Black miner did not "turn White", but he could be given a "White's" job. In spite of White supremacy, for capitalism to function, Black and White labour had to be interchangeable. The interchange rarely took place in 1922, but it had to be *possible* when required by profitability. The crux of the conflict was precisely how equivalent a Black worker was to a White one, and how far the bosses could serve their best interests by lessening White supremacy. Class determination never abolished colour determination, but it had priority over it.

The aristocrat lived a world apart from the commoner: the White miner worked beside a Black miner. Capitalist society creates and recreates inequalities, according to existing differences due to sex, skin colour, nationality, religion… and remodels them: some are perpetuated, others scaled down, and it is the contemporary state of things that determines whether a discriminating factor is brought to the fore, curtailed or phased out. Capitalism does not

memory (and a White memory[10]), 1922 has now been absorbed into a cultural/historical world heritage. *Patrimonialisation*, as it is sometimes called, processes and tames the past, insurrections included. "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation", Debord wrote in the second sentence of *The Society of the Spectacle*. Not quite everything, but a lot, even a rising that brought a country to the brink of civil war:

"If you are ever looking for something to do on a Saturday afternoon, why not take a drive and recreate a few of the scenes from this turbulent time [and follow the tour] published in a wonderful booklet, *Some Historic Drives & Walks of Johannesburg*" (Kathy Munro, August 8, 2016).

The drive meanders from Barnes Road (where strikers shot a shopkeeper they believed had assisted the police), to Fordsburg (where the last fighters died) via Collescoe school (HQ of the Knopkierie commando: "note bullet holes in the wall").

To the best of our knowledge, the Paris tourist office does not suggest a guided tour of the various places where the 1871 Communards fought and were massacred. It appears South Africa has a special need to digest its past. As the driver travels back in time and has a fleeting thought for racial segregation, she or he probably wonders how such a monstrosity could have persisted for so long. In fact, neither Black/White inequality nor its systematisation were more "abnormal" than other past and present exploitation systems. At the time, they were *necessary* to a "modern" mining industry and to a "patriarchal" Boer rural economy, as well as to the political balance of the country.

Tielman Roos, a right-wing politician who used to curry support from White voters, and loved quoting the "Workers of the World,

[10] White indeed. The race factor went so deep that it was taken for granted to the point of being ignored, and not just at the time. In *2.000 Casualties*, a book on 1922 published in 1961 by the Trade Union Council, "The account almost entirely avoids the issue of the colour bar in outlining the causes of the strike." (Norman Herd, no enemy of the unions: see bibliography)

ers more successful, yet very few in the mining industry. Their initiatives, however, remained separate from those of White labour, which was getting organised in established unions, and had also already started to shake the unions' institutional framework: 1921 was a wildcatting year.

4) White worker movement: reformism

White South Africa loved revelling in the myth of its wide open spaces (stolen from the Blacks), where (as in the US Western "Big Country") small farmers lived a supposedly simple independent life, each family on its own piece of land. In fact, many impoverished Afrikaners were driven out of the countryside and had to move from farming to mining jobs. On the other hand, so-called "English" or Anglophone workers had diverse backgrounds: some came from various parts of the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Cornwall after the closure of the tin mines), others from the Baltic countries, and some were Jews escaping the pogroms of Eastern Europe. The first decades of the 20th century were a time of formation of a South African working class where Afrikaner and "English" origins tended to merge. A labour class gradually got unified as a White social group (likewise, over the 20th century, as we shall see in § 19, the South African bourgeoisie finally overcame the Afrikaner/English divide). South African White unionism was predominantly craft unionism, and it did the same as craft unions everywhere: it tried to preserve the condition of skilled labour by maintaining the scarcity of their particular kind of skill. Restricting the supply of indispensable (skilled) labour available to the employer resulted in higher wages for those employed: in this case the colour bar prevented non-Europeans from competing with Whites.

Politically, what set the tone in South Africa labour was a brand of socialism both similar to and different from its European correspondents. Like most parties belonging to the Second Interna-

tional, the Labour Party (founded in 1910) shared the colonial paternalistic view that people of colour were yet incapable of self-government and therefore needed to be guided by Whites on the road to progress and possibly – one very remote day – to socialism.

"The Labour Party envisaged a rapid growth of the White population, the eventual elimination of the Coloured as a significant economic class, and the seclusion of the Natives in their own reserves, where they would be given education facilities and training in agriculture." (Edward Roux)

The South African situation produced a party that acted as the representative and supporter of a White labouring minority that existed alongside a large Black majority. Consequently, that socialist variant completed the usual social-democrat programme (socialisation of the means of production and democratisation of the State) with a persistent defence of White supremacy and of the legal and factual measures that implemented it: land and pass laws, taxation without representation, police bullying, colour bars, opposition to Asian immigration, etc. The soft left was hard on Blacks.

Since neither Blacks nor Indians were truly welcome in a party that was not immune from racist remarks, it is no surprise that very few of them felt like joining it. Such a "White-first" line was not unique. Australia, the first country in the world with a socialist government in 1910, had a "White labour" policy for decades, but most of its population were and still are White. South African labourism was slow to get started, with only 4 MPs in 1910 out of a total of 121. It was to prosper, however, under the authority of a man who soon became its leader, Colonel Frederic Creswell, a mining engineer and then manager of a mine where nearly all manpower was White. Famous for his opposition to hiring Chinese in the mining industry, Creswell had built a reputation as "the champion of the White labourer". In sum, an ex-boss was at the head of a worker party. Social pacifism and racism raised the status of the Labour Party which fared better in the 1920 elections and obtained 21 MPs (out of 134).

of the mine, the factory, the railway line or the harbour dock, but because it masters what sets in motion the mine, the factory, the railway or the dock: the production relationship without which this means of production remains idle. The State's armed forces – the bourgeoisie's last defence against disorder and revolution – is but a consequence of bourgeois command over means of production which are more than material machinery and equipment.

What is the bourgeois monopoly over the means of production? The ability to put into action tools, machines, engines, human beings too, i.e. to put proletarians to work, and it is this ability which gives the power to master society as a whole. So, taking hold of the mine, the factory, land, the office, etc., and not doing away with the *capitalist social relation*, is doomed to failure. Because of this social relation, the mine does not just extract coal: this coal is extracted by a wage-labourer, then sold for profit, according to norms that impose systematic working time measurement, cost-effectiveness, production time minimizing, normalisation, etc. Only by initiating a new way of life and of production will capitalist production relationships be overthrown. Otherwise insurrection is merely a disruptive temporary force while the bourgeois ride out the storm.[9]

21) One hundred years later

Nearly a century has gone by: South Africa is no longer "White". After having fuelled for a long time the martyrology of a workers'

[9] Bruno Astarian, *Crisis activity & communisation*, 2010: http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/english/crisis-activity-and-communisation ; G. Dauvé, *An A to Z of communisation*, 2015: https://troploin.fr/node/87 - Both texts available in book form: *Everything Must Go! The Abolition of Value*, Little Black Cart, 2015. Also in PDF form: https://libcom.org/library/everything-must-go-abolition-value-bruno-astarian-gilles-dauv%C3%A9 ; AND G. Dauvé, *From Crisis to Communisation*, Chapter 6, "Creative insurrection", to be published by PM Press in 2018.

than Indians/Asians and almost 5 times more than Blacks. Wealth no longer is a White monopoly, but most Blacks are still poor.

20) The mine for the miners?

"Socialism can only be brought about by all the workers coming together on the industrial field to take the machinery of production into their own hands and working it for the good of all." (*The International*, organ of the International Socialist League, 1916).

This is a fair summary of the ultimate goal of the 1922 insurgents, if a successful rising had opened the road to revolution. Likewise, a *Manifesto for the abolition of capitalism* that was circulated at the time defended "the establishment of the control of industry by the worker, for the worker".

The 1922 rising began with a large-scale work stoppage. Strikers interrupted the wage labour/capital interrelationship – temporarily, because everybody knows neither workers nor boss can live in limbo, so this discontinued relation sooner or later has to be resumed… unless the proletarians initiate an altogether different society, which was not the case in the Rand, 1922. The insurgents went for the heart of the State's military power (police stations, barracks, arms depots) and the core of bosses' power (the mines, in that case): after taking over these positions, they made them into strongholds to be defended as a first step to workers' or people's power. They occupied the social terrain – be it pithead or telephone exchange – without changing it, which sooner or later led them to be besieged and defeated.

Communist insurrection can obviously not afford to leave workplaces and living quarters in the hands of the bourgeois and their police, but this is not where the proletarians' main source of power could be.

Nor is it the main power source for the bourgeoisie: the capitalist class does not rule because it controls the physical premises

5) White worker movement: radicalism

In South Africa as in other immigration countries, unionism and socialist or anarchist activity were fuelled from outside sources. Special mention should be made of the influence of revolutionary syndicalism, a minority yet active current, which regarded unions as the main instrument of class struggle under capitalism and of the administration of a post-capitalist world. Revolutionary syndicalists not only promoted *industrial unionism* (organising all employed in the same workplace in one single body) as opposed to *craft unionism* (organising them separately according to their different trades)[4], but they also advocated the reunion of all proletarians irrespective of origin or skin colour. On this basis, the African Industrial Workers of the World were founded in 1910, which, like its American IWW model, aimed at One Big Union gathering all proletarian categories without national or racial barriers. In the US, with the exception of the United Mine Workers, "the IWW was the *only* labour organisation in the second decade of the 20th century which stood squarely for the organisation of Negro workers on the basis of total equality." (Philip Foner) Despite some successes, the African Industrial Workers of the World were fighting against extreme odds, and they withered after a couple of years.

Reformism did not go unquestioned, though. From the beginning of the 20th century, radical socialists, libertarians and revolutionary syndicalists refused to take part in parliamentary elections, and attacked White supremacy as a divisive way of opposing one part of the toiling masses to another. *The Voice of Labour*, the first socialist mouthpiece in South Africa, born in 1908, had a revolutionary syndicalist editor from late 1910 to early 1912, who argued

[4] In most cases, both types of unions coexist, one often prevailing over the other. In the US, in 1941, despite the large unionisation drive of the unskilled in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (as opposed to the conservative American Federation of Labor), out of a total of over 8 million union members, only about 3 million were organised in the CIO.

that the "only logical thing for White slaves to do is to throw in their lot with the Black wage slave in a common assault on the capitalist system." Otherwise, "if the natives are crushed, the Whites will go down with them", because the "stress of industrial competition" will compel the minority of White workers to "accept the same conditions of labour as their Black brethren."

As a reaction against the Labour Party's reformism and its acceptance of the war in 1914, an International Socialist League was created in 1915, for a while greatly influenced by industrial unionism. The ISL's first conference (1916) declared: "we encourage the organization of the workers on industrial or class lines, irrespective of race, colour or creed, as the most effective means of providing the necessary force for the emancipation of the workers."

At its peak, the League numbered 700 people, predominantly of English origin, but also Jewish, African, Coloured and Indian, some of whom lived in the multiracial slum area of Johannesburg. The ISL pressed for shop-stewards who would remain under rank-and-file control.

The ISL also played a part in the formation of the Industrial Workers of Africa in 1917, one of the first Black unions on the continent, which claimed a membership of 800, and was very active in a Johannesburg municipal workers' strike in 1918. The IWA managed to organise Black and Indian labour in various sectors (docks, transport, the garment industry, catering, printing, tobacco and sugar production), and launched a number of strikes. It seems few European workers were involved in those struggles. Despite a constant effort to build up coordination organs, joint interracial action remained the exception.

In such unfavourable conditions, the militant nucleus of the 1922 revolt was a small number of radicals who had met and built up trust, particularly through their wildcatting experience in 1921. One of the best known of those uncompromising workers was the "popular figure" and "fiery speaker" (Lucien van der Valt) Percy Fisher. Born in England in 1891, he emigrated to South Africa dur-

now won the right to be exploited at home, and strike-busting is now done by their "own" police. In 2016, the proportion of Blacks in the police force (76%) was roughly the same as in the total population (79%).

In 2012, when 37 Black miners on strike died in a demonstration at the Lonmin mine in Marikana, they were killed by bullets fired by Black policemen (and by union officials of the National Union of Mineworkers, who shot two demonstrators). Cyril Ramaphosa, ex-mine unionist, whom we left in § 16 as the COSATU's leader, is now a businessman whose interests range from Coca-Cola to farming via McDonald's, with an estimated wealth of half a billion dollars: he happened to be a director in the Lonmin company in 2012. Since then, he has been elected head of the ANC in 2017, and South Africa's president in 2018.

Racial inequality used to be a matter of law, enshrined in regulations and codes. It now results from market forces and profit vs. loss logic.[7] In 2015, the unemployment rate was four times higher among Blacks than among Whites. As for skill differentials, a major labour issue and an important cause of divisiveness, official figures euphemistically point to "an uneven distribution of progress". Twenty years after the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance came to power in 1994, the proportion of skilled labour within each "race group" has gone up by 3% for Blacks/Africans, 11% for Coloureds, 26% for Indians/Asians and 19% for Whites.[8] At the time of writing, White farmers own 73% of arable land, compared with 85% in apartheid days. If statistics are anything to go by, in 2014-2015 Whites still had the highest average incomes, 1.5 times greater

[7] As elsewhere, the mining labour force has been downsized. 425.000 people worked in South African gold and uranium mines in 1970: only 240.000 in 1997. As elsewhere, real wages have gone down.

[8] Statistics South Africa (a government department) distinguishes three labour categories: *skilled* ("managers, professionals, technicians"); *semi-skilled* ("clerks, sales and services, skilled agriculture, craft, machine operators"); and *low-skilled* ("elementary, domestic workers").

est men in the world, liberal MP from 1948 to 1957, and a major financial backer of successive anti-apartheid oppositions. As countduke Olivares advised the Spanish king in the 17th century, "we need to think about bending in order to avoid breaking". Bending apartheid was impossible. When in the 1980s, large parts of the country were spiralling towards full scale disorder, an enlightened elite was forced to admit that apartheid could not be reversed from within, and that to steer the country out of an explosive situation, some political deal had to be struck with the Black movement, namely the ANC.

At last the fabric burst at the seams under the combined pressures of black labour and township revolt, of international capital, and of "progressive" South African bourgeois. Contrary to apartheid supporters' predictions, instead of generating anarchy and terror, ANC power did its best to blunt the edge of social strife and put an end to rampant civil war. By and large, the transition to multi-racialism was peaceful.

In apartheid days, an "English" establishment (men like Oppenheimer) detained the essential economic and financial power, while an "Afrikaner" elite controlled the police, the army and the civil service. Over time, a historically divided ruling class understood where its common interests stood, and it finally overcame its differences. Nowadays, political authority is Black, and economic power shared between Black and White bourgeois. Black businesspersons who previously found their way barred by the White oligarchy now belong to a rejuvenated bourgeoisie.

Once in government, the ANC scaled down its reformist zeal. Like social-democrats the world over, South African left has swung to the right and does its utmost to curb "extremism".

What the ANC has been able to deliver is the promotion of the African man or woman from pariah to citizen. Not much more. Riots demonstrate the gap between civil rights and true emancipation, and new conflicts are brewing or simmering. Black proletarians used to be treated as outcasts in their own country: they have

ing the war, became a pitman in the goldmines, and promoted worker self-organisation while also being on the council of the South African Industrial Federation. He was one of the militants condemned by the union for heading an unofficial strike in 1920 and, because or in spite of that, was elected the Mine Workers Union's secretary. When the vote raised controversy owing to alleged irregularities, Fisher had to resign, and he failed to secure a majority in a new election. A year later, after he was involved in a second wildcat strike, the MNU fined and suspended him as well as Harry Spendiff and other radicals, who together formed in July 1921 a Council of Action as an independent body calling for "rank-and-file control" of the unions, via the development of direct action.

6) Strike

After 1918, the price of gold went down, then up - which enabled labour to get slightly higher wages - then down again: as production and transport costs were on the increase, capital gains stagnated.

From a bourgeois standpoint, "divide and rule" is always a must. But how was it to be achieved in South African mines? By preserving the advantages of the Whites? Or by hiring Blacks to do "White" jobs for lesser pay? Until then, the first option had been more convenient, but it now appeared too costly. A leading mine owner was quoted as deriding the "sentimental colour bar", and he had a point: business and sentiment do not go hand in hand. As before, profits required low pay for the Blacks, but *also lower pay than before for the Whites.*

In the early days of 1922, it was plain to see that the bourgeoisie was committed to tackling its cost/benefit dilemma by direct confrontation with the workers, who for their part had not lost their fighting spirit: a showdown was inevitable.

As 1921 came to a close, the Chamber of Mines made it clear wage cuts were to be expected. This was to repeat itself in the mining world in the 1920s, especially in English and Welsh collieries. But it hit the Rand with the huge difference of the race factor: ending the contracts of 2.000 Whites opened the possibility of replacing them by Blacks. Colour was not the bosses' priority: they were doing their rational best to exploit both Whites and Blacks by reorganising underground work in order to lower the wages of "over"-paid Whites.

Increasing the proportion of unskilled or semi-skilled Blacks (or in any case, less skilled than the Whites) was a synonym for labour de-skilling, and part of the general trend of the time towards Taylorism and Scientific Management. English collieries were being "rationalised" by the introduction of electricity, labour-saving equipment, power passing into the hands of experts, men turned into machine-driven cogs, plus cost-cutting measures like the end of free coal for miners' widows. Since the beginning of the 20th century, in most industrial countries, the bourgeoisie had been striving to narrow the margin of autonomy that allowed skilled labour a degree of control over the work process. This went together with a growing mass of unskilled workers who had little or no special qualification and only needed quick on-the-job training. South African mines were playing their part in the widespread simplification of work (which was a degradation for skilled workers) brought about by 20th century mechanisation. In this new "employability", most tasks could be performed by any worker available on a free-flowing labour market where the boss would buy the cheapest labour power.

Except South Africa was the opposite of a "free" labour market. In the Rand mines, "rationalisation" implied a boss's endeavour to reduce the relative autonomy of the Whites who supervised the tasks performed by Blacks. When he wanted to replace Whites by Blacks who were slightly less qualified but equally up to the job and (supposedly) much more docile, the bourgeois was simply ask-

While Black working class identification was being fused into the oneness of a Black people, the White working class lost its distinctiveness as labour and acted as if it were more *White* than *labour*.

19) Multi-racial capitalism

Apartheid came into existence at a time when the world was evolving towards a neo-colonialism that postulated equality between all countries and races, and gave way to more subtle indirect forms of domination. Capitalism is a society where social classes meet, not where ethnic castes are kept apart.

South African apartheid had built a White fortress propped up on racial walls: censorship, iron-fisted police, covert and overt military intervention abroad, plus a skilful and often successful "divide and rule" policy (playing Zulu against Xhosa, for example). If such a system managed to soldier on over forty years, it was also thanks to the Cold War: the stability or decomposition of the southern tip of Africa was a strategic challenge for the USA and the USSR. This became even more so in the 1970s with the two superpowers engaged in proxy wars on the African continent (Russian-Cuban intervention brought 35.000 Cubans to fight in Angola, and 50.000 in 1988). The US backed apartheid as long as a toppling of African dominoes appeared to be the main risk.

However, what buttressed the regime was also what made it an over-rigid ethno-stratified structure impervious to self-improvement, ill-adapted to a capitalist world that needs a minimum of racial inclusivity. International capital does not care about racism, only about business. When too many dark social storm clouds gathered in South Africa, disinvestment started. In the country, "liberal" sections of the establishment had always been pressing for reforms: they realised race segregation was one of the least adapted ways of perpetuating capitalism. Among them was Harry Oppenheimer (1908-2000), diamond mine owner, one of the rich-

fully independent republic. By a narrow vote (849.000 in favour and 775.000 against, only Whites having a vote), South Africa was no longer a constitutional monarchy like Canada or Australia. The national currency's name was changed from the South African *pound* to the *rand*.

The racial utopia of "separate development" divided the country into advanced and backward zones, reserved the modern economy for the Whites in areas where only exploitable Blacks were admitted under control as long they had a work contract, and it kept unemployable "surplus" Blacks in partitioned areas.

Apartheid turned South Africa into a command economy where labour flows were administratively monitored and education was tailored to fit economic needs, Whites having the upper hand, Blacks being specialised as the underlings, Indians, Coloureds and Asians fitting in between according to arcane bureaucratic classification. Before the notion became famous, the National Party was a proponent of "differentialist" racism, which claims races are neither superior nor inferior: they are simply incompatible. The South African government boasted about its ability to "allow the Natives to develop along their own lines" in Bantustans where Blacks enjoyed "self-determination" within the limits of their homelands (where actually in the 1950s only one third of the total African population lived). In patriarchal South African capitalism, the White behaved as "a father in his own home" and treated the Black as "a minor", with "fatherly care".

This was the end of White labour as a political force. Until the 1940s, the Rand White mining community had been a traditional Labour Party stronghold: after 1948, it switched its allegiance to the National Party. In 1953, Labour only had 5 MPs (out of 156), and afterwards no representation in parliament. White workers were entitled to believe that they had more to gain from a straightforward race identity than from a class one: "White South Africa" ceased to be equated with a specific working class selfhood. The Labour Party split and dwindled until it disappeared after 1960.

ing for the possibility to exercise his right to hire and fire as benefited his business. In the particular situation of a racially-divided proletariat, this was a fairly classic way of managing the capital/labour relation whenever the bourgeois believes to be in a position of strength. For him, nothing must impair the freedom of employment, even if in this case it meant crossing the race line: when Black labour was cheaper than White, it was imperative for the company to be able to substitute the former for the latter, decreasing the ratio of White to Black manpower.

A few years later, an utterly reformist yet perceptive British Labour peer commented: "The mine manager [...] does not see White men and Black men, he only sees grades of labour – and it is the technique of his training, from which he cannot depart, to try and reduce his labour costs by the most economical blending of grades dear and cheap." (Lord Oliver, *Anatomy of African Misery*, 1927)

This was not to go down smoothly, because of the resoluteness of a White working class heartened by the few concessions it had managed to wrest during the war, then by its capacity in 1921 to engage in wildcat strikes, the leaders of which had been sanctioned by union officials. The plan to downgrade or suppress 2.000 White jobs was even more dramatic as it came after wage cuts and the abandon of paid vacations: the impoverished White worker's reaction was as much a defence of labour against capital as a self-defence of White labour.

On January 1, 1922, an overwhelming majority of White miners (about 12.000 for, 1.300 against) voted to go on strike. Yet from Day One, outside support was lacking: the strike failed to extend to other groups. On January 2, in the collieries, Black miners kept on extracting coal, and in the gold mines the management started recruiting Black scabs. Few sectors sided with the strike, and neither did railway nor port workers, sectors of strategic importance in any large class confrontation. Rank-and-file pressure had pushed the established labour movement into an action which it did its

best to deflect by stalling and dithering. When things had started to slip, like all seasoned bureaucrats, the South African Industrial Federation had adapted to the times and broadened its power basis in order to retain a modicum of control by creating on December 31 a new decision-making body, the Augmented Executive. Though it was open to non-unionised workers, this entity was not meant to gather large forces for the struggle to come: like the secretary of the SAIF, the leader of the Augmented Executive accepted the wage cuts.

As for the middle classes, some groups (shopkeepers for example) briefly gave limited assistance to the strike, but the bulk of the rural world backed the State. White workers were on their own.

7) Commandos

The 1922 rising took on the original form of "commandos". The military connotation is obvious: strike defence organs morphed into insurrection combat units. Workers turned a military structure and culture against State power. Commandos owed much to the Boer war ("commando" was a tactical unit in the Boer army), and to 1914-18 (the word referred to a small group of soldiers on a special operation), but they also involved a complex web of experiences and symbols. They were certainly not the "Red Army" denounced by the South African press. Neither were they similar to workers' militia as we know them, in the Spanish civil war for example. South African commandos stretched further back.

One of the models was the *Voortrekkers*, the Boer colonists who embarked on a migration (*trek*) from the Cape region to the hinterland, a long and difficult journey which lasted from 1835 to 1852. A self-organised rural people took over Zulu territory to cultivate and "civilise" it. Up to the middle of the 20th century, Afrikaner mythology kept celebrating how a community of families conquered its freedom by the force of arms (dispossessing the Blacks in the same

There was an underlying contradiction in the South African race relations system: it employed Black workers where they were more cost-effective than White ones, but it also had to maintain political stability, i.e. White supremacy, therefore to provide Whites with better jobs, higher wages and more social benefits. No simple task, but it was effectively managed despite social outbursts (1922 was the most explosive, and the last one), until in 1948 apartheid tried to freeze the contradiction by assigning compulsory separate locations and functions to ethnic groups strictly defined by law and enforced by police. A godsend solution for capitalists who got the best of both worlds: cheap Black labour, and support from White labour which preserved its superior status.

A hitherto makeshift aggregation of rulings and statutes (some dating back to British colonial times) was solidified by apartheid into a race-tight setup supposedly adapted to the needs of 20th century capitalism. This all-encompassing system was complete with forced migration, separate representation (Blacks only voted in their "own" territories which wielded no effective power), and the race regulation of residence, labour, land ownership, business and sex (mixed marriages were prohibited in 1949 and intercourse in 1950). Modernity in reactionary garb, implemented by a ruling elite acting in the name of Afrikaners. Sure enough, nationalist ideology was less South African than Afrikaner, with its mystique of rural rootedness and community, its own flag, its language (Afrikaans, promoted against the domination of English), its epic and martyrs: Afrikaners liked to see themselves as a discriminated people colonised and oppressed by the English. (An inversion of history since the Afrikaners had been the first colonisers at the Africans' expense, but collective myth is often a better historical catalyst than factual truth.) Apartheid was a political re-enactment of the Boer wars, this time with an Afrikaner victory and the recapturing of a lost paradise for a chosen people. The identity quest wished for even more than isolation from the Blacks: it also cut off the symbolic ties with the British Crown in 1960 by becoming a

Government persecution and ANC radicalisation (with the decision to launch a sabotage campaign and create a paramilitary wing – the Spear of the Nation, in Xhosa *Umkhonto we Sizwe* - in 1961) stepped up the rise of important CP members to power positions in the ANC. Armed groups and guerrilla warfare bases in neighbouring countries were first organised through party channels, with help from the USSR. The ANC later became more self-reliant and, like many anti-colonial movements in those days, developed its own mix of nationalism and socialism. When unbanned in 1990 it put an end to armed struggle: it had grown into a mass movement that involved hundreds of thousands of people, complete with civic, youth, student, community and woman organisations, whereas the SACP had only 21.000 members. The ANC is by far the leading partner in the tripartite alliance of the ANC, the SACP and the COSATU that has ruled the country since 1994. The first Black president of a multi-racial South Africa, Mandela, whether or not he ever belonged to the CP (he most likely did), was no Lenin: he pragmatically reconciled South African races and classes – to a point.

18) A capitalist-racist utopia

Compared to the rest of the Western world, apartheid looked anachronistic, as if by a weird time-warp European ultra-racism defeated in 1945 had resurfaced in power three years later in Africa. No Ballardian dystopia there, though.

Up until the end of the apartheid period (1948-1991), South African politics was driven by the Black question, namely the best way to perpetuate bourgeois rule *and White* hegemony, interlocked by the containment of the Blacks in an inferior social and political condition. This was possible until the pressure of organised Black labour became so strong it could no longer be systematically kept at the bottom of the ladder.

process). The *Voortrek* had strong religious overtones, as the Boers, like the Hebrews, strenuously marched towards a "promised land" bestowed on them by God's will, providing they did His bidding (a millenarian dimension also present in Black African liberation movements, as in Rastafarianism, or here in South Africa: see § 2). The *Voortrek* myth was far from extinct in 1922.

The Boer war (1899-1902) brought this ideology to a dramatic level. The *trekkers* had been farmers and frontiersmen: now they had martyrs. Against the Blacks, the Boers acted as colonialists, but vis-à-vis Britain, they regarded themselves as colonised by an imperialist power. By calling themselves *Afrikaner*s, and their language *Afrikaans*, they thought *they* were the true legitimate inhabitants of Africa, with more rights over the country than the Blacks who they thought had forfeited their rights to it. Though more and more Afrikaners lived in towns and worked in industry (one Rand miner in two was an Afrikaner in 1922), a lot of them maintained family and emotional links with the countryside. It was therefore easy for the insurgents to believe that the rural descendants of the Boers would take up arms to join them.

These two sources originated in the Boer past: they were complemented by the experience of 1914-18, when lots of 1922 strikers had been soldiers.

All those models coalesced: resistance to statist/British power, the people in arms, local mobilisation, self-discipline, traditions and martyrdom fuelled the imagery of a (White) people self-defence against a superior yet illegitimate force… and against the Blacks.

Such military force believed in its superiority over conventional troops, because of its grass-roots and community spirit. Strikers expected dozens of thousands of commando members to come from the countryside to the mining towns and help redress rightful working class grievances, in a sort of labour-farmer alliance. Some even dreamt of a return to the allegedly free Boer Republic, when White domination was taken for granted and the White community

devoid of worker vs. boss antagonism. This was to be belied by the facts: when Afrikaner rural commandos came, it was to support law and order.

In reality, most of these so-called armed groups had no adequate combat weapons, i.e. firearms. They remained quite peaceful until the beginning of February and most of their members disapproved of a recourse to arms. In the west of the Rand, the head of two commandos, though an active participant in the militant strike a year before, refused the insurrection. In Springs, a town east of Johannesburg, the commando decided to attack the police only if the police attacked them.

Commandos usually protected private property, on the condition that it served the movement, and only when in need resorted to requisitions, sometimes giving receipts. Percy Fisher had looters punished.

There were about a dozen commandos in Johannesburg, and four at its outer rim. Membership varied from 50 to 500, up to 1.000, but some had no more than a dozen people. On the whole, out of 20.000 White miners in the Rand, 10.000 to 15.000 belonged to a commando, but membership was not a synonym of action, even less of armed action. Apart from miners, members were also railway workers, unemployed, and a few middle class people (teachers for example), sometimes forcibly drafted. The majority were Afrikaner, yet the "cosmopolitan" (Krikler) composition reflected the diversity of White working class origins. There even existed an Irish commando (called by different names), small but active, which attracted non-Irish members. Both English and Afrikaans languages were in use, and some commando leaders were English. Officers were often elected and could be dismissed for incompetence or misconduct.

The commandos adopted the occupations and manners of the army that was opposed to them, but what was a reality for the government troops was more of an attitude for the strikers. They displayed the whole paraphernalia of ranks (from private to general),

This political shift attracted new Black members, soon half of the articles in the party's main paper were written in Xhosa or Zulu, but Africanisation alienated some White members, created multiple dissensions and amounted to little more than sloganeering. The party lapsed into crisis, some activists were purged, others resigned, and in 1933 there remained about 150 members.

In 1935, the Popular Front line ditched the Native Republic and called for priority to anti-fascism. During 1939-41, the pendulum swung again: an anaemic party refused to take sides in what it regarded as an inter-imperialist conflict, which isolated it even more. In 1941, after the German invasion of the USSR, the CP switched to a dedicated support of the war effort and gained an air of respectability, but not much of a political heft. In the late 1940s, though more and more Blacks joined the party (but were still a minority in the leadership group), total membership remained small: 2.000 in 1950 (three-fourths African).

It was only after the banning of the CPSA, its rebirth as the clandestine South African Communist Party in 1953, and its close links with the African National Congress, that the CP made considerable headway in the orbit of the ANC, and played a big part in the Black resistance until the end of apartheid thirty years later.

Contrary to government propaganda, the ANC was not manipulated by the SACP (itself being presented as "a Soviet stooge"), but it owed a large part of its structure and cadres, hence of its strategy, to the CP, whose 1937 "Programme of Action" the ANC adopted in 1949. The CP's influence on the ANC was less due to manoeuvring skills than to its ability to resonate with Black people's needs and demands: the CP promised sweeping social and democratic changes. Moreover, its insistence that the urban Black working class be a leading force in the struggle was confirmed by the revolts that erupted in the townships. Instead of White and Black worker unity against capitalism, the CP stood for a trans-class alliance against White rule, and its "Black liberation + nation + socialism" combination was in tune with the times.

(himself not a PC member) once said a South African revolution could only succeed ”from the bottom up”, i.e. from the Blacks. In 1919, Ivon Jones, one of the CP leaders, predicted that in that country ”a future Lenin would be an African”, and three years after the Rand rising he wrote:

”We have lost the trade-unionists. […] As a cold matter of fact, there is no room for a CP in White South Africa except as the watchdog of the natives.”

Consequently, unless it remained a sect, the party had to take account of Black demands, which could only mean becoming part of an African men and women’s liberation process *as people of colour*. This was to take many years. African self-organisation was fragile. Non-European unions were subject to repression and linked to White unions precariously (if at all). Besides, they kept their distance from a CP which was more and more bureaucratised – and soon Stalinised.

Until the mid-1920s, very few Blacks bothered to join a party that showed little interest in the race issue, and where disparaging comments about non-Europeans could be heard from rank-and-file and leadership (admittedly, far less than in the Labour Party).

The coming of the ”Africanisation” line in 1928 brought a turnabout. The party switched from the socialist revolution slogan to that of a Black-governed ”independent native republic” with minority rights for the non-Blacks. Since South Africa was first of all a colonial country, the argument went, the priority was to get rid of colonial rule (viz. White rule over the Blacks), before a second step could overthrow class (bourgeois) domination. This entailed a lengthy debate on the existence or non-existence of a Black bourgeoisie. (At the same time, the American CP was advocating the creation of an independent Black country made of several US Southern States with a predominantly Black population, there again with rights for the White minority).

the spark that ignited the Soweto riots, when hundreds of people were killed.

uniforms, insignia, parades, drills, foot-soldiers, horsemen, cyclists, motorcyclists, music bands, bugle calls, rationed or distributed food stocks, Red Cross ambulances and field hospitals (one located in a cinema), coded messages, intelligence service, despatch riders, etc., most of which would no doubt have been necessary if the will and the ability to fight had been present. As this was not the case, barely armed workers played at being an army. Captured policemen had ”prisoner of war” status, and now and then commando chiefs exchanged a military salute with army officers.

The commandos pre-existed the insurrection, and initially their task was not to engage in armed struggle, but to keep up strikers’ morale (in other words, keep them occupied), to prevent a return to work (by scaring the scabs away), and to organise self-defence against the police. Regarding the second task, the commandos were quite up to it: in January and February, only about 1.000 white miners (5 to 6% of the White work force) resumed work.

The official leaders of the strike did not publicly endorse commando violence, but they lived with it as long as it helped them bargain with the bosses. When the cushioning role was over and some commandos engaged in insurrection, the union bureaucracy of the SAIF and the NWU completely dissociated itself from the rebels. However, only very few of the 10.000-odd commando members became insurgents.

8) Insurrection

Until late January, except for a number of inflammatory speeches, the authorities had to admit the situation was quiet. When arms happened to be displayed during some of the many street marches, it was more a show of strength than an expression of violence, and the police accepted rather than repressed demonstrations.

On January 9, power plant personnel went on a short sympathy strike, and the miners still received popular support from small business and part of the rural world. Some pits were flooded, though, and on the 18th the strikers took 40 "prisoners", including 2 policemen.

The State could not let things get out of hand. On February 7, Fisher and Spendiff were arrested, only to be set free soon afterwards. On the same day, a train was derailed. Government and business decided to break the strike. The Chamber of Mines owners offered hardly any concessions but demanded an immediate return to work. A leading mine owner stated what the bourgeois wanted: "to get back to the position of being masters in their own house. The whole world is beginning to realise the destructive effects of the inconsequent surrender to labour demands."

Predictably, the press was ferociously hostile to the strike. The only exception was the bilingual (English-Afrikaans) *Transvaal Post*, launched on February 13 as a "strike paper" and fairly popular (its editor claimed daily sales of up to 26.000 copies) until it was banned by martial law on March 10. The traditionally anti-worker *Star* "gave the displacement programme of the mining houses its unequivocal backing and it nagged the government to come down hard against 'increasing lawlessness' on the Rand" (Norman Herd). To avoid its premises being burnt down as they had been by the 1913 strikers, *The Star* turned into a fortress and created its own armed squad under a colonel on loan from the authorities, and the staff worked "with service rifles close at hand".

On both sides positions were hardening. On March 3, a cabdriver who didn't allow a commando to use his horses had his house dynamited. Two days later, a former trade unionist and now mayor of Springs, Jack Cowan, addressing a meeting of strikers, said he had "always recognised and supported governments", but the situation was completely different: "Rather than go down in the struggle we are prepared as a last weapon to have a revolution [...]"

by a large majority vote (since then, it has retained over 50% of the votes) reflected the multi-racial South African population.

17) From "Native Republic" to race & class conciliation

A particular feature of South African history in the second half of the 20th century was the structuring role of the Communist Party in the racial emancipation movement. This should not surprise us: like social democracy in a different way, Stalinism took many forms and contributed to a variety of historical evolutions.

Up to the 1950s, it was hard to imagine that a party with such an insignificant membership could ever be a major political player. In 1922, Bill Andrews, general secretary of the CP, had joined the Council of Action. But the presence of this trade-unionist, ex-Labour MP and later CP leader for decades, did not signify any influence on the strike by a party which at the time numbered 300 members in the whole country.

This party could only play a key role if it was no longer dominated by Whites, in its composition and in its programme. From its foundation in 1921, it had addressed the race question by supporting *both* the White workers' fight to retain their position *and* Black workers' demands for better employment and pay. There was obviously a contradiction here: one group's rights existed at the expense of another's, that is, the continuation of Blacks having lesser jobs and lower wages than the Whites. "Equal pay for equal work" is meaningless for a category which is denied equality *in the workplace*. In those conditions, the CP's (intermittent and fluctuating, and that's an understatement) commitment to anti-racism was more rhetoric than reality.

Even the straightjacketed mind-set of CP members and leaders could not fail to see the relevance of the race issue. Percy Fisher

tion among the 400.000 Black miners (who lived most of the time in native areas, were hired on 18-month contracts and housed in compounds) and one million Black agricultural labourers. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that a critical mass of Black proletarians came to depend solely on being waged for their livelihood. Then began the extensive unionisation effort that was to provide the ANC with one of its power bases, complementing the other one, the grassroots strongholds in the townships (where most of the population – employed or jobless - was also "without reserves").

At the birth of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, its general secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared:

"Never before have workers been so powerful, so united and so poised to make a mark on society. […] We all agree that the struggle of the workers on the shop-floor cannot be separated from the wider political struggle for liberation in this country." (on Ramaphosa's subsequent success story, see § 19)

Eventually, the ANC experienced military defeat and social-political victory. The armed struggle strategy initiated in 1961 (which included bomb attacks in public places, inevitably labelled "terrorist" acts by the government and its "Free World" allies) never brought apartheid down, and in the mid-1980s the ANC's underground networks were smashed everywhere except in Botswana. There was no "people's war", but the movement welling up from below in the townships created an uncontrollable situation, with a succession of rent strikes, protests against the lack of public services and against the imposition of the Afrikaans language, riots, gang warfare, creating large no-go areas for the police.[6] Township un-governability was not a step to revolution (as many radicals throughout the world wrongly prophesised), but to regime change.

In 1957, the ANC had opened its membership (not yet its leadership) to Whites. The ANC that came to power in the 1994 elections

[6] In 1976, the compulsory introduction of Afrikaans in all Black schools was

Whereas deliberate damaging of work equipment had been sporadic, it became frequent, together with sabotage and interruption of maintenance and servicing tasks. Attacks on police stations started being planned, and anti-scabbing escalated. On February 12, 10.000 people, including a woman commando, took to the streets in Johannesburg (its 1914 population was 250.000, so an equivalent would be 400.000 marchers in London today). The following day, the government warned it would support "the freedom to work", i.e. scabbing. Still, no violence occurred for ten days. On February 21, in Germiston, the cops were driven out of a large demonstration they were trying to control. The bosses demanded martial law. At that time, no gunfire was yet reported.

Then, on February 28, allegedly in self-defence, the police shot three strikers in Boksburg, the very town where the last of the insurgents were to die two weeks later.

These first 1922 worker casualties signalled a turning point. The most determined took stock of the situation. How far could they go? How? And who could be counted upon? They expected some support from the Orange State, ex-independent republic run by Dutch colonists, annexed by South Africa in 1900, which had preserved a tradition or rather an image of autonomy and freedom – for the Whites, that was. A much misguided hope.

As for the union officials, they met with police chiefs and, on March 2, had a leaflet circulated among the vast crowd gathered for the funeral of the 28 February victims, calling for peace and quiet. The unions knew they were being shunted to the side-lines. At the bottom, their authority was being undermined: "revolutionists" forced the Brakpan strike committee to vacate the garage it used as HQ. At the top, the SAIF was trying to defuse the conflict by channelling it into collective bargaining… that the Chamber of Mines refused on the 4th, even to the point of announcing that all deals were off and the SAIF would no longer be recognised. The bourgeois were done with negotiating wage settlements. They wanted more than to defeat the strike: their purpose was to crush labour.

The government realised how fraught with danger this class intransigence was, and started taking contingency measures: 700 more policemen were brought into the area, and volunteers enrolled as special constables, usually assigned to non-combatant tasks (body and house search, safety checks, identity control).

On the opposite side, power lines were sabotaged and put out of order, trains derailed and scabs subjected to ever more pressure. The proletarians stood at a crossroads. Either, as is very often the case, the strike would wane until there was a general return to work punctuated by clashes with the police and inter-proletarian discord. Or the most resolute strikers would take a leap in the dark.

On March 6, as the authorities were helping a scab move from his home to the mine where they could better guarantee his safety, a crowd burnt his furniture in the street. When 300 policemen tried to intervene, they were blocked and made powerless by the arrival of commandos supplemented by an influx of several thousand people.

A few hours later, "the joint executives of the striking unions gathered at the Trades Hall in Johannesburg Trades Hall to discuss the idea of arranging a vote for their members on the question of continuing or abandoning the strike. Outside, the most determined working-class crowd roared its disapproval at the notion of retreat [...] every time the proposed ballot was mentioned it encountered booing, whereas the idea of a general strike elicited the most vigorous support. [...] Radicals, apparently mobilised by the Council of Action and armed with revolvers, clogged stairways and surrounded the room in which the trade unionists debated. [...] Evasion of combat was completely unacceptable to the mobilised strikers." (Krikler)

There was neither a discussion according to standard democratic rules, nor a voting procedure: the assembled participants decided to launch a general strike without any ballot being taken.

The SAIF had to follow suit, otherwise it would have been rejected by the rank-and-file. Joe Thompson, head of the Augmented

man and Scandinavian) and Stalinist (French and Italian) "countersocieties" in the first half of the 20th century. South Africa greatly differed because labour organisation was one of the ways for Black women and men to organise as labour *and as Blacks*. In the 1950s and 1960s, African unionism could not but become part of a mass movement fighting for civil rights, for example boycott and burning of passes. (The pass system was an essential, and one of the most visible, means of segregation: it created internal frontiers, with common government practice of "deporting" a Black rebel back to "his/her" area.)

The African who lived close to the Whites was directly victimised by racism at work. Whereas an African hairdresser or shopkeeper could make a living from his trade in a Black neighbourhood (providing he stayed there), the African qualified to work as an electrician or a teacher was constrained by racial limits or barriers. For a Black proletarian, the abolition of apartheid went together with his or her defence as a worker.

An African National Congress Youth League Manifesto stressed "the fundamental fact that we are oppressed not as a class but as a people, as a nation". Against the National Party (firmly in power since 1929) that embodied a separate national White group, the rise of the ANC was the advent of a national movement with an inevitably Black character: its success depended on the mobilisation of a Black (and Indian and Coloured) trans-class "people".[5] A condition was the formation of an urban, completely dispossessed ("with no reserves") Black population. As long as it remained possible for the African worker to go back to the countryside or be assisted by his rural family, mine or factory work could be only a temporary phase in his existence. This is why non-European unions first developed less in mining than in sectors like transport, garment factories, laundries... In 1939, there still was little labour organisa-

[5] In 1945, out of a 11.5 million population, 65% were Africans, 22% Europeans (two-thirds Afrikaners), 10% Coloureds and 3% Indians.

about the emancipation of all African workers. Later, as in other countries (like the French CGT evolving even before 1914 from revolutionary syndicalism to reformism), the ICU's radicalism lost its cutting edge. It was hostile to wildcat strikes, preferred conciliation to confrontation, supported some strikes and disowned others. In 1926, it excluded the communists, and in 1927 its leader declared the ICU was "entirely opposed to revolutionary methods". In the following years, what had been the largest non-European labour movement in the inter-war period (up to 200.000 members, as compared to 30.000 in the – White –TUC) gradually withered, undermined by accusations of corruption and conflicts between radicals and advocates of "go carefully" methods, until the organisation split into much smaller rival unions.

In 1929, there were only 10.000 Rand workers in African unions. Sometimes – rarely – Blacks would go on a solidarity strike with the Whites (in the garment industry for example), without much of a reciprocity. An attempt to merge White and Black laundry unions ended in failure.

Faced with this near impossibility of common action, Black labour was led to act and regard itself not just as *labour*, but equally and sometimes more as *Black*. Unions of course never stopped pressing demands in the workplace, but they also served as a vehicle in the struggle against White hegemony. It was logical that the two would go together, since the working world was one of the fulcrums of racial discrimination. Nothing inevitable in this evolution: it was the White and Black proletarians' inability to unite that compelled Black workers' resistance to play an essential part in what became a cross-class national project.

In many other times and places, unions are also more than unions. The defence of labour often goes beyond the factory and office doors, and gives birth to a wide range of activities comprising mutual help, education, health, leisure, and of course politics, to the point where "political" and "non-political" sometimes merge. The most accomplished examples were the social-democratic (Ger-

Executive, appeared on the balcony of the Trades Hall and announced a general strike which the union apparatus has no intention of conducting, and which in any case made a bad start. A few professions stopped work, shops and businesses were forcibly closed, the town centre was blocked, railways dynamited and telegraph and telephone cables cut, yet this was not enough to promote the stimulus and the popular backing indispensable for a general strike to get off the ground.

On the 7th and the 8th, racial attacks took place against Blacks (this will be dealt with in § 11). After that, the strikers hardly ever targeted non-Europeans, only the police and army. But the ambiguity (to put it mildly) that ran deep within the whole movement is apparent in the way workers were mobilised in the town of Benoni. A meeting was summoned in order to help the police ward off the threat of an imminent Black revolt. When everybody was there, the doors were closed and the real motive made clear: to prepare for an armed rising to defeat the bosses and the State. Benoni was not the only place where (White) self-defence against a fictional Black menace was used as a ploy to get ready for armed (class) struggle.

Whatever the pretext, the contradiction had gone explosive, and the hour was late for reform. "Who ever heard of a strike without violence?", Fisher said: "We are out to win this fight, and by God we will, if we have to burn Johannesburg to the ground."

The Fordsburg Market Building served as headquarters but, as we will see, Fisher and his comrades were unable to lead or coordinate much. On March 9, Fisher wrote his will. The die was cast, and the insurrection started the following morning at 5 a.m. On the same day, martial law was declared. March 10 would be remembered in South Africa as "Black Friday".

From the very beginning, institutionalised labour took a firm and explicit stand against the rising, a position which did not always go down easily: violent discussions and exchange of blows opposed moderates and *Direct Actionists*. Once the insurrection was on its way, the official labour movement had its moment of truth and

openly admitted what it stood against: ”a thing which should never have happened, an attempt at revolution”, in the words of C.J. McCann, secretary of the Labour Party.

The insurgents took over some of Johannesburg’s working-class suburbs, Fordsburg and Jeppe, and further east two towns, Benoni and Brakpan. West and south of the Rand, several police stations were under their control, cops detained as prisoners, and government reinforcements repelled. Wherever the rebels had the upper hand, banks, offices and shops were closed and cafés and hotels only allowed to serve the insurgents. Food was requisitioned and transported in train carriages to warehouses for distribution to strikers.

If the plan was to seize Johannesburg, its municipal utilities, police stations, barracks and means of communication, digging trenches was not offensive enough, being more adapted to defence, and it did not prevent army and police from maintaining their hold over the city centre. On the 11th, 600 to 800 people tried to capture Johannesburg’s main arms and ammunition depot, killed 8 soldiers but, despite initial success caused by the element of surprise, inferior weaponry forced them to withdraw. It was less an insurrection aiming at a seizure of political power, than social warfare scattering into armed combats.

The scope and depth of the movement differed a lot between the east and west of the Rand. Little happened or was even attempted in the western part. Edward Hippert, chief of a local commando and a union official known for collaborating with the government in the 1913 and 1914 strikes, procrastinated and made an agreement with the police to sit out the strike. The insurgents’ headquarters knew about this desertion but all they could do was to denounce it publicly. In other localities in the west, the police kept a low profile, and the strikers filled this public authority vacuum by installing a ”people’s” law and order, among other things preventing thefts and lootings, until the army arrived on the 13th.

racial polarisation worse. True, more Blacks were hired as semi-skilled manpower, but it was easy to fire them as soon as they were causing trouble. In the long run, only the bourgeois came out as winners: they were able to drive and maintain a wedge between Black and White labour. In real terms, the wage gap between White and Black miners was wider in the 1960s than before 1914: White labour’s stronger bargaining position allowed it to be the sole beneficiary of productivity gains.

16) Black labour: from class to people & from people to nation

In the decades that followed, the Trades Union Council succeeded the South African Industrial Federation and its first secretary was Bill Andrews, also the CP’s general secretary. The TUC defended White labour’s continued yet reduced privileges. It sometimes supported non-European workers’ demands, but this backing stopped short of the point where these demands would interfere with White people’s employment, status and standard of living.

Much later, in 1965, a renewed bosses’ endeavour to hire more Blacks caused such an uproar that the plan was shelved after fifteen months, and the Whites confirmed as foremen. Their superiority, however, could not be maintained for ever, because the Blacks had the benefit of numbers and, despite fierce repression, of more and more robust and durable organisations.

The South African peculiarity was that Black proletarians had to challenge *both* the bosses *and* a racial domination which favoured White proletarians: therefore, it was necessary for class defence to fight also against this domination.

In its early days, the Industrial & Commercial Union, which organised non-European labour, was moving in a similar direction to the American IWW: the ICU declared itself in favour of One Big Union and held on to the hope of a general strike that would bring

low workers from insulting and assaulting the Blacks: they could rarely promote inter-racial solidarity, because solidarity is not a matter of feeling and goodwill, it evolves from the sharing of a collective experience, and White and Black lives were too different to produce such a community. Racial estrangement went so deep in South Africa that it seemed unchangeable and was a permanent source of contradictions. The CP, for example, favoured *at the same time* inter-racial solidarity *and* a White South Africa.

For years after the event, radicals and far-left activists were uneasy about the obvious "White" nature of both strike and rising. Without denying the inequality between Whites and Blacks, some contended that the lower condition of the Blacks would not benefit from the lowering of the condition of the Whites: therefore, until the day when White and Black labour would manage to act together, White workers were justified to fight for their rights. This was forgetting that these two groups did not simply exist in parallel: the "better" condition of one was based on the *inferior* condition of the other. Worse still, the "parallel struggles" argument implied that Black proletarians could only play an inferior part in proletarian emancipation:

"[…] the premise, stated in earlier debates, that the White workers stood at the forefront of the South African revolution [was] an argument that was generally accepted and dominated policy in 1922. " (Baruch Hirson)

In these circumstances, how could Black miners have shown solidarity with White miners? The African People's Organisation (founded in 1903 to defend Coloureds, it later extended its activity to fighting all racial discriminations) decided not to support a strike which the APO saw as merely a White people's affair: as in the Boer war, when Whites fight between themselves, the Blacks have nothing to gain by taking sides.

At the time of the rising, the opening up of certain jobs for the Blacks did not stop the Whites from having priority over the best work positions and, after 1924, the "White labour" policy made

On the contrary, in the eastern Rand, in the first 48 hours, the movement could believe itself to be on the ascendant, was confident of its future, and faced an army and police placed everywhere on the defensive.

In that early phase, the situation was so unstable and central power so insecure that when Prime Minister Jan Smuts arrived in Johannesburg on the 11th, he was fired upon, bullets struck his car and it is likely that only the expert driving of his chauffeur saved his life: the head of State lacked the adequate means to guarantee his own safety. A tipping point was close. Everything shifted during the night of 11th to 12th March, with the coming by train of fresh, reliable troops. Then, in Johannesburg, only partly controlled by the rebels, the police occupied union offices, seized documents and put union officials under arrest. The nominal strike leaders offered to negotiate, but the State was now sure of its victory and demanded an unconditional surrender.

No longer able to attack, the insurgents had to resist with scarce and uncoordinated forces. In Boksburg, where three strikers had been killed on February 28, though the local commando had been up to then well organised and dedicated, it very soon abstained from any action: on March 10, out of 500 members, 75 turned up. The war veterans showed little interest. Owing to the shortage of fighters, the rising died down after a few hours.

In Benoni, which is near Boksburg and where, as we have seen, men had initially mobilised against an invented "Black peril", the Workers' Hall was fortified, protected by sand bags, and its guards tripled, but very few occupiers had a rifle. In the early hours of the 10th, they took over the town after a little gunfire. Later, however, even in this hot spot of worker struggle, the passivity of the local majority prevailed over the fighting spirit of a handful of radicals. One commando was even unanimous in its refusal to engage in combat.

Brakpan's mine was one of the very few places where one could speak of "class hatred" on the part of the insurgents. On March

10, about 20 armed officials and a dozen special police led by the manager's brother, present in the mine to prevent the strikers from occupying or sabotaging it, were attacked by 500 to 800 members of the local commando. When the defenders ran out of ammunition, they surrendered and were disarmed. Then the strikers unleashed their violence against the people associated with the employers' power, for example against a shift boss (higher up in the hierarchy than the foreman because he oversaw and disciplined several work teams, and was therefore likely to be a miner's hate figure). He was killed together with seven other policemen or officials.

9) The crushing of the rising

Fighting lasted four days, March 10 to 13.

The State mobilised all accessible resources, including seven planes which were ready on the 10th, an armoured train, and a tank which broke down in a street, could not be fixed and never saw any action. 13.000 regular soldiers were brought to the area, bolstered by burger commandos: the countryside (landed property) was encircling the town (the working class).

Not forgetting a strong support from middle class people and professionals. Businessmen and students volunteered as civic guards and special police. In the 1926 English general strike, the scene was repeated, with middle class members proud to serve as auxiliary to the army and police, out of a confirmed taste for law and order, and distaste for the working class. Actually, they contributed less to policing than to conservative consensus-building.

Troops were welcome to rest in Parktown, the exclusive respectable district. Gentlemen loaned their motorcars to ferry soldiers, ladies helped with refreshment, tea and coffee. A few hundred feet away, others kept playing tennis. The bourgeois felt at home, basked in the aplomb of their "right to rule" and were one

been the core of the social battle: the loss of White monopoly over semi-skilled jobs. These kept being reserved to Whites in the public sector, in the railway and manufacturing industry, but not in the mines, where wages went down by 10 to 40%. White workers too could be downwardly mobile. Shop-stewards were no longer recognised, labour had to go through a compulsory conciliation procedure before a work stoppage, and there was a sharp drop in shop-floor and underground militancy.

In 1928, the Labour Party split: a minority remained faithful to its (not so strange) alliance with a right-wing party, and the majority started to come closer to the multi-racial Industrial & Commercial Union. This was the beginning of the long and slow evolution of the South African White socialists toward a cooperation with non-Europeans, which after decades of struggle resulted in the demise of apartheid. (We will return to the ICU in § 16, and to the Labour Party's final years in § 18.)

15) Unworkable solidarity

As seen in § 5, in the labour movement and in socialist/communist or anarchist groups, radical elements were fully aware of the racial inter-proletarian division and its dire consequences for the struggles of both Whites and Blacks. Percy Fisher was asking for militant action to double or triple African wages, and Harry Spendiff did not hesitate to attack worker racism. But in 1922 South Africa, the best intentions could hardly be followed up on. White miners regarded themselves as the aggrieved party: they sensed what was rightfully theirs was being taken away from them. Even those strikers who felt no hostility towards the Africans and had witnessed their fighting abilities, doubted the Blacks would ever join the Whites to battle a common enemy. Tellingly, a CP leaflet once urged White workers to "Leave the Native alone"… In the best of cases, White revolutionaries could therefore prevent fel-

bered as martyrs. Negated in life, they acquired a positive status in death. (Few White people bothered about the thousands of Blacks killed in the past decades.) This provided grist for the mill of the Nationalists who gathered electoral strength. Smuts had restored order and won a social battle, but he was about to lose politically.

During the strike, a handful of politicians had vainly tried to bring together Labour and Nationalist MPs in order to form a provisional government which would proclaim a South African Republic. What had been muted by the din of falling bombs was to be revived in the ballot box. 1922 found its political solution two years later: the South-African Party lost power in 1924, replaced by an alliance between the National Party and the White worker movement via the Labour Party, with trade-union support. Though in a minority position with only two ministers, Labour was given the important Ministry of Defence, with Colonel Croswell in charge. The two partners had been elected on an allegedly anti-bourgeois "social" agenda, with a "White labour policy" as its main plank. This cooperation between a workers' party and a party which in other times and places could qualify as "far right", received the critical support of the Communist Party, "an act which most of [its members] lived to regret" (Edward Roux). Nothing too surprising here: the CP simply believed that the anti-Black policy of the Socialist-Nationalist pact was *a lesser evil* than Smuts' anti-worker policy. Besides, to attract Coloured voters in the Cape province, the National Party had toned down its ingrained racism.

Once in command, the new government laid off thousands of African public employees. In 1925, racial discrimination in the workplace was embedded in law. Health benefits for miners' occupational diseases differed hugely according to the colour of the skin, and only White workers' children were entitled to free schooling.

On the downside, the White working class was far from regaining the advantages it had lost before 1922 and tried to recapture by strike and insurrection. The bosses did not go back on what had

with their army. Not in complete unanimity: a teenager was expelled from school for expressing pro-strike feelings in an essay.

On Saturday 11, the insurrection still held out. In Benoni, snipers slowed down the soldiers' progression. But sharpshooters are no match for artillery and air force. On the 12th, the State retook the initiative. With support from four planes, it broke the encirclement by the insurgents of a group of besieged soldiers and police. Then more planes were put into action. Field guns were used against entrenched workers and suspect buildings. Houses were ruthlessly searched. Arbitrary arrest and detention became the rule, but at this stage the distinction between *arbitrary* and *lawful* became immaterial. Counter-insurrection strips the modern State of its civilised veneer. When the rule of Law is put to the acid test, what matters is who calls the shots, literally. Jan Smuts reported 1.500 prisoners.

Benoni was only retaken on the morning of the 13th. The final assault had something of an "anti-climax" (Krikler). Nevertheless, if most parts of the town had few defenders, an air bomb was necessary to destroy the Workers' Hall and kill its occupiers. By the end of the afternoon everything was over, and the rebellion imploded in confused chaotic scenes which the press were all too happy to caricature: insurgents on the loose indulging in the basest instincts, drunkenness, vandalism, hooliganism, mugging and robbery… the bourgeois and their journalists love portraying the proletarians as a beastly criminal mob.

In Brakpan, until the 13th, the town was divided into two, a larger half in the hands of the strikers, while the police sheltered behind the walls of its station and its machineguns. The troops' entry met with little resistance.

The last workers' stronghold, Fordsburg, refused to capitulate. Planes dropped leaflets warning the inhabitants to move out in order to save their lives, and soon thousands of residents thronged the streets, where they were searched and sorted. Suspects were detained, many of them released after a short while. A few miles

away, from the rooftops of Johannesburg, people were observing the ultimate battle as if watching a show. Soldiers moved forward protected by a rain of shells and air bombs. Late in the afternoon, 29 corpses were to be found in the ruins of the Trades' Hall. Fisher (who had left a letter for his wife Mary) and Spendiff had chosen suicide.

Sporadic gunfire could still be heard in other districts on the next day. Armoured vehicles and heavy artillery arrived: they were not needed any more. Meanwhile, in the western Rand, "the burger forces reclaimed a kind of no-man's-land where the strikers had been dominant but not revolutionary" (Krikler).

On the 17th, the unions officially ended the strike.

10) Insurgents vs. soldiers

On March 10, the rising had been able to prostrate the State. Police forces had found themselves pinned down in the police stations that the insurgents had neither occupied nor neutralised. So, for the State to retake the streets, it had to call in the army.

For the next three days, the fighting did not build up a unified front, but led rather to a series of discontinued battles, in Johannesburg and in several nearby mining towns, nearly all in the eastern part of the Rand. More than once, army and police had to retreat to avoid being encircled. Discipline was not the insurgents' strongest point, but their military experience was equal to that of the government's army, owing to the presence of World War I veterans on both sides. The strikers' better on-the-ground experience gave them a tactical edge over their opponents. In the beginning, the State was weakened by the mobilisation of poorly trained soldiers, and it had no specialised repressive corps comparable to the National Guard for example.

Though the commandos numbered over 10.000 members, only a tiny minority took part in the armed struggle, with military hard-

their rejection of the Blacks and mistrust of the English. (Herzog had been an army general, like Botha and like Smuts; add to this list Colonel Creswell, Labour Party leader from 1910 to 1929: across the whole political spectrum, top brass military men were at the head of all big South African parties.)

The key political divide was between two ways of dealing with the race question: what to do with the Blacks (and to a lesser extent, with the Indians and the Coloureds)? How to manage necessary non-European labour while continuing to treat non-Europeans as social and political outcasts?

The "Afrikaner" or nationalist line was openly racist and advocated a full Black and White separation, and the exclusion of Blacks from political and daily life. The "English" or liberal line was aware of the impossibility of a thoroughly White South Africa, and advocated granting some non-Europeans a minimum of civil rights and social mobility. These orientations rarely existed as two absolutely opposed programmes: they conflicted yet often intermingled. The evolution was neither linear nor irreversible: after a time of minor concessions granted to the Africans, 1948 opened the national-racist era. The colonial legacy of the colour bar had evolved into a piling up of ad hoc measures and rules: apartheid straightened them out in an overall system that was to last nearly forty years (see § 18).

That point had not been reached yet in 1922, but the after-shocks of the rising rumbled on in an unexpected way, as it reopened the rift between "Afrikaner" and "English" elites.

The ruling class as a whole naturally closed ranks behind Smuts for having ground labour into submission, but the National Party was critical of the government's handling of the crisis, and objected to the "excessive" application of the martial law. With time, when the threat of "revolution" receded, attitudes and feelings began to shift, and the unions' campaign for the liberation of the jailed strikers received popular (White) support. After all, they had fought for the well-being of the Whites, and their dead started to be remem-

by one third. With the huge difference that the Blacks' lot was worse than theirs, the White miners' situation was not dissimilar from the plight of English and Welsh colliers in the 1920s. As a government body bluntly put it, the only solution for the mining industry was to get 'the highest possible production at the lowest possible cost".

Coal miners were subject to the same treatment. In the Highveld, where the country's main collieries were, the price of coal went down at the same time as the price of gold. There as well, the bosses knew they stood in a position of strength, cut down wages and refused to negotiate.

14) Aftermath: White labour's political victory?

First, a little background on South African politics.

At the time of the rising, the country was led by the South African Party, headed by Jan Smuts (1870-1950), Prime Minister since Louis Botha's death in 1919. Smuts came from the Afrikaner world and had been a Boer general during the anti-British war, but as a politician he tried to reconcile the interests of the Afrikaner and English factions of the ruling class. He was aiming at the best possible political balance, and went for the politics that was the least divisive:

"We are going to create a nation, which will be of a composite character, including Dutch, German, English and Jew, and whatever White nationality seeks refuge in this land – all can combine. All will be welcome."

Welcome if they were White, needless to say. Providing labour was White, Smuts was not averse to granting it a basement in the South African residence.

The South African Party's competitor was the National Party, led by James Herzog (1866-1942), which was the political expression of the Afrikaners, both ruling elite and common people, united in

ware very inferior to that of the army. Arms were blatantly lacking: a lot more revolvers than rifles (and few modern ones of the same quality as those used in the army); very few machineguns; and no artillery. This was even true in the places where the movement had been most committed to class action: in Johannesburg, on the first day of the rising (March 10), a lot of men only had sticks, and in Brakpan one insurgent out of four carried a rifle. When they could be used as hand grenades, home-made bombs were quite effective, though.

Initially, the government was not quite sure it could trust its own troops, and the rebels harboured hopes that the soldiers would be reluctant to shoot at fellow workers. Despite some wavering, however, there was no mutiny, and hardly ever fraternisation. Nothing comparable with Russia, 1917, or Germany, 1918: in 1922, South African political power was not bogged down in an endless unwinnable conflict. The troops brought in to crush the rebellion did not react as "proletarians in uniform": they acted as soldiers.

As a result, the insurgents fought a military battle, not a social war, and militarily they were no match. Strikers cut down phone and telegraph lines: the government had radio communications. The strikers had rifles: the government had field guns. And from the beginning, it deployed an air force, with a dozen planes. Resorting to air strikes to defeat organised labour, bombing a population in other words, was only a novelty *for Whites*: people of colour already knew about it, in the Middle East for example, when in 1920 the RAF had bombed Arab and Kurdish rebel villages in Mesopotamia:

"Terror bombing, night bombing, heavy bombers, delayed action bombs (particularly lethal against children) were all developed during raids on mud, stone and reed villages during Britain's League of Nations' mandate. […] An uprising of more than 100.000 armed tribesmen against the British occupation swept through Iraq in the summer of 1920. In went the RAF. […] The rebellion was thwarted, with nearly 9.000 Iraqis killed. […] Writing in 1921, Wing Com-

mander J. A. Chamier suggested that the best way to demoralise local people was to concentrate bombing on the 'most inaccessible village of the most prominent tribe which it is desired to punish. All available aircraft must be collected, the attack with bombs and machine guns must be relentless and unremitting and carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle.' " (Jonathan Clancey)

The South African State knew of the virtues of air strikes, which it had used in 1919 against rebellious Blacks in what is now Namibia, and as soon as the worker rising started, the government announced it would have no qualms about using its air force. The insurgents were well aware of that threat, and some leaders said they had the means to neutralise it by taking over the airfield and/or destroying the planes on the ground before they flew. Such optimism was to be contradicted by the facts, and the air force finally proved "fundamental to the crushing of the rebellion. What remains striking, however, was the ability of the commandos to counter, albeit to a limited extent, this new technology of repression despite their lack of suitable weaponry - above all, machine-guns." (Krikler)

Planes were not invincible (nor are helicopters today). One was disabled by rifle fire and had to retire. A pilot was killed. Sometimes sniping prevented the gunner from adjusting his fire. Nevertheless, air bombs proved a formidable instrument of destruction and terror, bringing down buildings with no possibility for its occupiers to retaliate, killing about a dozen non-combatants, half of them children according to the strikers.

But the true superiority of the State lay in its ability to concentrate its forces against uncorrelated actions. Once the initial momentum was gone, every group stayed in the area it had taken over and defended that particular place on its own. When power slipped from strike committees' control to the commandos, this was indeed a sign of radicalisation, but it remained at a local level, and "leaders" like Fisher and Spendiff only led where they happened to be.

go up to 150 African victims for the whole strike period: whatever the exact number, very few of them were killed by army or police in the Rand, January-March 1922.

Defeat in the street and work-place was succeeded by judicial repression and striker-bashing in the press. On March 15, the Minister for Defence denounced an attempt at "social revolution by Bolsheviks, international socialists and communists". It was open season for "Red" hunting, and the fabrication of plots to assassinate political leaders. The decomposition of the Benoni resistance (see § 8) provided journalists with fantastical lurid descriptions of crime, arson and looting. Looting there was, albeit much less than was reported: most strike committees strongly opposed it, unlike some burgers who were not immune to the temptation to help themselves during house searches.

Three special criminal courts were created where people would not be tried by jury, only by professional judges. There was a total of 4.750 arrests, 844 men and 9 women were charged, and over 650 actually went to court, about 200 accused of crime and 46 of high treason and murder. 18 received a death sentence, and 4 were executed: one found guilty of killing a shopkeeper who the rebels thought was assisting the police; one for the murder of two Africans; and two held responsible for the shooting of an army officer. Other defendants were fined or given prison sentences, some quite long (Erasmus Piet, a commando leader, 10 years for high treason), or even life imprisonment.

All were released after one or two years, mainly because Smuts was looking for White votes in the forthcoming 1924 election (see next section). To celebrate their liberation, a meeting was organised in Johannesburg Town Hall: nearly all those who spoke took up the White South Africa slogan, and there was hardly any African in the audience.

Thousands of White miners were not re-hired, and it was estimated that for a while 15.000 Whites stayed out of work or lived on welfare. Compared to 1914, skilled miners' real wages were down

were the working class. And quite a few workers in Britain, in the United States and in Australia would not have been shocked by such a statement. Worker solidarity indeed, but who qualifies as a worker? In the White South Africa claimed by many 1922 strikers, the White worker would have been treated as a White, not as a Black deprived of freedom, livelihood and dignity. Jack Cowan's call for "revolution" on March 5 (see § 8) was motivated by the government's determination "to put the White standard of South Africa in the background and the Black standard in the foreground". "Black" was synonymous with degradation and poverty. (White) class identity was socially constructed in opposition to an inferior Black condition. Whatever the men and women holding the banner may have had in mind, they were saying: "We are not Blacks."

13) Worker defeat

The official death toll was 216, of which 76 State forces, 78 "Reds" and 62 "civilians". According to another government report, there were 72 army and police dead, 39 rebels and 42 civilians. This was far from the massacres caused by the repression of Black revolts mentioned in section 3, or the kill ratio between the casualties of the Versailles troops and the Communards in 1871, or between the German army and the insurgents in 1919-1920. This was not because of South African State moderation and restraint, but because the rising only lasted four days and only a few hundred strikers took part in armed combat. Though labour institutions lost control, it was a small minority that made the leap from militant direct action strike to insurrection. The Labour Party and the unions failed to avert a social explosion, but managed to isolate the *revolutionists* from the vast majority of workers who, as a union representative was right to say, "did not go beyond a strike".

Official statistics acknowledged 24 dead "persons of colour", a figure well short of the mark: there were at least 40. Other estimates

This is one of the main reasons why there was no attempt at storming the airfield or the police HQ in Johannesburg. Union Buildings, the executive branch of government, though accessible, was left unattacked: contrary to most 19th century insurgents whose prime targets were ministries and city halls, 1922 Rand strikers hardly bothered to lay hands on governmental or administrative centres of power. Their main focus was not political.

Basically, the rising drew its strength from its deep roots in a community unified by its sharing the same mining jobs and the same neighbourhood.

In this collective experience, women played an important role. Some commandos included women and there existed specific woman commandos, sometimes in uniform. Boksburg's telephone exchange was briefly occupied by a women's group. They were most efficient in anti-scab action, especially after mid-February when the government started to protect those miners who were tempted to go back to work. They also got together to encourage or force shops and offices to close. But when women took part in actual fighting, it was in a non-combatant role, as nurses, not with guns in their hands. Arms remained a men's issue, and the closer to insurrection the proletarians went, the more women were driven into the background. In fact there was no woman labour down the pits, and little in factories. A typical White male miner would take pride in being the family's breadwinner, so his wife could take care of the home (possibly helped by a Black servant). Women *did* leave their homes, took to the streets, had their share of action against scabs and (less) against policemen (and sometimes against Blacks…), but this manifested a working class community as it existed, with unchanged sex roles.

For a short time the insurrection won on its own terrain by its ability to rapidly mobilise large sections of the population, and by the ties previously forged by the radical minority involved in past class actions. It lost when it found itself on the enemy's terrain, waging a war it could not win. Of course the government had far

more troops and guns. But its major asset was to fight with a clear agenda: the perpetuation of a social system that benefited the bourgeois and the upper middle classes, whereas the proletarians did not put forward any alternative perspective.

11) Racial killings

White labour was exploited by White capital, yet at the same time White capital and White labour were fighting over the division of profits largely derived from Black labour. Though they were omnipresent on the surface and down in the mineshaft, nearly 200.000 Blacks were invisible *as workers* to 20.000 Whites, who only saw them *as Blacks*. Black people were the blind spot of South African society, a colossal yet underground force that had been subdued but which might rise and savagely destroy civilised (i.e. White) society. For the White workers, the "Black Peril" racist fantasy expressed a fear of losing a privileged status based on a terribly oppressive domination over the Black population.

Rumours were rife. In Langlaagte, police numbers had "recently been augmented at the very request of the local worker community then affrighted by a supposed Black peril" (Krikler). In Brakpan, on March 10, the same day when strikers' violence erupted against people associated with the bosses (see § 8), there were stories that thousands of Blacks from the nearest compound, armed with spears, were preparing to assault the White miners who were about to occupy the mine. Two days later, when a police station was stormed, the insurgents seized all firearms except for a revolver left with a policeman for self-defence in case he was attacked by Blacks.

Oddly enough, while Blacks were by far the vast majority of strike breakers, they attracted much less animosity and physical violence than White scabs. Between the beginning of the strike (early January) and the first racial murders (March 7), there were very few

ment that railed against the rich and in whose ranks ethnos seemed so often to be subordinate to other solidarities." (Krikler)

Unlike the down-to-earth materialistic wealthy, the miners were unrealistic idealists when they believed that class and ethnicity always coincide.

The strikers were often heard singing *The Red Flag* (written in 1889, perhaps the most popular worker song in the Rand at the time) which professed:

> Look round, the Frenchman loves its blaze,
> The sturdy German chants its praise,
> In Moscow's vaults its hymns were sung
> Chicago swells the surging throng.

This short round-the-world overview had words for European (Russian included) and American toilers, all White people, and no mention of Africa or the East.

A picture has remained (in)famous. It shows how demonstrators changed the illustrious banner "Workers of the World Fight & Unite" by adding "For a White South Africa!" .

That modified banner has "haunted socialists in South Africa ever since" (Baruch Hirson). The "White" reference was not a random phrase. The *Transvaal Post*, the only "strike paper" which from February 13 until its banning on March 10 had a wide popular readership (see § 8), advocated the "supremacy of the White race": its "cardinal issue was the clarion call for a White South Africa. Therefore it implied the preservation of the colour bar in the mining industry as the 'only solution' to the strike." (Wessel Visser)

The "White South Africa" slogan racialised class struggle by binding working class emancipation to the advent of a White South Africa, where capitalist rule would be replaced by labour rule, *White* labour that is. To us, this is a contradiction in terms, because we define class in relation to *another class*, not by colour. But this was not so for 20.000 White miners: for them, the Whites

of the 1916 Irish Easter Rising. Yet the insurgents were no lunatics. They did what they believed had to be done: against overwhelming odds, they only had a limited time-window and did not want to let the opportunity slip. Once started, they had to go all the way despite a large disproportion of forces. Also, they expected some amount of support from the countryside. Searching for allies, a few commando chiefs took a short trip to the *veld*, the Afrikaans word for the vast expanse of land used for agriculture and cattle breeding. Their hopes were dashed: the rural folk of the burger commandos turned against the urban worker commandos.

In 1922 South Africa, what is now sometimes called "whiteness" proved both its reality, as amply demonstrated in our narrative, and its limit. Faced with Black proletarians, White proletarians were White. In the eyes of White landowners and businessmen, they were proletarians, and in that particular case rebellious proletarians who had to be browbeaten into submission by whatever means available. The Boers had dispossessed the Blacks and turned a lot of them into proletarians. Then the lack of new colonisable land and the growth of agrarian capitalism had the usual effects of land concentration. Afrikaner small farmers were now the ones to be dispossessed and proletarianised. Once these Whites became "have-nots", the "haves" treated them no longer as race brothers, but as members of a class to be subjugated, forcibly if necessary. Class came before race.

In matter of fact, the burgers had already sided with law enforcement before, against the 1913 and 1914 strikers. The *veld* felt little sympathy for the poor White (*die arme blanken*). Though one Rand miner out of two was an Afrikaner in 1922, he no longer belonged to the "authentic" Afrikaner people. Even if he had kept some rural semi-activity, his tiny plot was not enough to create solidarity with the real landholders:

"Landowners – the social basis of the burger forces – could not, when the test of arms came – make common cause with a move-

instances of strikers attacking Black scabs, and no attempts to deter them from going to work.

This paradox was caused by the fact that White strikers did not perceive the Blacks as workers like themselves. They dealt with scabs who were "their own kind" and "othered" those who were not. There is no record of the Blacks being seriously invited to join in the strike, and the unions did not ask for Black migrants to be sent back to the regions they came from. Since the notion of a *working class* only included White workers, logically the same applied to *scabbing*. Blacks were not part of the working class, so they could neither stand in solidarity with strikers, nor be "class traitors".

This explains why it was not out of the ordinary for strikers to expect or force mine officials to go on strike with them *as Whites*, or to try and win over policemen to their (White) cause against a non-existent Black menace: labour identity fused with a race identity that was able to bring together an all-encompassing inclusive White people, except for a tiny minority of "money lords" like the mine magnates. It was deemed impossible for Black labour to act as the enemy of White labour, but it was possible for Blacks *as Blacks* to be regarded as a danger to White people.

On March 7, in Germiston's New Primrose gold mine, equipment had been dynamited by the strikers. The next day, the management brought in groups of Blacks to guard the premises. They had no firearms (contrary to widespread Whites' belief, there were no guns in the compounds or Black urban districts). A 30-60-strong White commando entered the place: physical fighting, slight injuries, gun shots, black counter-attack… then the army walked in and separated the fighters without any human life lost. The Whites went back to their neighbourhood where rumours were spreading of an imminent Black assault. 400 commando members, together with a White crowd, lashed out at the Blacks who had returned home to their compound. The outcome was eight people killed, one striker and seven Blacks. Without the intervention of a bosses' militia, it is likely there would have been a lot more bloodshed.

On the same date (March 8), and the day before (remember the general strike broke out on the 6th), in the streets of a mainly African and Indian district, Whites had attacked Blacks who had no visible connection to the mines. On the 7th, in a suburb, other Whites had shot at Black passers-by, including women and children. All in all, 20 Blacks were killed on March 7 and 8.

These aggressions and murders took place before the insurrection, did not happen amidst the heat of combat, were not collateral damage of civil war, and they did not target enemies of the strike: they lashed out at adult and underage Blacks who had nothing to do with the police or the mines, but represented a "Black Peril" against which Whites thought they were "defending themselves". Over 40 Blacks were killed in that period, most of them by strikers, with at least some amount of popular White participation in the murders.

Most of the assaults took place in areas where a number of strikers lived. The urban geography of the mining region had been changing since 1914. Not all Blacks employed in the mines were then migrants housed in compounds. A proportion of them would live with their families in neighbourhoods close to the Whites, sometimes in the same area. It was the Blacks close to the Whites that came under attack, not Black strike breakers.

Being a White South African worker meant living the complete opposite of a Black's life: travelling freely in the country, not having to carry a pass, not being deprived of civil rights, not being outcast, having a proper waged job, possibly including sick leave benefits and vacation entitlements which Black labour never could hope to get in those days. By suppressing paid vacation (see § 6), the bosses were indeed putting the White worker down to the African level. Colour embodied what the White was not but could fear to become, a *white kaffir*, a White brought down the social ladder to the status of a Black (*kaffir* was a South African equivalent for *nigger* in America).

"Black people had become a fearful mirror. The Whites concerned could not abide what they saw in that mirror and they proceeded to smash it." (Krikler)

Whites were conscious of their privileges and ready to defend them. A few years before, during one of the many anti-pass actions, a White crowd was seen helping the police to check Blacks' passes, and White children took part in the control as if playing a game. White people (workers included) knew that race discrimination served their interests (for a while at least, but it was to be a long while). In the same districts as the murders took place, it was not uncommon for Whites to shoot at a Black crowd, even at woman and children. The "modern" Rand was at least as much a powder keg of racial tension as the "backward" Afrikaner countryside.

Years before, the Industrial Socialist league (different from the International Socialist League but equally supportive of industrial unionism), had warned of the consequences of White worker "treachery", viz. White scabbing against African strikers: the lack of "solidarity of labour irrespective of colour or race" would raise the "spectre of racial warfare". Indeed this is what happened on a small scale in 1922. The strike begun in January was racial in its nature: less racist in the sense of deliberately anti-Black, than racial because it involved one race and excluded another, and it can be a short step from racial to racist. A community closed in on itself only applies Orwellian "common decency" to its own members. Exclusion is not bound to turn into assault, but treating a group as fundamentally different from one's own, especially when one benefits from this difference, opens up the possibility of veering to extreme aggression.

12) The loneliness of the White working class

With the benefit of hindsight, it would be too easy to dismiss the insurrection as a quixotic, "heroic, tragic lunacy", as Yeats wrote