

Violence and the 1913 general strike on the Witwatersrand.

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On 26 May 1913 a seemingly trivial dispute at the New Kleinfontein Mine in Benoni triggered on the Witwatersrand a general strike, possibly the first of its kind in the world, on 4 July 1913; this with the caveat that it was almost totally confined to white workmen. Popular mythology views this strike as an inordinately incendiary- and weaponry-based violent strike with perceptions of syndicalism at its core. This paper examines the destructive episodes that occurred, initially in Benoni and subsequently Johannesburg. These concerns include the so-called insignificance of the initial cause of the strike, the many forms of intense and emotional responses that ensued and their links, if any, to 'scabbing'. The composition of the crowd (or mob) is also important and the reasons and responsibility for calls for injurious actions. It also looks at the strike leaders' use of symbols and their resorts to demagoguery, including intimidation. Finally it considers the effects of police and troop intervention (at the behest of the state) and questions the efficacy of the subsequent investigative (judicial) commission of enquiry.