

MIGRANT OR MOBILE? WHITE WORKERS ON THE WITWATERSRAND GOLD MINES 1902 – 1922¹

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This paper examines some elements of the impact of white worker mobility on the trade union and white working class politics on the Rand in the first two decades following the Second South African War (1899-1902) it traces this mobility, which often bordered on migrancy, to the transcontinental fluxes of what Hyslop terms the 'imperial working class'², but more important to the massive incorporation of semi-migrant Afrikaner workers who could be classified as poor whites, or bordering on this condition; into the white labour force on the mines. It suggests that the extreme instability of the living conditions and to a less extent of the working conditions of these workers has been under-recognised in the existing literature but that this left a strong imprint on the white working class politics of this period, including the 1913 and 1922 strikes³.

POOR WHITES

The emergence of a new category or at least named category of 'Poor Whites', in South Africa can be traced to the late 19th century in the Cape, but it expanded massively as a result of the scorched earth policy pursued by the British forces in the second South African War of 1899-1902, which they employed to root out Boer guerrilla/commando forces. The one uniform consequence of this policy – at least in the interior *platteland* regions- was the impoverishment of Afrikaner farmers⁴. In the aftermath of the war many Afrikaner farm owners who were aided by the Milner government to re-establish themselves on the land still did not possess the wherewithal to succeed in the new economic environment without the aid of share cropping African tenants. Other English speaking farmers introduced by Milner

¹ This is both a partially expanded and partially abridged version of one section of my chapter 'South African Society and Culture, 1910-1948', in Robert Ross, Ann Mager and Bill Nasson, *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Vol 2, 1885-1994, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2011.

² Jon Hyslop, 'The Imperial Working Class Makes Itself "White"'. White Labourism in Britain, Australia and South Africa before the First World War, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12, 2, Dec 1999.

³ Working conditions have been explored at length by Elaine Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy. A History of White Workers in the Transvaal and the General Strike of 1913*, Witwatersrand University press, Johannesburg 1976. See also her article in the *South African Journal of Economics*, 1974, 'White Worker Grievances', Living conditions have received less attention.

⁴ D Berger, 'White Poverty and Government Policy in South Africa, 1892-1934', Ph.D Thesis, Temple University, 1982. Irving Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid. The Struggle for national independence of Afrikaner Calvinism against British Imperialism*, New York, Mellon Press, pp.70-71.

likewise struggled to make ends meet and again resorted to share cropping. Keegan cites several examples of the kinds of arrangements that emerged from such conditions. Two stand out. The first was the Free State land owner who returned to his farm after the South African War with no working capital. After selling off 4 000 acres of his 10 000 farm to pay off debt he farmed the rest with the aid of share croppers. By 1912 the tenants had 160 head of stock compared to the landlord's 100. The second example comes from a letter written to the *Farmer's Weekly* in 1912 in which a farmer observed that, given the climatic conditions and the uncertainty of arable yields, it made more sense to allow the African share cropper to bear the costs and the risks in return for his half of his crop. Such arrangements were seriously subversive of notions of white supremacy⁵.

The worst negative consequence of such arrangements in the eyes of white supremacists was the gradual elimination of the white *bywoner*. This proceeded at an alarming rate after the South African War, as land prices rose, as farmers' heirs sub-divided the land of their fathers, as the white rural population increased, and as capitalist farming, especially including fencing, grew more prevalent. A striking example of the problems this group faced is to be found in the 10 000 ex bywoners who still remained marooned in British concentration camps in 1903-4, unable to restore themselves to a place in rural life⁶. Poor white *bywoners* searched out new options for survival in the arid north-western Cape and Western Transvaal, thereby accelerating environmental deterioration as well as the impact of drought, in the malarial reaches of the Northern Transvaal, and in isolated forest zones in the Cape. By the 1920s, rising land prices combined with drought, which struck the Cape every seven years, on average, closed off even the option, used by whites and coloureds. Their flight to such marginal zones nevertheless attested to the closure of the external frontier at the boundaries of Rhodesia and Botswana, and the steady narrowing of the internal frontier as a result of the development of capitalist agriculture⁷, particularly the fencing movement in the Eastern Cape and Western Free State that began shortly before Union. According to Grosskopf, most farms in the Eastern Cape were fenced by 1914. Following the recommendations of the Drought Investigation Commission of 1922, fencing was made compulsory in many districts from mid

⁵ Tim Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa*, Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1986, pp. 86, 93.

⁶ Berger, 'White Poverty', p.58.

⁷ Ibid, p.8. John Bottomley, 'The Orange Free State and the Rebellion of 1914: the influence of industrialisation, poverty and poor whiteism, in Rob Morrell and Sue Parnell, (ed) *White but Poor*, Johannesburg, pp.31-38.

1920s⁸. Space available to trekboer herders was thus radically contracted, a process intensified by escalating land prices in the decades after Union. Until the 1910s, du Toit claims, landless farmers were intent on escaping such pressure. Poor whites but also coloureds were able to find cheaper land in the trekvelde of the northern and north western Cape - the area stretching from Clanwilliam in the west to Hopetown in the north. From the 1920s, however, rising land prices combined with drought steadily closed off this option. According to de Kiewiet, droughts struck the Cape with monotonous regularity every seven years and with even greater intensity in the late 1910s and drought stricken 1920s, allowing few to make the transition from 'kneg to baas'⁹. As a result, the 1910s and 1920s also witnessed a steady migration to the port cities along the coast which hosted steadily growing poor white populations¹⁰. The white population of Cape Town, for example, increased by 30% (100 000) between 1911 and 1921, most arriving from neighbouring country districts after the savage droughts of the late 1910s. Many others followed the railways to Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth¹¹. The term *poor white problem* which first entered political vocabulary in the Cape in the 1890s was recognised and feared all over the new Union by 1910.

Recurrent recessions in 1896, 1897, 1902-3, 1906-8, 1916, 1919, 1920-4, 1926-7, 1930-32, and 1939 intensified white indigency and social distress, all adding urgency to a mounting sense of desperation. The droughts of 1916 and 1919 were particularly savage, driving tens of thousands of poor whites to small rural towns and city slums, and prompting the formation of the Drought Distress Commission of 1920, whose findings painted a dismal scenario for the future¹². The Carnegie Commission Report of 1929 published the life history of Mrs van Wyk which starkly testified to the often catastrophic effects of droughts. Born in the Little Karoo her family hired pasture but were too poor to hire labour to work it. She and her three sisters therefore worked alongside five brothers to help earn the family living. After marriage, Mrs van Wyk led the migratory life of a poor bywoner. Over several years they prospered and their stock grew to number a respectable 500. Then the 1916 drought struck. Only 20 animals survived. She and her family took refuge in Knysna where they cleared forests. Her

⁸ Pp 97-99 cited in Marijke du Toit, 'Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism. A social History of the Afrikaans Christelike Vroue Vereeniging, 1879-1939', Ph. D Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996, p. 142.

⁹ Ibid, p. 145.

¹⁰ W M MacMillan, *The South African Agrarian Problem*, Grosskopf, 1919.

¹¹ Du Toit, 'Women, Welfare', p 165-7; Berger, 'White Poverty', p.123.

¹² Berger, *White Poverty*, p. 18.

husband then died and the family thereafter survived on Poor Relief¹³. A slightly different kind of history is offered by Jacob Gouws, a respectable farmer in Prince Albert, who owned a 500 morgen farm. He lost all his ostriches and two thirds of his stock in the 1919 drought. When the drought broke in 1921, he unlike many others, was able to stage a brief recovery. With the renewed onset of drought however, in 1924, all his stock were lost and he joined the ranks of the poor whites, staying alive with the benefit of food rations supplied to him and 3 000 other destitute in the Prince Albert district¹⁴.

The Unemployment Commission which reported in 1921 and was formed in 1920 provided the troubling news that while the white population of the Union had grown 5.1% between 1916 and 1921 the poor white population more than doubled, that figure standing at 11.6% for the same period¹⁵. In 1917 the principal of Doornfontein Government School, FW Mills, gave this startlingly alarmist account to a Government Commission on Relief Works:

If South Africa continues to allow its children to become poor whites in ever increasing numbers, it will in consequence become the poor white among nations, the bywoner of civilisation¹⁶.

TOWNS

In the years around Union, many Afrikaners began to stream into towns which had previously been seen as foreign. At the time of Union the Witwatersrand's towns, the hub of South African urbanisation, were overwhelmingly foreign; a melting pot of strangers. In 1907, for example, 87% of whites working on the mines were foreign born. For Afrikaners towns were both foreign in concept and foreign in composition. Leading Afrikaner nationalist writers like Albertyn insisted that South Africa's cities did not emerge organically out of an indigenous rural people, but were imposed from outside and were populated by aliens¹⁷. In 1900 a tiny 10 000 Afrikaners lived in the country's ten big cities. From that point on, however, the streamed in. Towns offered an economic and social safety net from the vicissitudes of an often harsh rural life. There, Afrikaners mingled with foreigners who dominated their

¹³ M E Rothman *Mother and Daughter in a Poor Family* (1932) cited in du Toit, 'Women, Welfare', pp. 137-40.

¹⁴ Ibid p. 142.

¹⁵ Berger, 'White Poverty', p.22.

¹⁶ Linda Chisholm, *Reformatories and Industrial Schools in South Africa: A Study in Class, Colour and Gender, 1882-1939*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989, p 117.

¹⁷ Cited in Francis Wilson 'Farming' in Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson (eds) *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol 2, Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 133.

economic and social life. The fear of Anglicisation in the subjugated environment of the town – as Hexham emphasizes, was ever present through the decade of reconstruction and the first decade of Union and towns for this reason alone were viewed with great suspicion by Afrikaner leaders¹⁸. Colonial towns were also places where races integrated, sometimes on almost equal terms. They were accordingly viewed as sites of potential racial pollution. Fear of the evil ambience of the towns thus evoked the final racial phobia of white and especially Afrikaner society - miscegenation, to join its two companions, numerical 'swamping' and the economic and social slippage of poor whites.

Destitute and other whites were drawn to the towns by varieties of relief, by jobs and by informal and sometimes illegal income earning opportunities - the latter often involving some transactions with blacks. Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand were the fastest growing urban areas and hence offered the greatest opportunities to the poor. Before the South African War the government of the SAR had sought to implement a strategy of keeping poor whites out of the towns and only in extremes of distress to offer relief work in those areas¹⁹. As with so much else the South Africa war marked an important turning point in the history of the towns. Milner and his kindergarten now adopted a land resettlement policy to counteract white poverty in the Transvaal²⁰. Up until 1908 poor whiteism was viewed as a rural phenomenon, and not much attention was paid to the towns. The combination of rural distress and economic recession culminating in 1906-8, however, saw a refocusing of attention in this direction as poor whites flooded to the city and the city slums became identified as the central source of moral and racial degeneration. As both Chisholm and Lange point out, numerous poor white Afrikaner families began to disintegrate completely under the impact of the 1906-8 depression. Men deserted their wives and children 'with ease'; daughters were forced into menial work or enter prostitution²¹.

Two statistics graphically expose the reasons for this concern. By 1917 39 021 of the Union's white population were classified as 'extremely poor' and another 67 497 as poor, the greatest concentration of whom were to be found in the Transvaal and the Witwatersrand. And in

¹⁸ Irving Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid. The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism against British Imperialism*, New York: Mellon Press, 1978, pp.21-2; 49.

¹⁹ Berger, 'White Poverty', pp.48-50.

²⁰ Berger, 'White Poverty', p. 114-5.

²¹ Chisholm, 'Reformatories and Industrial Schools', p.68; Liese Lange p.160; Berger, 'White Poverty', p.71.

1920 an astonishing 48% of the total white population lived in South Africa's towns²² of whom Afrikaners constituted a sizeable minority²³. The towns were now the hub around which South African society turned.

From this point on, one core objective of government policy was to curb the supposed wanderlust spirit of the former *bywoner*/trekboer, seen as the bane of government efforts to stabilise white society and buttress white supremacy. After the war, as Bottomley and du Toit observe, many marginal trekboers in the Cape and Southern Free State sought new opportunities in arid peripheral areas in the Northern Cape and Western Transvaal²⁴. Others tried to survive - and even accumulate a little - by prospecting on diamond diggings, by occasional spells of transport riding, where this was possible, and by hunting and cutting wood in the Eastern Cape, in the Limpopo valley and in the Potgietersrus region (where they were known as 'pap and game' farmers)²⁵. From the early 20th century at least, this unstable segment of the population added the towns to their repertoire of movement. Researchers for the Carnegie Commission, for example, found many of their informants in small country towns, a neglected subject in South African historiography²⁶. Others headed for the larger cities such as on the Witwatersrand, in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. Many continued to harbour a nostalgia for the land (though not necessarily for the precarious existence of full time farming). A common aspiration among Afrikaner mine workers at least to the 1930s was to invest their savings in smallholdings which, from 1919, surrounded the main towns. These, it seems probable, they viewed as spaces of freedom - much like African migrant labourers from the reserves - free of the constant surveillance and irksome restrictions of resettlement colonies, and where a whole variety of core necessities of life - such as lodgings, food, were free to be drawn from the gift of nature's bounty, not bought for a price on a market²⁷. Others were perpetually on the move, and were distrusted by the elite. DRC ministers and Department of Lands officials who administered resettlement colonies such as de Lagersdrift

²² Karen Jochelson, *The Colour of Disease: Syphilis and Racism in South Africa*, New York: Palgrave, St Anthony's College, Oxford, 2001, p. 54.

²³ E P Stals, *Die Afrikaner in Die Goudstad*, Johannesburg, 1986, p.11,15.

²⁴ Bottomley, 'The Orange Free State', pp.32-8; du Toit, 'Women Welfare', p.93

²⁵ Tim Clynick, 'Afrikaner Political Mobilisation in the Western Transvaal. Political Consciousness and the State, 1920-1930', Ph.D. Queens University, 1996; Grasskopf, *Carnegie Commission Report*, Vol, pp.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.26.

²⁷ Vusi Ndima, 'Ayizondi I'nkabi', M A Research Report, University of the Witwatersrand, 198 , pp. and Hilary Sapire, 'African Urbanisation and struggles against municipal control in Brakpan, 1920-1958', Ph.D Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988, pp. ;

(set up in the Eastern Transvaal in 1907) despaired of what they viewed as these restless, rootless proclivities. DRC Mapoch Gronden administrators, for example, distinguished between respectable and unrespectable poor whites. The worst offenders in this respect were frequently identified as those who had been contaminated by the town. Morrell cites one Lands Department distinguishing between two classes of poor whites, 'the fixed *bywoner*' and 'the semi-townsmen, transport rider and diamond digger who outwit the government'. 'The poor white who has tasted town life' another noted, 'gave a great deal of trouble'.²⁸

Poor whites, both respectable and unrespectable, were not only unstable but also a politically volatile class especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Ticktin describes large numbers of Free Staters being drawn to the South African Labour Party in the years leading up to World War I before being disillusioned by its shift away from bread and butter issues and towards an English jingoist orientation at the outbreak of World War I²⁹. Both Morrell and Bottomley suggest poor whites made up the principal constituents of the 1914 rebels and Morrell cite Reitz as claiming that Rebel leader General de Wet had characterised many of his supporters as 'not gentlemen' but 'slum-dwellers', who looted whenever they got the chance. Clynick suggests a variation on this theme for the 1920s and 1930s³⁰.

THE WHITE WORKING CLASS

The white working class, or white waged workers, tends to be viewed in accounts of South African history as a discrete segment of the urban population, separated and insulated from both working blacks and poor white. Comprised mainly of English speaking, white immigrants in its early years, it is perceived as gradually changed in composition in the early 20th century, to second generation English speaking and a lesser number of Afrikaans speaking South Africans. Both parents and offspring are generally pictured as nurturing traditions of trade unionism and labourism, which they brought with them to their adopted land, and as shaking the South African state to its foundations in a series of general strikes, mounted by the white working class, at the point of its greatest concentration on the Witwatersrand in 1907, 1913, 1914 and 1922. Along with their traditions of trade unionism, these white workers are also commonly credited with cultivating a distinct brand of white

²⁸ R Morrell, 'The Poor Whites of Middelburg Transvaal 1912 – 1930', *Resistance Accommodation and class struggle*; R Morrell (ed) *White but poor: essays on the history of poor whites in Southern Africa 1880 - 1940*, Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992 pp7-9, 14.

²⁹ D. Ticktin, *South African Historical Journal*, 1969; Bottomley, 'The Orange Free State,' p.37.

³⁰ Clynick, 'Afrikaner Political Mobilisation, pp.

working class South African racism. Liberal historians have tended to view this in a largely negative light, portraying or begin economically irrational in the broader sense because of their blind insistence on maintaining the job colour bar, as shunting economic growth and being responsible for many of South Africa's subsequent racial ills. Radical or neo Marxist historians have by contrast viewed white workers defence of the job colour bar as a fundamentally rational, instrumental means of confronting the exploitation colour bars (comprising pass laws, contracts, masters and servants legislation, compounds, monopolistic recruiting and the maximum average wage system) erected by the dominant classes, to produce and maintain a docile, ultra exploitable, black labour force³¹. In a series of publications in recent years, Jon Hyslop has significantly reinterpreted both approaches. South African trade union racism, he shows, was by no means unique, but reproduced attitudes widespread among Australian and North American labour as they battled under cutting in 'their' labour markets by imported 'Asian' labour. In its earlier days, moreover, this immigrant white South African labour force was an integral part of an imperial working class and an imperial working class culture which exhibited not only a highly developed sense of racial vulnerability, but also high levels of mobility, moving frequently from one continent to another in search of mainly mining work. Finally, in the South African context, as both Katz and Hyslop argue, it was the importation of Chinese labour in 1905 that finally made the Witwatersrand's trade union movement gel and grow³².

The character of this white working class, as its central site on the Witwatersrand began to change, most historians agree, after the South African War of 1899-1902. The central feature of this change was less mobility and more stability. In the mid 1890s Johannesburg was still a bachelor town. In 1897, for example, only 12% of its whites were married, In 1902 this percentage increased to 20% and by 1913 it had climbed to the substantial figure of 42%³³. It was still racist (perhaps even more so, as the 'Black Peril' sears of 1913-14 may suggest); it was still English speaking and strongly stamped with an immigrant character, it still felt acutely vulnerable to black competition; but it was beginning to settle down.

This picture is not particularly accurate. Their racism differed little from that of their fellows in Australia and North America and significantly it was the importation of Chinese labour in

³¹ Frederick A Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1976; Robert Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900-1960*, Harvester Press: Brighton, 1979, pp.1-145.

³² Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*; J Hyslop, *Imperial Working Class*, p.

³³ Van Onselen, vol. 1, p. 31.

1905 that finally made the Witwatersrand's trade union movement gel and grow. Moreover, the picture of a distinct, discrete and increasingly stable English speaking white working class is, however, open to question, as are standard explanations of the spate of strikes between 1907 and 1922 found in the mainstream secondary literature. Just before the turning point of the 1913 general strike, mining still held by far the largest section of waged labour on the Witwatersrand, employing 24 107 white workers, as compared to the next largest sector, the railways, which employed 3 721 men³⁴. An approximately similar overall number (25 000) found work in a scatter of small heterogeneous industrial concerns. The railways were already mopping up numbers of unemployed poor whites and had assumed at least a partly Afrikaner complexion. The mines, by contrast, were viewed then and later as dominated by English speaking and increasingly family based and stable workers. In reality however, they were in fact increasingly manned by Afrikaners. The gulf between them and the stereotypically undisciplined, work shy erratic and unstable poor whites apparently remained immense. This conventional compartmentalisation of the white urban population does not, however stand up to close scrutiny. After Union and indeed some years before, the ranks of the white mine labour force were infused and diluted by increasing numbers of what the mine managers disparagingly terms 'backvelder' or 'bywoner' Afrikaner workers. Two events are customarily associated with promoting this process – the 1907 strike in which skilled immigrant miners were replaced by Afrikaner scabs (many of whom were, however, subsequently retrenched) and the First World War of 1914 -1 918 when many English speaking miners volunteered for the armed services and were replaced by less experienced local Afrikaner miners³⁵. As Elaine Katz has, however, demonstrated, Afrikaner workers infiltrated the mining labour force much earlier and in much larger numbers than had been previously. Prior to the 1907 strike she shows 30% of the white mine labour force to have been made up of Afrikaner miners. These were able to make their 'silent and unobtrusive' entry on the mines due to the mine-owners' efforts at job fragmentation which broke down skilled 'all round' jobs, into their semi-skilled components which were relatively quickly mastered by new Afrikaner arrivals, and as a result of the mortality inflicted by the dust-imparted lung disease, silicosis, which opened up large areas of employment to local-born miners³⁶. Once anecdote and one statistic reveal all about the horrific ravages of this fatal disease. Firstly the anecdote according to the well know story of Bain, all but one of the 1907

³⁴ U G 51, 1913. *Report of the Small-Holdings Commission, Transvaal*, Cape Town, 1913, p.6.

³⁵ Frederick A Johnstone, *Class Race and Gold*, p. 105.

³⁶ Elaine H Katz, *The Underground Route to Mining: Afrikaners and the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Industry from 1902 to the 1907 Miners Strike*, *Journal of African History*, 36, 1995, No.3 pp. 467-489.

miners' strike committee had died of silicosis by 1913; secondly the statistic recorded by Katz, among others, which fixes the average age of death of white miners at twenty nine years.³⁷

The new 'bywoner' workers laboured mainly underground, where they themselves became victims of the deadly lung disease, probably accounted for 50% of the white underground labour force by 1914. While no figures exist to confirm this point, they were probably predominantly single, while their foreign-born fellows, if they were married, usually had their wives living overseas. When the Small Holdings Commission published its report in 1913 (prior to the strike) it presented a generally dismal picture of life and conditions on the mines which significantly subverts later conventional wisdom. While 42% of white employees on the Witwatersrand gold mines were indeed married and living with their families on the mines, 83% of married miners maintained their families aboard and a full 49.31% were single. In addition while the mines provided married quarters for 3 617 of their employees, the bulk of the accommodation which they offered took the form of barracks, two men to a room, for single men, which housed 13 753 employees (i.e. well over half of the white miners³⁸). A significant sector of this labour force was also astonishingly unstable. Figures collected by the Commission showed that between January and June 1911 labour turnover stood at an average of 13.3% a month. Those 'shifting' in this way, according to evidence given to the Commission were 'mostly underground men'³⁹. This mobility was partly generated by imperial working class, and Afrikaner bywoner habits and culture, but was also a product of conditions on the mines. Mention has already been made of miner's phthisis, but management autocracy was also another prime cause of workers' mobility. As the Commission again reported, of the 22 815 employees in the service of the mines in the latter part of 1912, 20 176 were subject to 24 hours notice⁴⁰. And 'sacking' at short notice was standard practice. This often occurred through no fault on the part of the miner concerned. As a statement submitted to the Commission remarked

'A change of Manager on the mine of the Witwatersrand is, more often than not, accompanied by an entire change of staff; a change of even

³⁷ Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, p.

³⁸ UG 51, 1913, p.15.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp.18-19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p.6.

Engineers, Mine Captains and others at lower positions, means a change in the staff of those immediately under their control'⁴¹

The Commission also reproduced an illuminating extract from a Report of the Inspector of White Labour Johannesburg for the year ending 1911 in which he quoted the words of a mine employee

'I have been lucky' he told the Inspector, 'I have been here about ten years and am about the oldest hand on the property. The changes during my time here have been constant. I have never felt at ease although I know I can do my work. When you see so many men as good or better than yourself get shifted on the change of a boss how can you feel secure'⁴²

Such wholesale changes of personnel, had moreover become increasingly common in the years after Union. Of the 50 mine managers working in August 1913 O Quigley tells us, one had been appointed in 1901, one in 1903, one in 1907, five in 1909, 15 in 1910, 7 in 1911, eighteen in 1912 and 10 in 1913⁴³. As a result, numerous witnesses informed the Commission 'it is a well known and accepted fact that the industrial community is a roving one'⁴⁴. As trade union and 1913 strike leader James Bain later informed the Commission, the average white miner was likely to work for only eight months a year, while many worked on the mines simply with a view to maintaining a toehold on the land⁴⁵. *Bywoner*' habits and mentalities also contributed to this pattern. Johnstone cites CD Leslie, consulting Engineer of Simmer Deep Mine as observing

'They had not come to follow the profession of mining, they had come up merely to earn money to buy cattle or buy land'⁴⁶

Testimony presented to the Smallholding Commission made a similar point. Some farmers deliberately sent sons to the mines so that they could jointly retain a foothold in the land;

⁴¹ Ibid, p.20.

⁴² Ibid, p.17.

⁴³ Ann O'Quigley, 'The 1913 and 1914 white workers Strikes', African Studies Institute Seminar paper, Section 5, p.18.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.20.

⁴⁵ UG, 51 1913, p.28.

⁴⁶ Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*, p.108.

most dreamt of returning to the self-sufficient, independent life of the countryside and geared their efforts towards this end⁴⁷.

In the mines, the worlds of the *bywoner* poor white, the semi-skilled Afrikaner worker invisibly overlapped. So too though to a lesser extent, did the worlds of the semi-skilled Afrikaner underground worker and the skilled unionised English speaking artisan. These porous and shifting boundaries made the mines increasingly volatile places. Mine owners relied on racial and ethnic hierarchies of power and occupation to pre-empt or obstruct combination amongst their employees was being imperceptibly being nibbled away by changes in work arrangements underground. These accelerated during the course of World War I at the end of which, one observer commented

‘The white conditions below ground have changed completely since the war. The bywoner Dutch from all over South Africa are the underground workers, 70% and in some cases 86% ... they never rise to better positions. They are bossed by the mine captains and stoppers and they again boss the natives’.⁴⁸

Even now, the English-speaking artisans continued to dominate skilled positions and positions above ground, and a pattern of language-based residential, suburban segregation gradually evolved. Nevertheless, as Lange plausibly, though by no means conclusively argues, much intermarriage between the Rand's English and Afrikaans speaking populations occurred during the first two decades of the twentieth century, not least because of the relative scarcity of single English-speaking men and nubile English speaking women⁴⁹. Moreover, while suburbs like Brixton gradually acquired an Afrikaans speaking identity, they continued to house many English speaking residents in those early years. My own house (in Brixton) was built by an English speaking blacksmith J M Rutter, which he continued to occupy into the first decade of Union⁵⁰. Both English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking miners moreover, even while being simultaneously divided by the mines hierarchy of control, shared common work place grievances, prominent among which were miners' phthisis, the arbitrary and autocratic behaviour of managements, and the threat of displacement by cheaper

⁴⁷ UG 51, 1913,p.24, 28.

⁴⁸ Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*, p.106.

⁴⁹ Lange

⁵⁰ Title deed,

African labour. Both Katz and Johnstone describe at length the de-skilling that was taking place among white artisan workers underground in the years just before and after Union. In 1907, as Katz shows, the Chamber of Mines employed 2 234 white miners to supervise 1 890 African-operated drilling machines. By 1913, 2 000 white miners were supervising well over double that number of machines (4 481) while white gangers were being rapidly replaced by African boss boys⁵¹. Semi-skilled Afrikaner workers were most directly threatened by these developments but skilled artisans also feared that they were just one or two steps away from the same fate.

A watershed was reached in all of these areas in May 1913 when a general strike was mounted by the Rand's mine workers which shook the newly formed state to its foundations. It was triggered by autocratic and arbitrary management on the New Kleinfontein mine in Benoni. The trigger for the strike at face value was 'trifling', but in fact went to the core of miner's conditions and grievances on the mines⁵². It began on New Doornfontein Mine in Benoni after a new manager, Edward Bulman, was appointed mine manager. Upon his arrival 60 underground employees of the mine left of their own accord and Bulman discharged 15 others⁵³. Bulman immediately set about re-organising the work of underground mechanics. Apart from dismissing two, he also increased the hours of work of the rest. The five remaining mechanics refused to comply and so the strike began. This change in conditions of work of a minuscule number of five mechanics ultimately brought 19 000 white miners on all mines on the Rand out on strike. Clearly Bulman's new policy struck several raw nerves. One of the most exposed of these was autocratic and arbitrary management. The New Kleinfontein mine had earned a reputation for being 'a hotbed of labour and more miners signed up there to the Miners' Union than at any other single mine'. The mine management therefore appointed Bulman, who had an ant-labour reputation 'to cleanse the stable'⁵⁴. Bulman also arrived with his own mine captain and other men, hence the immediate departure of 50 former employees. The arrival of a new manager and the enforced departure of fifty employees clearly underscored the insecurity of employment of practically all white miners on the mines, managements' deep aversion to unions, their determination not to offer them any recognition, and the wish to re-impose management autocracy⁵⁵. These were

⁵¹ Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, pp.300-1.

⁵² Quote from the South African Typographical Journal, June 1913, p. 9, by Katz, *Union Aristocracy*, p.381.

⁵³ Ibid, p

⁵⁴ Cited Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, p382

⁵⁵ O'Quigley

problems shared by all miners on the Rand. With the added instigation of militant, socialist white union leaders like James Bain, and management intransigence, the strike soon spread to other neighbouring mines until a general strike was called on 4 July 1913. Ultimately, 19 000 miners on all the Rand mines came out on strike⁵⁶.

Both the mine managements and the State were more unready than at any time before or after in the history of the gold mining industry or the Rand to meet a challenge of this kind. For some weeks the government dithered. They considered, but were ultimately unwilling to press the mines to the negotiating table, yet in a less than even handed manner, provided police protection for strike breakers employed by the mines. It was these actions and patchy unionization, ironically, that encouraged the strike to spread. Once the strike became general, the government found it did not possess the resources to restore law and order. The number of police were inadequate, and the defence force, only just created in 1912, was in the process of reorganization. After a mass meeting in Benoni on 29 June, which degenerated into violence, the government secures permission to use 3 000 Imperial troops still remaining in South Africa and they were rushed to the Rand. Even these were not enough. On 2 July 20 gold mines were on strike, and a general strike was called two days later by the TMA, when 19 000 white miners downed tools. On 4 July miners streamed from all over the Reef to attend a mass meeting in Johannesburg's market square turned violent. Indecisive to the last Smuts finally banned the meeting. Violence now erupted, though no one was subsequently able to identify what exactly had set it off. Twenty one civilians were killed and 166 police injured over the following two days. Rioters thronged the streets of central Johannesburg on the evening of the 4th. The offices of the pro-magnate *The Star* newspaper and Park Station were burnt down. Rioting and looting became widespread. After consultation with the Chamber of Mines, General Smuts and Prime Minister Botha met with the strike committee at the Carlton Hotel in an effort to broker a truce. For the government and the mines this was a moment of profound humiliation. Persistent rumours thereafter claimed that the two generals had been forced to negotiate with the Federation's leaders at revolver-point. Smuts denied the allegation, but subsequently acknowledged that it had been 'one of the hardest things' in his life' to place his signature on a document together with that of Federation leader James Bain,⁵⁷ The terms of the truce that was reached were full re-instatement, compensation

⁵⁶ Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, pp. ; Jon Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, Jacana, Johannesburg, 2000, pp.

⁵⁷ Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, p.461.

for the victims of rioting and strike-breakers, no victimisation and the submission to the government of a list of grievances by the trade unions.

Once World War I was joined in August 1914 the terms of engagement between government and labour quickly changed. After initial vacillation, the South African Labour Party (SALP) and the bulk of the trades unions backed what left critics termed the imperialist war. Since the continued production of gold was central to the success of the war effort, the government made every endeavour to prevent the resumption of class war between the Chamber of Mines and the miners' trades unions, an exercise in which the SALP gladly connived. An exodus of skilled British artisan miners from 1915 (an estimated 25% of the workforce) also changed the face of industry. The mines now found themselves chronically short of skilled white labour, which provided extra negotiating leverage to the mining unions.

One high profile incident which took place in January 1917 attested to the strength of the swing. Then, white underground workers at van Ryn Deep embarked on a spontaneous unofficial strike in protest at the employment of black labour in semi-skilled positions. In this instance, white waste packers were being replaced by black recruits at a wage of 5s as opposed to 15s per day, but as investigations of the strike also showed, the same general grievance was shared by white workers in a number of mines. The broad contours of the 1922 rebellion were now coming into view. 2 500 Afrikaners, mostly from the Free State, had recently secured jobs on the mines of the East Rand in place of workers who had left for the European front. These felt especially threatened by the gathering trend of recruiting Africans into semi-skilled jobs and took the lead in the strike. The veil of invisibility hanging over Afrikaner workers had now finally lifted.

The strike which was summoned on 10 January lasted for a remarkable eight weeks. During that period it underwent several changes of personality which confound both liberal and Marxist interpretations. 22 000 white miners struck work, along with workers from one or two ancillary industries. Strike committees were set up across the Rand. Their representatives sat on an augmented SAIF executive strike committee. While the Chamber of Mines remained obdurate and at times provocative, the Government adopted a posture of relative neutrality and made several efforts to broker an agreement between the parties to the dispute. At the very opening of the strike it nevertheless despatched a large force of South African Mounted Rifles from other centres in the Transvaal to the Rand. Fears about the potential role

of such a force, and the need to create bodies which would prevent scabbing or strike breaking led to the formation of a unique institution of the strike - the commando - about two weeks into the strike. These represented a formidable defensive and coercive force, without whose existence the slide into outright rebellion would have been totally unthinkable. Strike commandos sprang up all across the Reef - Johannesburg alone probably had ten commandos, their membership ranging from 100 in Fordsburg to a massive 1 000 in Langlaagte. The East Rand had many, Germiston being the hub of at least six.

The strike commandos whose roots are commonly traced back to republican days are frequently portrayed as exemplifying the republican and white racist character of the strike. Johannesburg magistrate Devitt, for example, took this view at the time of the strike when he observed,

‘it is highly significant that a very great deal of the fighting had been done by the poor Dutch Afrikaners, with perhaps a sprinkling of foreigners. It is the poor ignorant class fresh from the country, devoid of industrial trade unions traditions, with little or nothing to lose, distrusting and hating the governments, hating and fearing the native..and fondly trusting their friends in the country [who have played the main role] to come to help them to crush the native and establish the Republic’⁵⁸.

To which he might have added another distinctive element- their migrant/mobile character. This mobility shading into migrancy lent intense volatility to the mining work force on the Rand. Lacking a house or permanent accommodation, they had less to lose than the English speaking miner with a family and a house; lacking security of employment and bent on returning to the countryside from the town, they were more willing to risk losing their job. Finally, lacking stability, they had less to gain from trade union membership, impelling trade union and white working class leadership towards the tactic of a general strike. The outcome-the general strikes of 1913 and 1922.

⁵⁸South African Quarterly, IV, 21 March, 1922. My thanks to Tim Clynick for this quotation.