

1922.

The Great War effected a change in the type of white workers employed in the mines of South Africa. Prior to the war many had come from overseas bringing with them not only a practical experience in mining, but a tradition of militant trade union struggle which found expression in the strike struggles preceding the war.

But the war cut across the miners' fight; many miners were induced by treacherous "working class leaders" to take up the rifle on behalf of British Imperialism; the patriotic sentiments of others were appealed to in order to maintain "business as usual"; during the war the war premium on gold enabled the bosses to increase the miners' earnings, mostly in the form of war bonuses: and thus it came about that a state of "industrial peace" reigned in South Africa during the war years.

Reactionary bureaucrats of the stamp of Archie Crawford dug themselves into the leadership of the Trade Unions, and the South African Industrial Federation was for the most part a tool in the hands of the imperialists. The Chamber of Mines obligingly deducted the monthly Union dues from the workers' wages in order to save the bureaucrats the trouble of collecting and to make sure that every worker was a dues paying member of the union. The union officials naturally repaid this benevolence in kind and the whole industry, bosses, workers and functionaries was just one happy family.

Simultaneously the Chamber of Mines pursued a crafty policy which it has followed right up to this day - the policy of gradually eliminating the militant workers who had been taught to fight in the hard school of European class struggle, and replacing them with Afrikaans speaking South Africans, most of them fresh from the country and without any experience of the meaning and function of trade unions. By 1922 more than three quarters of the white miners were South African born.

The elimination of European-born workers certainly weakened trade-unionism, but while the influence of the Labour Party waned on the Rand, that of the Nationalist Party grew, because the concentration camps and the burned farms of the Boer War were still fresh in the memories of the Afrikaaner population,

So it came about that the attack made at the end of 1921 found the workers fighting organisations, the Trade Unions, in the hands of corrupt bureaucrats and isolated from the masses of workers who clung to republican illusions fostered by the big landowners.

The Chamber of Mines, the Coal Owners, the Victoria Falls

Power Company and the Engineers and Founders Association made a simultaneous onslaught on the white workers' standard of living. The Coal Owners reduced wages and refused to arbitrate; the Chamber of Mines proposed to abolish the contract system and increase the number of native workers supervised by each white miner; the V.F.P. refused all negotiations with the unions on the question of wage-rates, while the Engineers and Founders Association repudiated their agreement with the unions and proceeded to cut wages.

In the face of this savage concerted attack, the coal miners struck on January 1st, 1922, while more than nine tenths of the trade unionists who voted on the ballot paper issued by the S.A.I.F., were in favour of striking. Consequently the cowardly leaders of the S.A.I.F. were compelled to declare a strike of all white workers in the Gold Mines, V.F.P. stations, and Engineering shops, beginning January 10th.

As the workers steelled themselves for a life and death struggle, the reformist lackeys of the boss class were pushed into the background, while the militant leaders emerged from the rank and file to take the lead. The struggles of 1914 had revealed to the workers their own lack of a fighting organisation and one of the militant leaders who had been deported had advocated fighting units of "six men and a corporal". The lesson was taken to heart and where 1914 had seen a disorderly rabble, 1922 saw disciplined and organised fighters.

Many of the workers had served in the Great War, and by March there were commandoes in every township, with elected officers, strict military discipline, cyclist, signalling and ambulance corps - the daring feats of the despatch riders who formed the core of the intelligence system are recalled with a thrill to this very day. There were Women's Commandoes; disciplinary drill was strictly observed - exercises and manoeuvres in bombing, unhorsing cavalry, etc, while a central control was established which afterwards functioned as the "General Staff" of the insurrection.

As the struggle grew daily more and more bitter, and the classes confronted one another in open hostility, the political windbags of the Reformist and Nationalist camps grew alarmed, and as more and more of the workers grimly armed themselves for the inevitable fight, these politicians drew back in panic, and struggled in vain to damp down the workers' militancy.

But there were leaders like Percy Kisher who could declare:

"We are out to win this fight and by God we will, if we have to
 raze Johannesburg to the ground!" Fisher had twice led
 strikes in the gold mines in defiance of the trade union
 functionaries, and for leading a strike in 1921, he had been
 fined £50 and barred from holding office in the union for
 three years. His reply was to form, in conjunction with
 other militants against whom "disciplinary action" had been
 taken, the Mine Workers Council of Action ~~Workers' Council~~
 which proclaimed its aims and objects to be "the abolishment
 of capitalism and the establishment of the control of
 industry by the worker for the worker."

It was to revolutionary leaders like Fisher that the
 workers turned when as a class they became aware at the end
 of 1921 that the Smuts government was openly the tool of the
 master class while the nationalists and reformists, for all
 their talk of republics and workers' rights, were "opposed
 to revolutionary violence", and urged the workers to
 capitulate before the imperialist bourgeoisie.

Early in March the Chamber of Mines showed in a cynical
 letter to the S.A.I.F. that it had no further use for the
 lackeys of reformism - it refused to recognise the S.A.I.F.
 and broke off all negotiations.

Against overwhelming odds, the armed workers' commandoes
 entered into the fighting of the March days of 1922, and
 suffered inevitable and decisive defeat.

The story of the March days and the aftermath of the
 insurrection needs a new chapter.

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