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History of the Working Class Movement in S.A.

The Workers Struggle.

The early days of the development of mining were comparatively free from industrial struggles. The reason for this is not far to seek: the European workers occupied a privileged position and enjoyed high wages on account of the scarcity of skilled labour; the native workers on the other hand were an easy prey to intense exploitation on account of their class inexperience and the absence of traditions of workers' struggle.

The first notable clash took place in 1884 when the white miners went on strike through an attempt on the part of De Beers to subject them to the same indignities as the Native miners were compelled to submit to - personal search for stolen stones after each shift. The De Beers bosses' gunmen who shot down five strikers and wounded many others, but the strike succeeded in its object insofar as the attempt to search white miners was given up. This episode was the first of a series of attempts, more or less bloody, on the part of the mine-owning capitalists to undermine the privileged position of the white workers and to drag them down to the economic and political level of the enslaved native workers. The struggle of the white mine workers in this country has not so much been a struggle to gain benefits as it has been to defend the status already attained from the attacks of the rapacious mine-owners.

The first reaction of the white Kimberley miners to the growing class oppression took the form of anarchism. At this period the working classes of Europe and America were beginning to express their deepening rebellion in the form of terrorist outrages: heroic spirits among the masses turned in despair to the bomb and the dagger to express their revolt against capitalist injustice. In France a series of dynamitings and assassinations culminated in the plunging of a dagger into the heart of President Carnot by an anarchist. In Russia, Czar Alexander II was assassinated; in the United States President Garfield was shot and the Haymarket bomb thrown. The lesson that was learned from these blind struggles was that the only road to workers' freedom lies through mass organisation and militant mass struggle led by the workers' party. Individual acts of terror, no matter how courageously carried out, avail the workers nothing, for the oppressors find easily new leaders, new figureheads; it is the system that must be overthrown. The lesson of the impotence of anarchism was quickly learned by the Kimberley workers. A secret society called the "Knights of Labour" which had been formed, functioned

for awhile, only to fall to pieces after the imprisonment in 1890 of its leading spirits for dynamiting the De Beers offices. Now followed a long lull in the class warfare marked only by guerilla fighting.

We have seen how the industrial crisis which paralysed the United States in 1907 - 8 had its effects on the internal struggle of the mine owners. Further repercussions are seen in the serious defeats inflicted on the white miners in both gold and diamond mining in these years. In 1907, the gold mines, seizing eagerly on the native labour set free by the partial closing of the diamond mines, attempted to increase the number of native miners supervised by each white miner. The strike which was called in resistance to this attempt soon spread to every mine on the Witwatersrand and Imperial troops were called in "to protect the mining properties". The strikers were defeated and returned to work, but the question of the ratio of white to coloured labour still remained to be the main issue in great class battles that loomed ahead.

When the Kimberley mines resumed full activity in 1908, they made a similar onslaught on the white workers' privileges - they abolished the Saturday half holiday and locked out those who refused to work the extra half-day. Here also a shattering defeat was inflicted on the miners' union, and a great number of the men locked out were never admitted to the Kimberley mines again. ^{bosses}

After these defeats there ensued the usual aftermath of working class apathy followed by a slowly rising wave of struggle which reached its peak in 1913 - 14. Interrupted by the Great War, the struggle waned only to revive again with redoubled violence as the war ended. The climax was reached in 1920-22. Thus the Rand Revolt of 1922 must be regarded as the delayed outcome of the struggles of 1913-14.

The miners' strike of 1913 originated apparently in an obscure dispute at the Kleinfontein Mine concerning mine mechanics. We must however look deeper than this for the causes. Ever since the defeated strikes of 1907-8, the discontent and irritation of the white miners had been growing, while the mine owners had been preparing to discard the Industrial Disputes Act and proceed to a direct attack on the privileges of the white miners. The Kleinfontein dispute was for the miners a last straw and not a major grievance. A general strike rapidly swept over the whole Witwatersrand. The mass demonstration held on the Johannesburg Market Square was dispersed by two squadrons of dragoons who rode down the demonstrators with drawn sabres. A storm of indignation swept over the workers following this act. Park Station and the offices of the rabid mining rag, the "Star" were burned down, and the Government called out troops to clear the streets. ⁹

A demonstration was held outside the Rand Club which was then as now the class headquarters of the mining lords and their lieutenants. The crowd was fired upon by the troops and by panic stricken bourgeois who sniped from the upper storeys of the Rand Club. Men, women and children were killed and wounded.

The wave of horror that convulsed the population after this blood-bath compelled the government of the mining capitalists to call for peace. The original demands of the strikers were acceded to, namely the reinstatement of the Kleinfontein strikers.

The workers had ^{halted} the long process of gradual encroachment on their rights and their standard of living; now they proceed to the offensive. The struggle of July 1913 had resulted in no positive gains for the miners - on the other hand those workers who had led the fight were blacklisted and victimised. The railway workers, civil servants and coal miners pressed forward with demands for better wages and conditions; the railwaymen's leaders were arrested and then the General Strike of railway workers of 1914 broke out.

Martial law was proclaimed, the railways were occupied by troops, thousands of armed burghers were mobilised and concentrated at strategic points, a rigid censorship was maintained, and wholesale arrests were made of workers' leaders, nine of whom were illegally deported. The then Minister of Defence, General Smuts, demonstrated to the bourgeoisie his capacity as the general of capitalist reaction. 1913-14 was the dress rehearsal for 1922: both sides had now tested their resources.

History of the Working Class Movement in South Africa.

For the worker there can be no understanding of the complex social processes at work in this country today, without understanding how these processes started, how they grew and developed. In other words the worker must study history. But not the abstract theoretical "History" of the bourgeois college professors, who treat their subject in an "impartial" manner, so that it degenerates into a mere catalogue of events, of wars and emigrations, of the struggle of races and nations for supremacy, interspersed with accounts of the heroism and great deeds of this or that national hero.

① ~~The worker has neither time nor patience to become well informed in this or any other branch of learning, unless it promises to be of use to him in his bitter struggle for bread.~~ But this very struggle for bread places upon the shoulders of the working class the need to organise as a class; the capitalist system is visibly decaying.

~~Because~~ ² ~~of the inability of capitalism to plan production and distribution~~
^{because of chronic crises as a result of this inability and anarchy}
because of the growth of unemployment, the danger of war and the spectre of starvation and misery which haunts the workers, it becomes more and more obvious that the present system must be uprooted and destroyed and a new system built in which the workers may enjoy the fruits of their toil. To wrest political power from the bosses by means of an armed uprising, ^{to take away from them the means of production} this is the task which is placed before the worker today, and if the working class fails in this vital task, there is nothing for mankind to look forward to, except the barbarism and horrors, the poverty and misery of Fascism and war. ^{2. order to fulfill this task,}

To alter ~~the system~~, that is to alter history; ^{to fulfill this task} he must understand the basic processes and forces which make history. This he cannot learn from bourgeois historians, whose only object (unconsciously perhaps) is to glorify and to maintain the present system, which the bourgeois class has of course no ^{intention} ambition to change. But the revolutionary Marxist, for whom historical change is the main goal, tears away from history the veil

of national and racial antagonisms and lays bare beneath it the fundamental economic struggle. Behind the struggle of British and Dutch, of white man and black man, he sees the struggle for bread and butter and for security in the enjoyment of the good things of life.

The present struggle has its roots in the past struggle — we understand today's economic struggle in the light of yesterday's historical struggle.

The object of this series of articles is to present to working class students a sketch of South African working class history.

We intend to concentrate on those events and processes which have influenced the political, economic, and cultural development of today, and we try to draw from this historical survey certain conclusions, certain lessons which will guide us in the mighty task we have before us, the task of building a new system on the ruins of the old one, a new South Africa fit for the workers ^{and peasants} and their children to live in. And since South African workers & peasants

produce for the world market and
 consume the goods produced by
 workers in other lands, their fate
 is bound up with that of the
 workers of the world. Together
 with them we will build a new
 world. * * * * *

Prior to the discovery of
 mineral wealth in South Africa —
 gold, diamonds etc, the towns were
 merely enlarged villages dependent
 on the farming population. But
 when large scale mining operations
 began and the industrial revolution
 overtook South Africa, thousands
 of miles of railway lines were
 built, industrial cities sprang up
 in the interior, and a huge new
 population streamed into the
 country from Europe. This new
 influx consisted for the most part,
 of workers, bringing with them
 from overseas the traditions of
 class struggle.

The South African working
 class movement thus did not
 grow up with the growth of
 capitalism, slowly and painfully,
 as in Europe and America, but
 was imported into the country,
 so to speak, when British Imper-
 ialism laid greedy hands on
 the newly discovered mineral
 wealth. The struggles of the

workers in South Africa, both black and white, have been struggling against capitalism in its final stages, struggles against imperialism. What is Imperialism?

In the dawn of capitalism, free trade and free competition was the watchword of the capitalist class, but all this has suffered a profound change as capitalism approaches its sunset.

Trusts, cartels and combines have grown up with the result that the small producers have been crushed, swallowed up, and the means of production have been concentrated into the hands of national and ^{then} ~~even~~ international syndicates.

The banks too, which were at one time the intermediaries of industry, have combined together in powerful banking trusts with a finger in every pie, for not only do they control strings of smaller banks, and financial concerns, but they also participate directly in industrial undertakings. Their position has become so powerful that a small group of ruling finance capitalists is able to dictate to the merchants and

industrialists of the world.

Imperialism is the age of trusts and of finance capital. The trusts of the imperialist countries share out the world market amongst themselves as well as the sources of raw materials — ~~the colonies~~. Finance capital ^{controls all branches of} ~~dictates~~ ^{industry,} and, ^{gets a grip on small countries,} through its loans, ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~foreign~~ ^{foreign} ~~governments.~~ ^{colonies,} In this way free ^{dominates} competition disappears to give place to monopoly, free trade vanishes and we have protection in its place. — ^{stays,} capitalism ^{never to higher} ~~it~~ transformed into Imperialism, and can now only expand further by means of war.

The world war of 1914 is but the first in the series of wars and revolutions that mark the final extinction of capitalism.

Early competitive capitalism encouraged technical progress, new processes, new inventions, but now that industry has fallen into the hands of monopolist trusts, inventions are bought up and suppressed — monopoly becomes a break on further

technical advance. Where the old capitalists were captains of industry, personally controlling their concerns, today management has become the task of specialists, to whom the capitalist investors have entrusted all control, while they themselves have degenerated to an idle class of rentiers ^{parasitic} coupon clippers, devouring the profits of others' labour.

^{2nd South Africa} ^{Imperialism in S.A. first} ^{During} This parasitic class, which ~~owns~~ ^{owns} the bulk of the shares in the gold and other mines, and which has ^{financed} ~~financed~~ the municipal and government loans, is by virtue of its financial control of ~~this country~~ the ruling class of South Africa, although it is for the most part domiciled in Europe and America. To pay tribute to these external blood-sucking imperialists class the whip is cracked over the whole South African population.

The native has been driven by hunger and taxation to slave in the mines for the profit of imperialism, while the European workers have ~~in~~ ^{been} allotted the role of taskmasters and foremen over the native workers.

This is the broad background

of Imperialism against which the working class movement in South Africa developed ~~later in the~~

We shall ~~in a series of articles~~ ~~on the history of articles~~ ~~the~~ ~~working class movement in South Africa~~, give a survey of the historical developments in this ^{S.A.} country following the industrial revolution; we shall observe how the growth of South African capitalist economy ^{has} produced not only the trade union movement among white workers but also a ferment among the native semi-proletariat of the mines, an awakening class consciousness that has ~~hitherto~~ expressed itself in spontaneous and sporadic strikes, but which is gradually groping its way towards organisation and political expression.

The Labour Party, the Communist Party and the old I. C. U. have all ^{embodied} ~~embodied~~ the political aspects of the class struggle in South Africa which have been veiled by those innumerable antagonisms that cloud the class issues. The national question, the colour question, the agrarian question; these issues are intimately bound up with working class ~~the~~ history which future articles will examine in greater detail.

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