

December 4 1937

E13

### The March Days of 1922.

During the last days of February, strikers who assembled outside the Boksburg Goal and sang the "Red Flag" to cheer some of their comrades imprisoned within, were fired upon by the police. Two were killed, a third died of wounds and many others were wounded. This unprovoked shooting goaded the workers into their final onslaught upon the Government forces.

For two months, ever since the strike began, there had been desperate attempts on the part of the strikers to bring about the suspension of work in the mines, but with gradually diminishing success. The native workers naturally continued working, supervised by the salaried staffs and the deserters who drifted back to work in increasing numbers, encouraged by the active protection of the Government. Sabotage and picketing were answered by placing armed guards on the mines, and skirmishes became more frequent, the situation more explosive.

The shooting at Boksburg Goal was the spark that fired the mine. As the anger of the strikers flamed up more fiercely, the Civic Guard which had been armed and equipped in readiness was called up. Remembering the "Tramwaymen's Soviet" still fresh in the memory of the workers, the Government occupied the Power Station and Tramsheds in Johannesburg by an armed force which drove the workers from the shops at the point of the bayonet. The city was plunged into darkness at night and transport ceased. A huge demonstration of more than five thousand strikers assembled on the Union Ground, Johannesburg, in protest against the murder of the Boksburg strikers.

And while the indignation of the workers and sympathetic sections of the middle class rose higher and higher, the Chamber of Mines deliberately fanned the flames by its insolent refusal even to maintain communication with the workers' representatives, by expelling strikers' families from their homes on mine property, by every means in its power. The Government co-operated enthusiastically in this process of deliberate provocation, by refusing an enquiry into the Boksburg shootings, by flooding the Rand with special constables in addition to the troops and police.

On March 6th, under the pressure of the militant rank and file, a general strike was declared to commence the following day. Pickets and demonstrators were confronted by armed government forces and the fighting reached its peak on March 10th: on this day, Martial Law was declared. Fighting was general all along the Reef. Benoni Trades Hall was bombed from the air, and many civilians, women and children killed, while the strikers for their part struck heavy blows, launching a surprise attack on the Durban Light Infantry stationed at Ellis Park, and ambushing the Transvaal Scottish at Dunswart.



The Government flung all its forces into the Rand, and finally brought up the "Burgher Forces" to complete the overwhelming of the Insurrection. Fordsburg, the last remaining stronghold of the militants was bombarded heavily with big guns and fell before the superior arms and numbers of the Government forces. The "Red Revolt" after a fortnight of fighting was at an end, to be replaced by capitalist terror. Houses were searched, thousands of arrests made; the strikers beaten and brutally mishandled in the ~~g~~ols. Some of the captured strikers were done to death at the hands of their captors; the cold blooded shooting of the three Hanekom boys will never be forgotten by the South African workers.

Trial by jury was abolished, and even while hundreds were awaiting trial, some of them on capital charges, the Government Commission on Martial Law sat, a commission whose terms of reference were apparently to whitewash Government, police, military, and the Chamber of Mines, and particularly the murderers of captured strikers. The real "culprits" for the uprising, if we are to believe the report and the flood of Chamber of Mines propaganda that was let loose, were the Nationalists and the Communists.

The Communist Party had been in existence but a short time, and consisted of a mere handful of radicals, a few of whom did indeed play a part in the strike, but only as individuals. The Communist Party as a whole did not exist for all practical purposes, but a great to-do was made by the mouthpieces of the Chamber of Mines about the "Red Gold" and the "Moscow influences" that lay behind the uprising.

On the other hand, the Nationalist Party played in the whole affair a characteristic role - the role of Judas. The rich landowners who form the class backbone of the Nationalist Party planned to utilise the situation in order to lever ~~themselves~~ into power at the next election, and the strikers were urged to "wait till the elections" and to avoid all violence. There was however a strong current of republican feeling among the workers that clamoured for the overthrow of Smuts' party of British Imperialist domination, and demanded a provincial government.

In the first days of February, the attitude of the Government in protecting scabs impressed vividly on the consciousness of the workers that the Government was merely the executive committee of the ruling classes. But what they did not realise was that the Nationalist Party represented only another section of the ruling classes - the slave-driving farmers. The workers naively took the demagogy about an independent republic at its face value. When Roos spoke of the nationalisation of the mines, they answered by sending delegates to the Nationalist and Labour M.L.A.'s at Pretoria asking them to proclaim a South African Republic and form a Provisional Government.

The proposal was rejected, but the workers continued in their faith



in the Nationalists, and even though the burghers were permitted by the Nationalists to be used against the workers, the lesson was not learned, for there was no workers' party capable of branding on the workers' consciousness the lessons of the defeat and betrayal. At the next election, the mass revulsion to the party of Smuts swept the Pact Government into power.

The blood of the Rand miners was shed in an attempt to defend the Colour Bar and the "Status Quo", an attempt inevitably foredoomed to failure. The privileged position and the high wages of the white workers was protected by their position in industry as skilled workers only as long as natives were new to industry. In 1904, when Chinese labourers were imported to work in the gold mines, the white workers demanded and received as the price for their consent to the transaction, legal protection. Certain occupations were reserved for Europeans by statute.

During the Great War, the mineowners succeeded in having the miners considered as workers in essential services, and the production of gold went on at full speed; but when it was found impossible to recruit the full Third Contingent, the Chamber of Mines reluctantly agreed to permit the enlistment of miners, and their place was taken by experienced natives, who proved quite capable of carrying out the work. Alarmed by this, the Miners Union succeeded in engineering the Status Quo Agreement in 1918. It was the determined efforts of the Chamber of Mines to alter the ratio of European to non-European labour that led to the uprising. The white workers attempted to defend their position by striking and ultimately by resorting to arms. They failed, and they must fail again when the Chamber of Mines makes its next determined effort to force the white workers back.

Only by the road of solidarity with the native workers, only by joint struggle to better the position of the native miners will the welfare of both be secured.



**Collection Number: AG2722**

**WORKER'S PARTY OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1933-1935**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

©2013

**LEGAL NOTICES:**

**Copyright Notice:** All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:** Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a collection held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa