

~~The Anglo Boer War.~~

South African working class history begins with the opening of the mines. The skilled workers for these mines and for the secondary industries to which mining gave birth, came from Europe carrying with them a highly developed capitalist technique.

In the course of a few decades, the old South Africa of the bare veld and lonely ranches was transformed. Railways and the huge new populations of the Rand and Kimberley gave to the landowners a market for farm produce and means of transport, where previously they had merely farmed for their own bare subsistence.

But almost immediately the interests of the mine-owning class came into sharp conflict with those of the Boer landowners, and this conflict was the prelude to the Anglo-Boer War.

The government of the South African Republic was in effect a feudal regime that sought to control and imprison the growing forces of capitalist economy. A bitter fight developed over railway rates and customs tariffs. The mine owners groaned piteously under the burdens that were laid on them by the government. This Government they complained, sold monopolies to certain individuals for the manufacture of goods, pretending that their purpose was to encourage secondary industry although they knew full well that the monopoly holders merely imported goods, repacked them and sold them at a high price. The mine owners did not mind so much the jam monopoly and such like swindles on the workers but the dynamite monopoly was more than they could bear since ~~it~~ it was they themselves who had to pay for this graft.

The new population of "Uitlanders" which already outnumbered the original Transvaal population of Boers, was excluded from citizenship rights by the government. The agents of British Imperialism stirred up the Uitlanders in a campaign for the vote, for admission to the civil service, for educational reforms.

Only after the failure of the "Reform" movement and after the experiment of the Jameson Raid (1895) had convinced the Imperialist bourgeoisie that it was not possible to seize power by means of a military coup, only then did they resort to war in order to effect the transference of power.

The Anglo-Boer War was thus a crisis in the struggle of the two ruling classes of South Africa - the landowners and the imperialist bourgeoisie; the issue at stake was the class issue - which class was to be master in the South African house? It was obvious of course that the primitive landowning class could not hold its own against capitalism in its prime.

Nevertheless the class issue was, and is to this day, masked by the national question, because of the fact that the landowners were predominantly Dutch, while Imperialism spoke English and carried with it the whole British tradition. It was for that reason that the change which in European countries was effected by revolution and civil war was in South Africa effected by the war of "Briton and Boer". The economic warfare that still continues between the mutually hostile classes is to this day masked by the issue of "racialism."

For the skilled white workers who flocked to South Africa in the period preceding the Anglo-Boer War, work was plentiful, conditions good, wages high. Secondary industry lagged behind on account of the shortage of skilled labour, which was immediately absorbed upon entering the country, by the mines.

Founded Although the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners was formed as early as 1881, we observe that no trade unions were formed until the eve of the Anglo-Boer War. This fact was of course a reflection of the shortage of skilled labour and the privileged position of the white workers, a position that has not been weakened until recent years.

In 1896 the iron moulders founded their trade union, followed two years later by the typographical workers and the engine drivers and firemen.

Industrial activity was practically suspended during the long drawn out guerrilla fighting, and the short post war boom was followed by an intense depression. Throughout these vicissitudes until 1911, the activities of the Rand trade unions were co-ordinated by the Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council which became in 1911 the Transvaal Federation of Trades. Stormy years followed for the trade unions, but before recounting their struggles of the skilled workers, we must take a brief glance at the conditions of the unskilled African and Asiatic workers who formed the bulk of the toilers exploited in industry.

The real struggle between "Boer and Briton", that is, between the slave-driving landowners and the blood-sucking mineowners was a struggle for the right to exploit the reserves of native labour that surrounded the mines and farms. The natives themselves were perfectly contented under tribal conditions. The story of the devices adopted by the recruiters to induce the tribesmen to come to the mines, forms one of the blackest chapters in that long tale of crime that recounts the history of Imperialism in this country.

There was not enough unskilled labour to serve in the mines and on the farms. Both mine owners and ranchers exhausted all expedients to obtain the labour they needed so urgently. Indentured labour was imported from India for the sugar plantations and the coal mines. The Indian question thus arose from the frantic search for labour, and the long struggle of the Indian workers as well as the long overdue revolt of the native miners came to a head during the three or four years that preceded the Great War. During these years there occurred ~~the Rand general strike~~ amongst the European workers the general strike and the strikes of the miners. In order to understand better the events of 1911-1914, we must take a survey of the development of South Africa's only heavy industry — the mines. This we shall do in our next instalment.

next article will deal with the Mines.

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