

THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL
AND THE STRIKE OF THE 60,000 AFRICAN MINE
WORKERS ON THE WITWATERSRAND GOLD MINES

1.

For over 50 years the wages of the hundreds of thousands of African workers employed in the Gold Mining Industry in South Africa have remained more or less stationary, having ranged from 10/6d. to 15/-d. per week. Nearly all the workers are indentured labourers and are compelled to live in compounds where they are provided with rations and have to sleep on cement beds.

2.

The Chamber of Mines is bitterly opposed to trade union organisation among the African mineworkers and has done everything in its power to prevent these workers from organising. Despite the bitter opposition of the mine owners the African Mine Workers' Union was formed some years ago and thousands of workers became members. Under an able and responsible leadership the Union pursued a policy of conciliation and for years sought to obtain improvements by peaceful means.

3.

In 1943 the Government appointed a Commission - under the Chairmanship of Mr. Justice Lansdown - to enquire into the wages of Native mine workers on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines. The African workers were not represented on the Commission, but were afforded the opportunity of presenting a memorandum and submitting evidence. The memorandum submitted by the Union dealt very fully with the wages and conditions of native mine workers. The document is undoubtedly one of the finest ever presented on behalf of any section of workers. The Commission carried out a very lengthy investigation and made recommendations with regard to increases in wages and other conditions of employment, which would have cost the Mining Industry on an aggregate the amount of £2,600,000 per annum, or an average increase of wages and other benefits to workers of about 3/-d. per week per worker. The

improvements recommended were totally inadequate.

4.

Some of the hardships of the African Mine Workers in the Gold Mining Industry may be ascertained from the following extracts from the Commission's report:-

Paragraph 67 of the Report States :-

"In its evidence the Chamber laid great stress on the fact that its policy was to employ cheap native labour. A study of its annual reports, particularly during the early years, indicates clearly that one of its chief problems was to secure an adequate supply of labour at a reasonably low wage. During the period 1890-1898 several very determined efforts were made to reduce the wages, but continued shortage of labour and lack of general control over the wage rates resulted in alterations in the wage level."

Paragraph 68 :-

"The early history of mine native labour on the Witwatersrand is briefly given as follows by Hatch and Chalmers in their book 'The Gold Mines of the Rand', published in 1895 :-

'In the early days the rate of wages grew rapidly owing to the inadequacy of supplies, until in 1890, the average pay of natives was as high as 63s. a month, exclusive of keep. In that year an endeavour was made to secure the concerted action of various mining companies in reducing the wages, and a scale of monthly payments to natives was agreed to by 66 companies, with the result that in the course of three months the average wage was reduced to 41/6d. a month. Little effort, however, was made at that time to increase the supply, and the reduction was to a great extent temporary, owing to the failure of many of the companies to maintain the scale agreed upon as soon as natives became scarce. Although wages did not at once return to the former high figures, the demand has since that time steadily increased to a greater extent than the supply, and wages have consequently again become as high as 60s. Towards the close of 1893 the Chamber, adopting a policy more likely to prove successful, instituted a Native Labour Department, with the objects

(1) of assuring an adequate and regular supply of native labour, by opening up the sources of supply which exist within the Republic, and if this were found insufficient, by arranging for the introduction of natives from the East Coast, and

(2) of taking steps for the gradual reduction of native wages to a reasonable level.

This policy is still being pursued, and although the result has not yet been felt, it is probable that eventual success will be attained, by increasing the facilities for natives travelling to and fro, and by inducing them to make contracts binding them to stated periods of service at fixed rates."

Paragraph 78 :-

Cash Wages. - The following table will show the rates of
- wages -

wages distributed over the total native force on the 17th February, 1943 :-

Table IV.

DISTRIBUTION OF WAGE RATES OVER NATIVE LABOUR FORCE

	Surface Employees.	Under-ground Employees.	Totals
Number earning less than 1/9d. per shift	4,658	-	4,658
Number earning 1/9d. to 1/11d. per shift	30,360	-	30,360
Number earning 2/-d. per shift	17,488	107,690	125,178
Number earning 2/1d. to 2/3d. per shift	7,993	61,648	69,641
Number earning 2/4d. to 2/6d. per shift	5,742	26,427	32,169
Number earning 2/7d. to 2/9d. per shift	1,922	12,026	13,948
Number earning 2/10d. to 3/-d. per shift	1,562	5,741	7,303
Number earning 3/1d. to 4/-d. per shift	2,003	6,541	8,544
Number earning 4/1d. to 6/-d. per shift	1,402	5,258	6,660
Number earning 6/- and over per shift	135	1,181	1,316
	<u>73,265</u>	<u>226,512</u>	<u>299,777</u>

Paragraph 79:-

"The average rate for surface labourers works out at 2/1d. per shift and for underground labourers at 2/3d. but average rates take into consideration a number of workers who, through long service or efficiency, or through being paid by results, have progressed considerably beyond the minimum rates. Thus a machine boy, though working on a minimum rate contract, is usually paid by the footage of holes drilled, and an experienced labourer will usually earn something in the neighbourhood of 3/-d. per shift at this work."

Paragraph 80 :-

"Maximum Average Wage. - A system known as 'the maximum average' is in operation on all Chamber mines, fixing an average daily wage for labourers on all mines, which under penalty may not be exceeded save for good cause shown. The maximum average per shift up to the end of 1942 was 2/3d. but an alteration in January, 1943, in the commencing rate for underground workers from 1/8d. to 2/-d. led to its relaxation. Mr. W. Gemmill stated in evidence that the figure now works out at 2/3³/₄d. per shift."

Paragraph 81 :-

"The limitation imposed by the maximum average wage provision was condemned in 1914 by the Native Grievances

Enquiry Commissioner, who, in Chapter IV of his Report, stated that the earning of Natives employed on tramping and shovelling piece-work were thereby unduly restricted and efficiency directly penalised. Amendments to the clause made since 1914 enabled the Low Grade Mines Commission of 1920 to state in paragraph 208 of its Report that the clause was not then open to the same serious objection as previously. Nevertheless that Commission felt that its operation should be closely watched to see that it did not work unfairly against efficiency or against the earning capacity of the Native."

Paragraph 87 :-

"Deductions and Expenses. - For the first month or two after he begins work on the mines, the native labourer usually finds that he has little or no cash to send home. The advance which he received at his recruitment must be repaid; he has to purchase a pair of boots; he must buy something in the nature of a cheap mattress or sacking which he can use upon his concrete bunk for sleeping purposes; and usually he finds it necessary to purchase some clothing. The amount of the advance and the cost of the boots are deducted by instalments from his first earnings, subject to the retention by him of 10s. per ticket, until the whole amount due is discharged. The bedding and the change of clothing are usually purchased by him out of his first available earnings."

Paragraph 88:-

"Other deductions made from the pay of a mine labourer are the price of a lamp or of a protective jacket where these have been issued to him free and have been lost and must be replaced. Frequently the loss will have been incurred through theft, but it would be difficult for the compound management to ascertain this and to distinguish between cases where the loss has been through no fault of the labourer and those where it has been the result of sale by him or negligence on his part."

5.

Since 1932 the Gold Mining Industry in South Africa has experienced unprecedented prosperity and made hundreds of millions of pounds in profits. In recent years Gold Mining Shares have risen very considerably, some as much as 1,000% and higher. The Industry could easily afford to improve the wages and conditions of the African mine workers, but even the recommendations of the Lansdown Commission were not carried out in full and the workers were deprived of some £800,000 per annum. The cost of living has risen catastrophically since 1939. A Native mine worker has to pay a week's wages for a cheap shirt, a month's wages for a second-grade pair of trousers or for an inferior blanket. Naturally the Native mine workers were bitterly discontented.

6.

The African Mine Workers' Union, however, urged the workers to be patient and for about two years tried to arrange a joint meeting with the Gold Producers' Committee of the Chamber of Mines to discuss the grievances of the workers. The Chamber of Mines, however, contemptuously refused to have any dealings with the Union or to redress the workers' grievances. There was no alternative left for the workers in their efforts to secure elementary justice, but to come out on strike, and on the 12th of August, some 60,000 African mine workers stopped work.

The Government, instead of taking steps to enquire into the workers' grievances and have them adjusted, decided to suppress the strike by means of police violence. Hundreds of police were mobilized and the most rigorous repressive measures were used to break the strike and force the workers back to work. About ten workers were killed (the exact number is unknown), hundreds were injured and thousands of workers were actually driven back to work by force. Public opinion throughout the world was shocked and outraged at the manner in which the Union Government dealt with the strike.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL AND THE STRIKE.

7.

The South African Trades and Labour Council claims to represent the interests of all organized workers throughout South Africa; to be the official voice of organized labour in South Africa; and to constitute the exclusive channel for communication between the Trade Union Movement and the Government and any overseas, national and international, Trade Union Movement. There is no colour bar in the Constitution of the Council and Non-European Trade Unions may affiliate to the Council.

The Council has also adopted a Workers' Charter, which is based on the Philadelphia Charter adopted by the International Labour Organization, and in the preamble to the South African Workers' Charter, it is stated:

"... we put forward our Workers' Charter, embodying fundamental demands that the Trade Union Movement believes can be brought to fruition for a post-war South Africa, where security of employment, freedom from want and poverty, with a happy and prosperous life, can be attained for all our people, irrespective of race, colour or creed."

8.

In spite of the declared principles and objects of the S.A.T. & L.C., the National Executive Committee of the Council failed to give the African mine workers any support. Admittedly the African Mine Workers' Union was not affiliated to the Council, but the Union had applied for affiliation and, instead of being accepted, the N.E.C. dilly-dallied for a long time and did not come to any definite conclusion. The cause of the African mine workers was so patently just that no one calling himself a trade unionist could refuse them support.

9.

On the 20th August, 1946, the N.E.C. discussed the strike and adopted the following Resolution :-

"While not at the moment prepared to express any opinion on the merits or demerits of the cause of the dispute concerning the Native Mine Workers' Union owing to the lack of knowledge on the matter, this N.E.C. expresses its strong disapproval of the action of the Government, through its police force, in coercing the Native strikers, by means of violence to return to work; that a Sub-committee be appointed to investigate and ascertain the true version of the causes which resulted in the Mine Native Strike; the findings of the Sub-committee to be reported to a subsequent meeting of this N.E.C.; and further, that a request be made to the Government that any Commission appointed by it to investigate the position of native labourers generally should include a representative from the N.E.C."

A Sub-committee was appointed of the following members of the N.E.C.:

G. McCormick	Miss J. Cornelius
C. H. Crompton	J.J. Venter (Vice-Chairman)
S. Kemp	W. de Vries (General Secretary
B. Weinbren	<u>ex-Officio</u>)
T. O'Keefe	

10.

Three days later a cablegram was received from the World Federation of Trade Unions, reading as follows :-

"PLEASE INFORM WFTU OF ORIGIN OF LATEST STRIKE MOVEMENT STOP SUBMIT REPORT ON ITS DEVELOPMENT AND GIVE DETAILS OF INCIDENTS WHICH TOOK PLACE STOP WFTU WISHES TO BE INFORMED VERY SPEEDILY".

Without consulting the full N.E.C., three members of the Sub-committee of Enquiry, Messrs. G. McCormick, S. Kemp and the Secretary of the Council, Mr. W.J. de Vries, sent the following cable in reply to the W.F.T.U.:

"YOUR CABLEGRAM REFERS STOP NATIVE MINE WORKERS UNION NOT AFFILIATED TO SOUTH AFRICAN TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL STOP WE WERE NOT CONSULTED BY THEM ON DESIRABILITY OF STRIKE STOP COMMITTEE OF THIS COUNCIL INVESTIGATING ORIGIN AND INCIDENTS CONNECTED WITH STRIKE STOP STRIKE WOULD APPEAR TO BE DUE TO GOVERNMENT AND CHAMBER OF MINES REFUSAL TO MEET NATIVE TRADE UNION AND FAILURE TO IMPLEMENT IN FULL RECOMMENDATIONS MADE RECENTLY BY GOVERNMENT COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO CONDITIONS OF NATIVE LABOURERS ON MINES STOP FURTHER APPEARS NATIVES WERE MISLED BY IRRESPONSIBLE PEOPLE STOP POLICE METHODS CONTROLLING STRIKE DRASTIC BUT WARRANTED STOP SUCH ACTION WAS NECESSARY TO MAINTAIN LAW AND ORDER PREVENTING CHAOS IN COUNTRY."

At the following meeting of the N.E.C. delegates raised indignant protests against the text of the cablegram and Miss B. du Toit moved and Miss J. Cornelius seconded

"That the cablegram be repudiated and that the Resolution adopted by the full N.E.C. be sent to the W.F.T.U."

Numerous trade unions sent in their protests against the text of the cablegram to the S.A.T.&L.C. and some direct to the W.F.T.U.

The Resolution was defeated. It will be observed that Messrs. Kemp, McCormick and De Vries, members of the Sub-committee of Enquiry, had already passed judgment condemning the workers and approving of the police violence used against the strikers before the Sub-committee started with its inquiry; further that the cablegram was in direct conflict with the Resolution adopted by the full N.E.C.

12.

The South African Council of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (A.E.U.) sent a letter to the Secretary of the S.A.T. & L.C., dated the 24th September, 1946, which read as follows:-

- "Dear -

"Dear Sir,

African Mine Workers' Strike

In reply to your circular No. 21/46 dated 6th instant, in connection with the above, we have to advise that the South African Council feel that the following reasons may be of assistance to your Sub-committee in their investigation into the above strike:-

- (a) Low wages, more especially so in view of the present value of the Pound.
- (b) The recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry were not carried out.
- (c) The refusal of the Chamber of Mines to hold discussions with the African Mine Workers' Union.

Anticipating a favourable consideration of the above.

Yours faithfully

Secretary

"

On the 4th October, 1946, the A.E.U. addressed a second letter to the S.A.T. & L.C., which read as follows:-

"Dear Sir,

AFRICAN MINE WORKERS' STRIKE - TELEGRAM SENT BY
S.A. TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL TO WORLD FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

We acknowledge with thanks your letter of the 26th ultimo, wherein you state that the Council's suggested reasons for the cause of the above strike, will be taken into consideration by your Sub-committee.

In regard to the telegram sent by your Council to the World Federation of Trade Unions, we are instructed to submit the S.A. Council's resolution in connection with the contents thereof.

The South African Council has resolved that the S.A.T. & L.C. be informed:-

"That we cannot agree with the part of their telegram to World Federation of Trade Unions regarding the African Mine Workers' Strike, where they refer to the native Labourers being misled by irresponsible people and that Police action was warranted.

The true fact being that the leaders of the Union acted in a responsible manner in their efforts to better the conditions of their members. The employers acted in an irresponsible manner by completely ignoring the repeated demands over a long period to meet the Union's leaders.

- After -

After being continually ignored the workers had only one remedy. The right that is recognised by Trade Unionists all over the world - The Right to Strike."

We must request your attention to this matter.

Yours faithfully,

Secretary "

The view of the Amalgamated Engineering Union undoubtedly represented the opinion of all trade unionists worthy of the name in South Africa.

13.

The Sub-committee of Enquiry subsequently called for evidence and a great deal of evidence was presented. Some of the witnesses however, protested against the personnel of the Committee and quite rightly pointed out that at least three of the members of the Committee, Messrs. McCormick, De Vries and Kemp, were unfit to conduct an impartial enquiry, as they had already passed judgment condemning the strike of the African mine workers in the cablegram which they sent to the W.F.T.U. Common decency demanded that these three gentlemen who had shown their prejudice against the workers very clearly should have recused themselves, but they remained on the Committee. The African Mine Workers' Union, feeling indignant and outraged at the cablegram sent by a small group of people, who were now sitting as "impartial judges" to enquire into the conduct of the strike, very naturally refused to give evidence before the Sub-committee of Enquiry. The Sub-committee, however, collected a great deal of evidence on which it could issue a report, but the evidence, it seems, clearly condemned the action of the Chamber of Mines and the Government and apparently some members of the Committee had already made up their minds to condemn the workers.

14.

In December, 1946, Mr. S. Kemp gave notice of the following motion :-

"In view of the fact that the officials of the African Mine Workers' Union declined the Committee's invitation to state their case in regard to alleged untoward incidents -

cidents which took place during the recent strike; and that it would take at least fifteen days to draft a suitable report based on the third-party statements submitted to the Committee of Enquiry, the Committee be dissolved."

Obviously this was an attempt to place the blame on the Mine Workers' Union for the shortcomings of the members of the Committee of Enquiry. Further, much of the evidence that was submitted to the Sub-committee of Enquiry was evidence that was given under oath in court and was not "third-party". Instead of being frank and admitting that they were not willing to issue a report which was favourable to the workers, the majority of the members of the Committee sought without any justification to place the blame on the Mine Workers' Union and to hide themselves behind untenable excuses.

15.

Mr. E.S. Sachs, a member of the N.E.C., moved an amendment to Mr. Kemp's motion, which read as follows :-

"That the Sub-committee appointed by the N.E.C. to investigate into and report upon the African Mine Workers' Strike be dissolved and that all the documents and evidence submitted to the Sub-committee be forwarded to the W.F.T.U."

As the Sub-committee was incapable of carrying out its work properly, and moreover unwilling to do so, the only alternative left was to dissolve it. Mr. Sachs, in support of his amendment, stated that the Mine Workers' Union could not possibly be expected to submit its case to a Committee of Enquiry, three of whose members had already shown their animosity towards the workers and had passed judgment condemning the workers without having any facts before them. He thought that the attempt to blame the Mine Workers' Union for the incompetence of the Committee was sheer hypocrisy.

Mr. Kemp's motion and Mr. Sachs' amendment were discussed at the meeting of the N.E.C. held on the 4th February, 1947.

The amendment was defeated by six votes for and nine against and the Resolution was carried.

Mr. Sachs then gave notice of the following motions:-

"That the N.E.C. disagrees with the text of the cablegram sent by the Sub-committee to the World Federation of Trade Unions and resolves to withdraw it and notify the World Federation of Trade Unions accordingly.

That the N.E.C. ask the Government to appoint a judicial commission to investigate the dispute of the African Mine Workers' Union."

These resolutions were discussed at a meeting of the N.E.C. on Tuesday, the 18th February, 1947. Mr. de Vries, the Secretary of the Council, in opposing the first Resolution, stated:-

"As a member of the Sub-committee, I am very proud to have sent the cablegram to the World Federation of Trade Unions".

He then proceeded to defend the police action with great fervour. The President of the Council, Mr. A.J. Downes, followed suit, and stated very dramatically that :-

"if he would have been on the Reef at the time of the strike, he would have applauded the action of the police"

Another member of the N.E.C., Mr. Palm, from Pretoria, representing the Pretoria Local Committee of the S.A.T. & L.C., (which openly and defiantly refused to carry out the Constitution of the Council by excluding the Non-European Unions from being represented on the Local Committee), made a speech which would have gladdened the heart of every racist. Several other speakers followed in a similar strain. At times it seemed that it was a meeting of the Klu-Klux-Klan or of the Ossewa-Brandwag and not of "the mouthpiece of organized labour in South Africa."

Mr. R.H. Haldane supported the Resolution in an able and reasoned speech. He stressed the point that neither at the time when the cablegram was sent nor at the present moment was there any evidence to the effect that the strikers were out to commit violence. He also stressed the necessity for helping the African workers to obtain better conditions and to organize into proper trade unions. The Resolution was also supported by

Miss Johanna Cornelius, Miss Bettie du Toit, Mr. Carl Rehm and Mr. Wolfson. Mr. Sachs, replying to the debate, reminded those present that this was a meeting of the N.E.C. of the S.A.T. & L.C., the National Trade Union Centre, and not of preachers of racial hatred. No trade union worthy of the name, had every supported police violence against strikers. Under the pretext of maintaining "Law and Order" in 1913 and 1922 workers were shot. Mr. O. Pirow, in 1932, had scores of Afrikaner women workers, who had come out on strike against wage cuts, beaten up and put in gaol. The cablegram was an outrage against common decency and elementary trade union principles and if not repudiated would result in the S.A.T. & L.C. being damned by the World Trade Union and Labour Movement. The Resolution was put to the vote and the result was as follows:-

For the Resolution

R.M. Haldane
C. Rehm
R.V. Griffiths
E.S. Sachs
I. Wolfson
Miss J. Cornelius
Miss B. du Toit

Against the Resolution

J. Calder
H. Cowley
D.T. Brand
B. Caddy
K.J. George
H.F. Tyler
J.D.F. Briggs
E.A. Clements
M.J. Palm

It should be noted that Mr. Clements, who is the Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, voted against the decision and policy of his own Union.

17.

The Trade Union Movement of South Africa cannot possibly allow this outrageous act of a handful of people against the elementary principles of justice and trade unionism. The honour of the South African Trade Union Movement is at stake. The issue is not one between the conservative trade unionists and militants; for even conservative trade unionists do not applaud police violence against workers. The mouthpiece of organized labour, the South African Trades and Labour Council, must not be allowed to support the cheap labour policy of the Chamber of Mines, the use of police violence against striking workers, and to repudiate

elementary trade union principles for the miserable doctrines of the reactionary Fascist elements. We call upon every Trade Union in South Africa to disassociate itself from the action of the so-called trade union leaders who have completely divorced themselves from recognized trade union principles and practice. We urge every trade union to send protests to the S.A. Trades and Labour Council and express their indignation publicly.

JOHANNA CORNELIUS) Members of the N.E.C.
BETTIE DU TOIT) of the S.A. Trades
E.S. SACHS) and Labour Council
I. WOLFSON)

P.O. Box 6779,
Johannesburg,
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