

FOCUS ON SOUTH AFRICA

Black gold, white profits

The recently ended strike was not the first great struggle on the South African mines. Indeed, mining has been central to the development of South African capitalism, and of apartheid.

The past has vital lessons for today. But often the past has to be rescued from mythology and "official history".

In this three-part article, Bob Fine, co-author of a forthcoming book on the workers' and popular movement in South Africa, looks at the history of the miners' struggle, and explodes some of the myths.

The mine owners: divide, rule and profit

The new democratic order has to address itself to the transfer of ownership, control and direction of the economy as a whole... This (could be done...) hand in hand with true business patriots of this land... It is in this area that the importance of NUM, of COSATU, of all relevant labour movements in joint consultation with the business sector cannot be over-emphasised... The government has gone out of its way to discourage business and labour solidarity, as seen in its hysterical reaction to big business's attempt to communicate with Lusaka. (*Winnie Mandela, keynote speech to the NUM Congress, March 1987, five months before the start of the largest miners' strike in South African history.*)

"Nationalise the mines under workers' control!" NUM poster produced after the Kinross disaster in which 177 miners died.

Those who believe that the great mining houses of South Africa might serve as liberal allies in the fight against apartheid may be right in part, but they should not

forget the role played by the mine owners in brutally exploiting workers from the inception of the gold mines in 1886 to this day, in the repression of all expression of worker grievance, and in building the state system of racism in South Africa which culminated in apartheid. As many commentators have rightly observed, racism and the exploitation of labour in the mines have been intimately connected in the history of South Africa. If it is true these days — a big 'if' — that racism is less useful for the exploitation of labour in the mines, we should not forget the multiple threads which link the mine owners to apartheid willy nilly; nor should we forget that if the mine owners wish to lessen the effect of racism in the mines and in the wider society, then it is only to perfect their system of exploitation in other ways. The mine owners will make concessions, but only if they are forced to by the 'black gold', the workers who labour for others to profit.

The divisions between black and white miners had their origins not just in the colonial relations between black and white introduced by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, but also in their respective relations to the productive process. The mine owners did not simply inherit racism, they reproduced and intensified it on a far larger and more systematic scale. With the discovery of diamonds and then gold in 1886, vast numbers of black men were forced into the mines to perform the unskilled work of digging the ore (or 'lashing'), taking the ore to the surface

('tramping') and then moving the ore to the processing plant. White miners were brought into the mines as skilled workers — imported from Cornwall, Wales, Australia, etc. — to sink the deep shafts, fit the pipes and pumps, instal the lifts, operate the drilling machines, perform the blasting, extract the gold from the ore and manage the labour process as a whole. The mine owners did not create the racial division of labour, but they developed it to new depths. The idea that capital was merely the innocent party as far as racism was concerned, adapting to the imperatives of a racist state, is complete nonsense.

Before the First World War, conditions even for white miners were very bad. The great killer underground was a disease of the lungs called silicosis, caused by breathing in the dust from the drilling. The average white rock driller could hope to live only five years. He died at an average age of 37 years. When skilled miners returned home to Britain in the First World War, most were to cough themselves to death in agony. Whites were privileged over Africans, but suffered brutally as workers at the hands of the owners. The owners were simply not prepared to pay the price of installing safety equipment. Working life was no bed of roses for white miners.

For African miners, conditions were still worse. The mines needed vast numbers of unskilled workers and its hunger for labour could never be satisfied in a country where the colonial conquest of Africans had only just been completed, where the resistance of Africans was such that in one form or another most still held onto some land, and where the incipient agricultural working class was tied to the land of the white farmers as labour-tenants and prevented by law from moving away. The mineowners used their resources to the full. At first they sent out their own recruiting agents to bribe and coerce chiefs and headmen to send their young men to the mines. They made deals with the colonial powers to the North, especially the Portuguese, to send men down. They used their own troops to force Africans off the land — by taxation, expulsion and restriction of access. They impelled the British government to invade the independent Boer Republics, where the gold was found, to impose a modern state capable of supporting the mine owners' hunger for black labour and pretended they did so as a civilising mission, even as they instituted the first concentration camps for Afrikaner farmers and their families.

Today, the mine owners express their willingness to phase out slowly the migrant labour system and declare that it no longer suits their purposes. In reality the mine owners from the earliest years were unenthusiastic about migrant labour: transport, the loss of experienced workers, the unpredictability of finding new labour, were all costly. Migrant

FOCUS ON SOUTH AFRICA

labour was forced on the mineowners by the workers. The resistance of Africans to working in the mines was such that the mineowners were compelled against their will to grant fixed contracts — at first of about 7 months, then 10 months, then 12 months, as the owners got the upper hand — at the end of which the African could return to his land. The owners' preference was for a permanent workforce, but it could not be achieved on account of what Hobsbawm has called the 'primitive rebellion' of Africans against the slavery of wage labour on the mines. The idea that migrant labour was introduced as the ultimately rational form of securing cheap and docile labour was an ex post facto rationalisation of some Marxists. It is by no means obvious, for example, that the migrant labour system was any cheaper for the owners than the employment of men, women and children on the mines, as occurred in Britain.

It was not so much migrant labour that the owners wanted — though they turned it to their own advantage as best they could — but rather rightless, unfree labour. To impose discipline on African workers and prevent them from leaving, the owners locked them into compounds, sowed tribal divisions between them, imposed private policemen and 'boss-boys' (or 'indunas') over them, built prisons within the compounds, held back their wages till the end of their contract, fined them for not fulfilling their quotas, forced them to buy at the company store, starved them of nutritional food, used the Pass Laws — originally intended to tie labour tenants to the land — to prevent their movement and the Masters and Servants Laws to back their discipline within the labour process. As black workers died in droves — from pneumonia, meningitis, intestinal infections, scurvy, silicosis, TB and accidents — so the hunger of the mineowners for more black labour and for more control over black labour was compounded and met by the state. The wages of black miners were miniscule, in absolute terms and in relation to whites (particularly after, for example, the 'loafer ticket' system of depriving black miners of their day's wage when a quota of work was not performed had taken its toll). When the mines re-opened after the Boer War and Africans fiercely rebelled against returning to the mines, the owners indentured some 100,000 Chinese workers to satisfy their craving for unfree labour, who were paid even lower than the Africans. After resistance by the Chinese workers and an outcry in Britain against slave labour, the Chinese were sent home to the last living man.

The 'Randlords' who owned the gold mines came from the monopoly which had won control of the diamond mines, De Beers. Under the control of Cecil Rhodes, who became Prime Minister of the Cape in 1890, it personified the link between mining capital and the state in South Africa. The Randlords also came directly from British capital based in London. The small firms were soon pushed

out, the remaining monopolies formed a cartel in 1887 called the Chamber of Mines, and the pickings were enormous. Rhodes' personal income at the time was £400,000 a year. The City of London's streets were paved with the gold of black and white labour, thanks to the repatriation of profits.

As the workers dug for money and the bosses in both Britain and South Africa expropriated what they dug out of the ground, the whole massive affair — which revolutionised the face of South Africa in its every aspect — appeared as the civilising mission of the great entrepreneur. As the President of the Chamber of Mines put it in 1912:

"A course of six to twelve months on the mines is the best education for natives. Here they can learn the value of discipline, regularity and the ways of the white man....Outside of the special reserves, the ownership of the land must be in the hands of the white race. The surplus of young men must earn their living by working for a wage...Thorough and general eviction of natives from

private property through the country would effectually dispose of labour troubles as it would force upon the market the excess population and thus create a floating population of native labourers dependent upon it for its support...That the native is grossly overpaid is undeniable."

Well, the businessmen were less mystified by their own civilising mission than the politicians whose job it was in part to mystify.

To this day the mineowners like Anglo-American disclaim responsibility for racism in South Africa. It is true they did not invent it, did not create it. But they did perfect it into a weapon of modern capital and a source of great wealth for the few and of terrible slavery for the many. The miners have been the direct victims of this system, though its victims are to be found much further afield, not least among the women left on the reserves to eke out a living dependent on their absent man's pitiful wage. But the miners have not only been victims, but also fighters●

White and black divide and lose: the defeat of the miners 1920-22

1987 is certainly not the first time that African mineworkers have taken concerted strike action. We have to go back almost 70 years to 1920 to see the first major strike of African miners. Two years later in 1922 there was the huge strike of white mineworkers, known as the Rand Revolt. Even these were not the first strikes of white and black miners. The strikes of 1920 and 1922 were all heroically fought by workers against the might of mining capital and the state. They were all lost with terrible consequences not only for black miners but for the working class movement as a whole. In this historical sketch I wish to draw what seems to me to be the most important lesson from these class struggles: the absolutely disastrous effect of racism and chauvinism within the labour movement.

Rapidly in the years before the First World War black miners learnt the skills originally possessed by whites alone. At the same time, the demand for skilled labour declined as the construction of mines was completed and as the introduction of new technology — particularly the jackhammer drill in the First World War — undermined traditional crafts. White miners took on an increasingly supervisory and managerial role, as black miners performed most of the dirty and dangerous work underground. When skilled white miners went on strike in 1907, the bosses used unskilled Afrikaners to keep the mines running. By 1917 there

were as many Afrikaners as English-speaking miners, proof of the artificiality of the racial division of labour as far as skills were concerned. More and more the whites were skilled in name alone but not in fact; more and more the blacks were skilled in fact but never in name.

The skilled white immigrants had brought with them their traditions of craft unionism, based on control of access to skills. Organised as carpenters, engineers, etc. they used their power as skilled workers to raise their wages, secure paid holidays, win compensation for accidents and disease, etc. Skill rather than race was the basis of their exclusivity. As the old skills waned and black miners learnt the skills of deep-level mining, the bosses began to attack the white unions. They tried to reduce their wages (this led to a successful strike in 1897), they replaced them with semi-skilled Afrikaner workers at lower rates of pay, they substituted black labour at rock-bottom black wages.

The response of the skilled workers was to move toward industrial unionism, embracing all workers in the industry — so long as they were white. At one level this was a positive move, from craft exclusivity to an industrial base of organisation. At another level, it was a move from reliance on skill as a basis of negotiation with employers to race. This embrace of racism within the trade union movement was reinforced by the unions' turn to political parties to support them against the bosses, parties committed to white supremacy and the protection of white workers. The English-speaking miners turned to the thoroughly segregationist Labour Party (committed to sending Blacks back to the reserves and 'Asiatics' back to India) and

the Afrikaans-speaking miners to the Afrikaner National Party. The white unions turned to negotiating job reservation based on a job colour bar to protect them against undercutting by the bosses.

In 1907 the bosses instructed white miners to supervise three black drillers instead of two. This meant a shift in the ratio of black to white miners and an increase in the death-giving dust in the shafts. 4000 white miners went on strike. The bosses introduced scab unskilled Afrikaner labour (who were taught the job by Blacks and Chinese). The government called out the army and beat the miners back to work. The bosses made it clear that they did not need the costly white miners as they did before. The Smuts government, to assuage the danger of white working class discontent, introduced statutory job reservation on the mines to exclude Black and Coloured workers from skilled labour. The bosses still substituted Black for white, but not at skilled levels of pay.

In 1913 some 19,000 white miners went on strike again demanding the recognition of their union and the right of their union to negotiate. The mines were aggressively picketed and scabs beaten up. The government sent in the troops but also promised the workers that they would get their jobs back, with an eight hour day and union recognition. When the miners went back to work, the government reneged on its promises. It banned picketing and outdoor meetings, arrested trade union leaders and sent some back to England. During the First World War, however, when profits were high (war brought death to millions and super-profits to the Randlords), skilled labour was scarce, the trade union leaders declared their support for the war and desire to collaborate with the bosses in a common war effort, and black miners were rumbling with discontent, the Chamber of Mines recognised the white industrial union (the SAIF) and agreed to a so-called 'status quo agreement', guaranteeing that for every 17 black miners they would employ at least two whites at skilled wages.

Before the war, black miners did not usually have the power to strike, but they did fight back 'informally' — through refusing to return to the mines after their period back home, through desertion (at one mine in 1908, 1236 men out of 2000 deserted), sabotage, go-slows, playing dumb, etc. But there were strikes of black miners recorded between 1896 and 1902, then a period of quiescence when their bargaining power was weakened by the import of Chinese labour, and then a major strike in 1913. 13,000 black miners struck for three days, demanding to know 'what are our laws about our pay', until they were forced back to work by the army. The signs were growing, however, that black miners were organising and fighting as workers.

After the war, the price of gold went down, the price of machinery went up, and the mineowners attacked the workers. In 1918 black miners boycotted the com-

pound stores in protest against rising prices. Real wages were reduced. The same year in Johannesburg white municipal workers went on strike for a 25% pay rise and won. Black municipal workers, the 'bucket boys', followed suit for sixpence a day rise and lost. They were sentenced to two months hard labour. The same year, too, the first African trade union in South Africa was formed, the Industrial Workers of Africa. It was set up by the largely white International Socialist League, which had split from the Labour Party during the war in opposition to its chauvinism, and was to form the nucleus for the formation of the South African Communist Party. In Sotho and Zulu the IWS declared: 'There is only one way to freedom, black workers. Unite as workers, unite. Forget the things that divide you. Let there be no talk of Basuto, Zulu or Shangaan. You are all labourers.'

The strikes of 1920 and 1922 shook the confidence of the mine owners but they were decisively beaten, because white racism within the labour movement divided white from black.

Let labour be your common bond'. The Transvaal Native Congress and the African People's Organisation called at one point for a general strike, though they backed off.

Unrest in the mines continued. A boycott here, a strike there, a protest march against inadequate food. The Chamber raised black wages marginally. The IWA continued to organise. In 1920, when two Zulu miners were arrested for organising a strike, this was the trigger that led to the strike of some 71,000 black miners on 21 mines for 12 days. It paralysed the industry. The army was rushed in and beat and shot the workers down the shafts. The Chamber, however, was worried at the spectre of organisation and politicisation among the black miners. It tightened discipline. It introduced small reforms in the conditions of life. It decided to give more of the semi-skilled jobs to a relatively elite group of black miners and so loosen the colour bar. It was this move in part that led to the white miners strike of 1922.

In 1921 the Chamber dropped the wages of many white miners and laid off many more. It abandoned the status quo agreement. It also withdrew recognition from the SAIF. This was particularly threatening in the context of a growing 'poor white' problem as Afrikaner immigrants poured from the country to the town. In January 1922 the union declared a general strike among white miners. The strike was bitterly fought for two months.

The army was brought in, workers were shot, aeroplanes dropped bombs upon them. Leadership of the strike moved away from SAIF to a rank and file 'Action Committee'. Socialist ideas were rife; the Red Flag flew; the strikers armed themselves and formed 'strike commandos' (reminiscent of the Boer war); they held 50 policemen captive for three days; they physically pulled scabs out of the mines. Communist Party members were on the strike committee.

The strike had a revolutionary edge to it. But it was also imbricated with racist ideas. The goal of the strike was to preserve the racist status quo agreement. The organisation of the strike was limited to whites. Even among revolutionaries, the confusion of racist and socialist ideas was marked by the slogan: 'Workers of the world unite for a white South Africa'. As the strike progressed, the racist element grew stronger. Many of the 'commandos' were Afrikaner nationalists, not subject to the discipline of the Action Committee, and directed their violence against black miners. As the industrial muscle of white miners proved inadequate to stop the mines, instead of turning to their black fellow-workers, the white miners turned to the white racist political parties for support against the bosses. They turned to a Pact between the Labour Party and the Afrikaner Nationalists on a 'civilised' (ie. white) labour programme.

The strike was lost. The wages of white miners were cut 25-50%. Many lost their jobs. Apart from black workers, white workers were industrially weak. Politically, however, they were strong enough to use their vote to oust Smuts and bring in the Pact Government. The Afrikaner Nationalists preached 'anti-imperialism' in opposition to the power of 'foreign' capital. The Labour Party preached protection of white workers against the bosses. The Pact government was thoroughly bourgeois. Its law and order programme promised to rid the country of communists and agitators. It introduced statutory job reservation for whites on the mines. It introduced the 'civilised labour' policy giving job preference to whites. It created a corporatist relation with bureaucratic white unions and hammered black unions. It was to prove a government which gave preference to white workers over black but which fiercely suppressed any working class activism, white or black.

The strikes of 1920 and 1922 shook the confidence of the mineowners but they were decisively beaten, because white racism within the labour movement divided white from black. In the newly-formed Communist Party there were marvellous revolutionaries (like Bunting and Jones) committed to the fight against racism and the organisation of black workers. But even the CP had not broken from its White Labour origins. On the one hand, it called for black-white unity on the mines but it also called for support of the racist

FOCUS ON SOUTH AFRICA

Status Quo Agreement. It asked black workers to support job reservation excluding them. It failed to combat the racism of the commandos. Until it actually came to power, it characterised the racist Pact of Labour and Nationalists as an 'anti-imperialist united front'. It failed to support moves in the SAIF to open its ranks to blacks.

The CP made terrible mistakes in pandering to racism. It might not have been able to change the course of the strike — who knows? — but it could have offered a beacon of enlightenment for

black and white workers to guide themselves by. The CP at the time, however, was an essentially youthful party, in the process of breaking from its parent body. It was honest, capable of learning from its mistakes, finding its feet in a difficult world in which the black working class was itself in its infancy. Its mistakes were the mistakes of youth. Regrettably, its later mistakes, when the black miners once again struck in force in 1946, were no longer the mistakes of youth but of a cynical maturity under the watchful eye of Moscow●

“We on the mines are dead men already”: the 1946 strike

The mining industry is one of South Africa's biggest and most important industries. The value of its production was £66 million in 1939. It employed 480,139 workers; 55,008 European, 850 Indians and 424,281 Africans...In 1939 348,000 African workers helped to produce gold valued over £54 million which gave the shareholders a profit of more than £19 million. But they received an average wage of £2.17.1 per month, 685 died of accidents and 1498 died of disease during 1939. Every year thousands more die of miners' pthisis contracted on the mines....Moses Kotane, 1941

The African Mineworkers Union (AMWU) was established in 1941 as part of a wider upturn in working class organisation and consciousness which had taken off in the mid-1930s and reached its peak in the course of the Second World War. There had been an attempt to organise black miners in 1930 by a veteran Communist, T W Thibedi; when he was expelled from the Party during one of its Third Period purges, he appears to have carried on organising without help until at least 1936. In the late 1930s the Trotskyist trade unionist, Max Gordon, attempted to organise black miners until his internment for anti-war activities in 1940. In 1940 the Communist Party addressed itself finally to the organisation of the miners, urged on by veteran trade unionist Ray Alexander: “It is not impossible. It can be done. It must be done”, she implored.

The failure of the CP to address the organisation of black miners between 1936 and 1939 was related to its Popular Front policy of seeking an anti-fascist alliance with three groups: the officialdom of the white labour movement, the Non-European nationalist movements and so called Progressive Capital. None of these potential ‘allies’ was well disposed to the independent organisation of black workers. In 1939, however, the Hitler-Stalin Pact led to an immediate re-orientation of the South African CP to an anti-war stance and freed the Party from the shackles of popular frontism. It denounced its erstwhile allies and was now

open to organising black workers. A committee of 15 was set up to build the AMWU, which was dominated by CPSA members, but included two Trotskyists (also anti-war), Gordon and Koza. Most of the original members of the union were clerical workers, while the number of miners who joined was very small.

With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the CP reverted to support for the Smuts government's war effort. In the field of trade unionism the Party took the view that strike action should be employed only as a last resort. Its analysis was based on a celebration of the Soviet Union: ‘It stands for the freedom of workers and oppressed peoples of the world’ and on the self-conscious subordination of class struggle to the Soviet Union's war effort. The Party called for ‘all-out production for victory’, lobbying the government for reform to ‘strengthen the government in its war effort’. It was in this period that the CP forged an alliance with the ANC on the basis of support for the war, collaboration with the government and opposition to industrial action. Thus the CP took over the AMWU in alliance with the ANC; the Trotskyists were expunged and damned.

For the black miners — white miners, though by no means all white industrial workers, were by then a lost cause — the result of this externally dictated political approach was that, in spite of frequent wildcat strikes from at least 1942 and rank and file calls for a national strike from 1944, the union withheld official action until after the war was over. Even then the reluctance of the union leadership was only overcome as a result of irresistible pressure from below.

In 1942-3 there were a series of local stoppages on the mines, serious enough to lead to the appointment of the Mines Native Wages Commission, better known as the Lansdowne Commission. The African Mineworkers Union welcomed the appointment of the Commission ‘as a token of earnestness on the part of the government’ and put the miners’ grievances to the Commission. It was a

long list, concerning starvation wages, the contract labour system, the compounds described as ‘sleeping coffins’, long hours, accidents, assaults by white supervisors, and centrally, the lack and poor quality of food. The union also complained about the refusal of the Chamber of Mines to recognise its existence. Its policy was to desist from any action, pending the Commission's report, but it energetically built up the membership of the union from 1827 members in 1943 to around 25,000 in 1944 (this was still only 8% of the total force of 300,000).

Calls for strike action at the 1944 conference of the AMWU — made urgent by cuts in rations and severe food shortages — were met by the leadership under Marks with a further plea for patience, while it sought to have the findings of the Lansdowne Commission accepted by the government. Basner recalled two years later that:

“...over 1000 delegates...were present. They wanted...to strike there and then and on the other hand you had officials who wanted to know whether we had exhausted all channels of negotiation for coming to an amicable settlement.”

After an exhaustive examination of the determinants of wage scales in the mines lasting more than a year — which was highly revealing about the dire conditions suffered by migrant workers — the Lansdowne Commission recommended a small cost of living increase, a boot allowance, 150% overtime rates and a minimum wage for surface workers. It did not meet the wage demands of the workers and left the compound system, the pass laws, the colour bar, white domination in the workplace and the illegality of black trade unionism unscathed. ‘Ordinary mine natives’, the Report read, ‘coming as they did from the reserves and the tribal areas...had not reached the development necessary for trade unionism’.

In 1945 *Inkululeko* announced that ‘the African Mineworkers Union is shortly to meet the Prime Minister in Pretoria. The union leaders will put forward the demands of African workers on the mines for more pay in accordance with the Mine Native Wages Commission, and for the right of the union to hold meetings of the workers — at present prevented by regulation 1425’. The Chamber refused to negotiate with the AMWU, ignored all correspondence with the union and was victimising its organisers. The union also met with total rejection from the Acting Prime Minister, Hofmeyr. With further swingeing cuts in rations (30% in 1944) there were demonstrations, hunger strikes, work stoppages and seizure of stores, organised by ad hoc Workers Committees, demanding more and better food. The union, however, continued in its efforts to negotiate a settlement without official industrial action. J B Marks commented on the union's ability to temper its members' anger when he told

a mass Emergency Conference of the AMWU that 'the mine officials and compound managers admit that our meetings encouraged discipline amongst the workers. Far fewer cases of such actions as the stoning of compound managers' houses have occurred since these meetings were in progress'.

In January 1946, the AMWU warned that 'the African miners are saturated with grievances and unless something is done immediately to ameliorate their conditions, there is sure to be a series of sporadic and spontaneous revolts'. Food shortages caused situations of grave immediate discontent. On one mine 'the mine manager told the workers that there was not enough food owing to the draft', to which the miners replied by 'raiding the compound kitchen and (ate) all the food'. The government put up posters in the mine compounds, 'explaining to the Natives the reasons for the shortages of meat, milie meal and kaffir beer, and pointing out that such deficiencies arose through no fault on the part of the Mining

"The problem was that class politics were subordinated to constitutional protest until it was too late".

Industry'. (ICM Annual Report, 1945). But the workers were not assuaged. Majoro and Marks warned that 'a most serious situation is emerging' and 'not only on the crown mines. At Spring mines, for example, dissatisfaction has been aggravated by the recent interference of the police against the workers, when they expressed their resentment at ration cuts'.

In April of 1946, the AMWU demanded a R1 minimum per shift for black workers. The union addressed four letters to the Chamber of Mines stating its demands. The letters went unanswered except for one declaring that 'the matter was receiving attention'. As spontaneous strikes broke out, the union issued a statement declaring that the strikers were 'not acting on the advice of the leadership' and that 'despite the difficulties placed in our way by both employers and government, our organiser succeeded in contacting those workers and impressing upon them the need for discipline and restraint'. Even the Native Representative Council was unanimous in its resolve to press upon the government the urgent need to recognise black trade unions under the Industrial Conciliation Act.

Finally, it was the spontaneous action of the workers which forced the union to support them. On Sunday 4 August 1946 some 1000 delegates attended a meeting at which the decision to call a strike was

taken. According to Diamond, the unknown miner from the floor who demanded the strike said: 'It is better to die here than to go home empty-handed', to which an old miner shouted: 'We on the mines are dead men already'. Simons and Simons write that 'the proceedings were widely published but mine owners and government refused to credit Africans with the capacity to organise concerted action on a large scale in defiance of the elaborate system of surveillance, intimidation and espionage that operated in the compounds'. But it was apparently not only the government and the mine owners who doubted the efficacy of the strike call. In evidence at his trial, charged with sedition for, among other things, engineering the strike, Communist Party member Bram Fisher told of how he had decided to go on holiday during August 1946 believing that no major crisis would occur. He conceded — though we should be cautious of evidence drawn from a state trial — that the Communist Party had been caught off guard and had not expected the strike to occur.

The union took a cautious approach to the strike. As J B Marks put it when discussing his role:

"I explained to them what a strike would involve, sacrifices would have to be made, to refrain from falling for any provocation, to be non-violent. To do nothing on the day of the strike but to remain in their rooms."

The strike began on 12 August with some 70,000 workers participating. Support from CNETU did not come quickly. Only on the afternoon of the second day of the strike did the Council of Non-European Trade Unions meet to pass a resolution that if the Chamber of Mines was not prepared to open negotiations with the African Mine Workers Union by 15 August — the fourth day of the strike — they would call a sympathy strike. By the fourth day more than half the mineworkers had already returned to work. Nabuth Mokgatle, a member of CNETU's executive, provides an insight into the lack of planned support for the strike when he writes that 'the day before the strike I was summoned to be in Johannesburg to plan what was to be done to see the strike through...The meeting had to find ways of contacting the workers and providing them with money and food; and found that none of this had been planned'.

With limited general support and a hesitant leadership, the miners were exposed to ruthless state action. The union offices were raided and its leaders arrested. An attempt by workers to stage a sit-down strike at the rockface was stopped by the police with considerable brutality — the miners were baton-charged and driven up stope by stope to the surface. Similarly, a march by workers to the office of the Chief Native Commissioner in Johannesburg was dispersed by the police with great force. At least 12 Africans were kill-

ed and some 1200 injured.

The strike was defeated. The miners failed to win their demands. The miners' union collapsed and was not to reappear in any force until the formation of the NUM in 1982, 36 years later. The defeat of the miners also represented the final and major blow to the workers' movement as a whole in the 1940s. What went wrong?

There can never be a guarantee that with a different leadership or strategy victory could have been won. We can only guess at what might have been. If the strike had been called during the war, when the state was relatively weak and the workers relatively strong; if it had linked up with the industrial and community struggles waged by black and sometimes white workers during the war; if the union had not been hemmed in by the policy of legalism and support for the war at the expense of industrial action pursued by its political masters; if the union had actively prepared for strike action and not waited for the state to prepare itself for the onslaught; if CNETU had not fallen apart as a result of the anti-strike policy it too pursued under CP-ANC leadership; how might the history of South Africa have been different.

As it was, not only were the miners defeated. It was worse than that. The idea of an independent workers' movement waging a socialist struggle against the state suffered with them. The name of socialism was discredited by the CP. The radicals turned to one or other form of nationalism. The Communist Party itself adopted the banner of African nationalism. The 'unmaking' of the working class movement has subsequently been idealised by CP historians. Witness the words of Dan O'Meara:

"Despite its apparent failure, the strike was a milestone in South Africa's social and political development....It profoundly affected the direction and thrust of African opposition.... The strike and the state's response illustrated the futility of constitutional protest pursued so long by the ANC....The purely class organisation of the African proletariat began to decline as proletarian discontent was channelled increasingly into political opposition in the ANC.... The aftermath of the strike saw the merging of most elements of African opposition into a class alliance articulating a radical nationalist ideology.' The 'problem' with the 1946 mineworkers' strike, however, lay not in the fact that it was organised along 'purely class' lines. The problem was that class politics were subordinated to constitutional protest until it was too late, in the name of socialism, by the CP under external imperatives that had nothing to do with the needs of the trade union movement in South Africa. The instinctive class politics pursued by the miners themselves was made of sterner stuff. This is the tradition of revolt from which miners today should take heart●