

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The Railway Strike in Portuguese East Africa.

By James Shields (Johannesburg).

For the past four months or so a stoppage of railway workers in Lourenco Marques has claimed the attention of the whole of South Africa. In this Portuguese colony affairs have been conducted in rather chaotic fashion since the Great War, and continual changes of administration have only served to intensify matters further. High Commissioner has followed High Commissioner and still the faulty administration has continued until practically the whole colony has been reduced to a veritable state of bankruptcy. Within the past couple of years the cost of living has increased by over 100 per cent whilst the National and Provincial currency has steadily depreciated in value.

The worst effects of what seems to be a chronic crisis has undoubtedly been felt for some time past in Lourenco Marques district, for this place has been made the chief centre of Southern Mosambique. A certain amount of development has been carried out in Northern Mosambique, but most of the resources in the Southern area of the Province have been sacrificed in order to develop the Port of Lourenco Marques, which forms the natural port for that vast hinterland, the British-owned Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia. It is precisely in this town that 800 railwaymen have downed tools and come out on strike rather than submit to further inroads into their standard of life.

Previous to the strike taking place they had enjoyed certain privileges with regard to matters of pay, sickness, holidays, pensions and so forth. Their wages averaged 20 libras per month, although owing to the depreciation in currency this barely constituted a living minimum wage.

Prior to four years ago British sterling was legal tender in Lourenco Marques, the parity value of the £1 being 4,500 reis (national currency) but which had depreciated to approximately 45,000, and has since fallen to 180,000 per £1. The financial

octopus of Portugal and the bank of issue 'for overseas' possessions, the Banco Nacional Ultramarino, introduced the libra note (local currency) which at the outset was exchangeable with the pound sterling. This meant that railway workers receiving on an average 20 libras per month had the equivalent of £20 in British currency. The Banco Ultramarino, however, followed up this move by declaring the libra inconvertible outside the district of Lourenco Marques, and with the continuance of economic decline in the affairs of the province, and the over issue of local currency, the libra has depreciated 85 per cent in its relations with the pound sterling.

This development nominally shows a reduction by almost half of the purchasing power of wages, so that the lot of the workers became exceedingly hard. On the 11th of November one third of the total railway staff downed tools in opposition to the loss of all privileges coming on top of this fall in wages. This was followed by a general strike on November 19th as a protest against the cost of living, depreciated currency, etc. With the exception of Shipping Houses (which carried on business behind closed doors) and Government Departments, practically all business was at a standstill for about a fortnight. This was followed by a lightning strike in sympathy with the striking railwaymen or, more correctly, as a protest against the methods adopted by the Government.

The new Railway Reform Regulations stated that from the 1st of December certain privileges hitherto enjoyed by railway workers would cease; whilst 200 men would be discharged from the railways. The privileges to be discontinued were the subsistence allowance of 4.8 libras, abolition of the annual leave, abolition of three days' sick pay per month abolition of the bonus paid for five years' service. In addition to this an extra four hours was to be tacked on to the usual working week, and all medicine and maternity rights were to be abolished.

In face of this deadly attack, strike action was the railwaymen's only alternative, and this they made use of. Right from the commencement of the struggle the strikers were opposed by a vicious reign of white terror. All sorts of unscrupulous methods have been employed against them, to the extent of forging copies of their strike bulletin, urging a return to work, of imprisonment, deportation and torture. Many have been imprisoned, others have been forced to hide in the bush while soldiers scour the country looking for more victims. Raoul Ferreira, a staunch trade unionist, was murdered in the public streets. An accident occurred to a scab train run by blacklegs and ever since imprisoned strikers have been taken and placed as hostages in open trucks in front of the engine, exposed to the burning rays of the African sun and the piercing cold of the bush veldt. Imprisoned strikers have also been subjected to the lash in an endeavour to force them to confess that the rail accident was an episode of strike sabotage. A number of strikers have been deported while most have had their houses completely destroyed through the violent acts of the police and soldiery. In spite of this there is no sign of weakening in the workers' ranks so far. On the contrary their heroic and plucky fight has aroused the admiration of all working class elements. The Lourenco Marques Typograph workers refused to assist in producing the "O'Portugal", a violent anti-strike paper, and the South African workers sent £300 as donations towards the strike relief fund.

Attempts to procure blacklegs from Portugal have ended in failure, and the nine deportees from Mosambique were enthusiastically welcomed in Lisbon by a demonstration of workers 12,000 strong. A further batch of deportees still remain in the Province owing to the sailors refusing to transport them to Portugal. The strikers' wives formed themselves into a commando and in spite of being fired on by the military carried on demonstrations and collected funds for strike relief.

The whole strike has been a remarkable evidence of working class solidarity, and all the more so when it is recognised that the men have had only the flimsiest trade union organisation. The confident tone of the Government officials at the outset has now given way to an outlook of gloomy anxiety and the fabrication of Communist plots, Russian gold tales, etc. As yet, however, they have not unearthed any "Zinoviev letters" though they are liable to do so at any time now.

The kept press has come out with vilifying attacks against the "S. African Worker", the organ of the S. African Communist Party, because of its whole-hearted support and encouragement of the strikers' cause.

So great has been the dislocation of business in Lourenco Marques that the Railway Administration has agreed to con-

tinue the granting of all privileges if the men only return to work with the exception of the 200 due for retrenchment. These, they say, will be repatriated at Government expense. The strikers, however, have replied that all men must be reinstated or none at all, and so the fight goes on.

The issue of the struggle seems doubtful at the moment, for while the Government has perceptibly weakened in its attitude the gaunt spectre of hunger and want has made its appearance among the strikers. Nevertheless, no matter what the outcome is, a fierce and bitter hatred against the exploiting class has been sown in the ranks of the Provincial Portuguese workers, which must increase as time goes on until finally Mosambique comes under the rule of the working class.

APPEALS

Appeal of the R. I. L. U. to all Working Men and Women!

Comrades all!

The First of May, the international working class holiday, will soon be with us, and once again the toilers and the oppressed of all countries will march forth shoulder to shoulder to show the capitalist world the solidarity of the exploited, the brotherhood of the downtrodden. During the past year the employers have attacked along the whole front, politically and economically. The growth of the political reaction has led to a whittling down of all the rights of the toilers, to attempts on the freedom of the trade unions, and all the gains won by the workers during many years of heavy struggle. With united front the fascist, conservative and liberal-democratic governments have attacked the working class. All the dragging burden of persecutions has fallen to the share of the revolutionary trade unions and their leaders, and to the Left Wing of the labour movement.

Despite pacifist phrases, the peoples are groaning under the burthen of heavy armaments. The talk of disarmament taken part in by the leaders of the Second and Amsterdam Internationals screens the predatory intentions of the Imperialist Powers. The wars in Morocco and Syria are being continued. In the Near East the situation is becoming ever tenser; in the Balkans there are mutterings and rumblings; on the Pacific a fresh world conflict is being prepared; in China all the Imperialist Powers have jointly attacked the national movement for freedom and are trying to perpetuate the slavery and humiliation of the Chinese people.

Concurrently with the increasing armaments of the Imperialists and the steady and unweakening oppression of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples and the struggle between the large and small Powers for markets and raw materials, a diplomatic comedy (Locarno) — which the reformists of all countries hold as ushering in a new era — is being staged.

The object of these continuous attacks on the rights and interests of the toiling masses is to cheapen the costs of production at the expense of Labour Power. "Rationalise" and "Americanise" all undertakings in order to get as much produced in a given time as possible and to squeeze millions of "superfluous hands" out of industry. Unemployment has become a permanent feature; in the most important countries (like Britain and Germany) it has affected a considerable percentage of the working class. Gigantic conflicts threatening to destroy all that the working class has gained during the past few decades are on us. The coming conflict in Britain, particularly in the mining industry, promises to be of a most threatening character, as the British bourgeoisie are splendidly organised and are endeavouring with the help of the right Labour Party and trade union leaders to smash and disorganise the leftward moving working masses and their trade unions. The British bourgeoisie wants to reduce the British working class to the standard of living obtaining for the workers on the Continent who are worse paid, with the object of competing on the world markets. The workers of all countries must devote particular attention to the coming dispute in Britain and do everything possible to help the miners, engineers, and other sections of the British proletariat in their struggle against organised capitalism.

Furthermore, the international bourgeoisie has not abandoned the idea of fighting against the Only Republic of Labour, the U.S.S.R. All the arts and Wiles of the bourgeois diplomats have been directed during the past year towards this end.

The noose of inter-state and social contradictions is drawing tighter and tighter.