

The Crisis in the South African Labor Movement

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** Johannesburg in the Transvaal is the centre of a coal and gold miners' strike. Apart from sympathetic movements which may or may not break out, not more than 20,000 white workers are directly involved. Yet the London Press is considerably perturbed. "Kaffirs", as gold mining stock is dubbed, are the mainstay of an important section of the bourgeoisie. And the Transvaal mines produced last year slightly more than half the total gold output of the world, produced moreover under the most modern forms of concentrated large industry. Hence its importance not only for the section of the bourgeoisie directly interested, but for the whole financial mechanism of world capitalism at a time when

British bankers are striving to stabilize currency on the gold basis. But this big proportion of the world's gold output is not produced by the 15,000 or 20,000 workers directly involved in the present dispute. Apart from the coal mines, there are 200,000 native workers, many of them raw recruits from the tribes, employed in the Transval gold mines. These are the men who actually drill the rock, "lash" the blasted ore and do the hardest manual work. The white miners on strike are more or less go-betweens, gangers, possessing a legal monopoly as white men of the right to handle gelatinite and blasting fuses. No man of color can by law hold a blasting certificate. This color bar is the symbol of the white workers' privileged economic and social position in South Africa.

This double-barrelled character of the South African labor movement is only now dawning upon the white workers. Hitherto they have regarded themselves as all that was meant by "Labor". Under the illusion of being the whole of Labor (as the bourgeoisie have the illusion of being "the people") the white workers have waged several fierce struggles with gold mining capital. In the 1913 general strike things went so far that a pitched battle took place between them and the regular troops in the streets of Johannesburg, in which 21 persons were killed and over 400 wounded. The capitalist class were panic-stricken, and the men's leaders, under the slogan of "The Martial Law of the Workers", scored a temporary victory. The following year, Smuts, after careful military preparation, avenged himself and deported nine of the trade union leaders.

When the war came, the supreme necessity of keeping the gold mines going forced the old politician type of magnate to withdraw from the scene, and Sir Evelyn Wallers, the arch-conciliator, was put in charge of the Chamber of Mines. Bain, Mason, Andrews and other old militant trade-unionists were shoved into the background by their opposition to the war, and the Boards of Reference found Crawford, one time Anarcho-Syndicalist, a most suitable tool for carrying out the policy of class collaboration. After the war, the premium on the mint price of gold further helped the Chamber to concede much to the white workers, who gradually lost their fighting spirit.

Meanwhile, the native workers gave signs of awakening, and surprised the white worker out of his self-sufficiency. A strike of 80,000 native mine workers; a big anti-passport movement; strikes of native municipal workers; the formation of a native trade-union, an unheard of innovation; all these portents came after the outbreak of the Russian revolution. But the native still calls his white fellow worker "Boss" as an ordinary form of address. And so the white worker is assured his status.

But now the gold premium is vanishing under the better exchange position of the pound sterling. The mine owners declare that many low grade mines have been working solely on this premium as a source of profit. It has been for some years the dream of the gold magnates to abolish the color bar, and introduce native labor into the more skilled operations. The "Star", organ of the Chamber of Mines, is a champion of Negro advancement against the exclusiveness of the white labor unions, and sometimes its propaganda in this direction is a good handle for Communist Party propaganda. The white labor movement is placed in a false position against the undeniable justice of the capitalist plea for native advancement, although it is only a transparent cloak for more intense exploitation of the native. Comrade Andrews, writing in our Party organ, "The International", holds out to the miners the only solution which they can employ and compromise their position in the labor movement: The following extract condenses the issue in a nutshell:—

"As for the unions, they would do better for themselves if they urged and helped the natives to demand more pay for the jobs they do now, thus decreasing the competition of native with white and diminishing the danger of natives ousting whites. The white miners are perfectly justified in fighting to keep up the numbers and pay of holders of blasting certifications. They would get native support in this with the higher pay and better treatment of the blacks. However, owing to deficient class consciousness, we find them presenting the shameful spectacle of conspiring with their masters for the better exploitation of their fellow-workers, which must inevitably, if gradually, lead to their own elimination. For a section which poses at the same time as both masters and workers must sooner or later collapse".

Let it not be supposed that a state of antagonism exists between the black and white worker at all comparable with that obtaining in the South of the United States. All our pogroms are governmental pogroms—the recent dastardly massacre of simple natives at Bullhoek, for instance, (passed over so lightly by the British Press). As a matter of fact, the white and black workers get on very happily together at the mines. The South

African Bantu is a jovial fellow to work with. The white skilled mechanic functions as a teacher of the native laborer, though he may not be conscious of it. During working hours he jokes with him, and even discusses the rudiments of social justice. The industrial functions of white and black are complementary. There is no industry where both do not labor together. The white workers can stop industry on their own account. So can the black workers if they have a mind to. But it takes both white and black to start the wheels going again. Under a Soviet system all the factors are present for mutual cooperation. Capitalist exploitation turns this industrial partnership into political antagonism. An abyss separates the standard of living of the blacks and the whites. It is this, and the fear of falling into the abyss, which generates the anti-color prejudice of the white worker. It is also this which makes the white worker a strange combination of anti-color conservative and anti-capitalist militant. He would honestly like a way out with justice to these "uncivilized children" as he naively regards the Bantu worker, but without "social contamination" with them.

The attack on the color bar threatens to put an end to this, the best possible condition for cooperation of white with black. A competition in the same industrial function will introduce the more ugly forms of American race hatred. There are more compelling reasons for this challenge than the drop in the gold premium. The total world output of gold has dropped from 94 million pounds in 1913 to 66 millions in 1921. The drop in Transvaal output was only from 37.4 million 34.5 million. It will be seen that the proportion of the Transvaal output to the whole world output has risen from two-fifths to one-half. With the enormous inflation of the currency, this drop in gold production must be checked if the bankers' stabilization plans are to be realized. The low grade mines must be kept going at all costs, and the low grade ore knocking about the higher grade mines must be made available, and new borings encouraged. These considerations are behind the undoubted determination of the mine-owners to smash the color bar. A reduction in wages is not enough. Some "larger perspective", equal to the discovery of the cyanide process of gold extraction in the nineties, is needed. And the cheap Bantu worker is the solution, the man for the job, fresh from the tribe and requiring only a loin cloth and the benevolent sunshine in addition to the needs of the inner man—for the time being. Just now the mineowners are only asking for a certain fixed proportion of colored workers to white.

Since 1913, Dutch workers in large numbers have invaded town industry, forced from the land by modern methods of agriculture. The Dutch Afrikanders are in a majority in the mines today, as well as several other industries. The police force is largely Dutch Afrikander. Only in the skilled mechanical trades does the old type of British trade unionist still hold his own. Nevertheless, with one or two exceptions, the leadership of the labor movement is still in the hands of the more experienced British workers. The Dutch workers make splendid trade-unionists, however, full of the fighting spirit, for the trade-union movement gives them back a little of the lost glamor, the sense of combat, of the old voortrekking days. But they are as yet a drag on the wheel of labor progress. They are much more bitter towards the native than the British workers, owing to the slaveholding traditions of the Dutch farmers. They are an obstacle to the speedy rapprochement of the white with the black worker which is the burden of our propaganda as a Communist Party in South Africa. The Dutch workers form as a rule the left wing of the Dutch Nationalist movement, since the Labor Party by its chauvinism has forfeited their sympathy. Hence we have for the first time the participation of Nationalist leaders like Visser and Tielman Roos in the present strike on the side of the men, and General Hertzog, the Republican leader, has had a conference with the Industrial Federation. The Nationalists seem to be utilizing the strike as a means of forcing Smuts out of office. The sympathetic elements in the police force and the absence of Imperial troops, are factors in their favor. In normal times the British workers would resent the interference of the Nationalists. But the attack on the color bar is an attack on the very existence of the white section of the working-class, and it is therefore prepared to seek allies anywhere.

In the 1913 strike the more advanced white workers already encouraged appeals for native support. In the present strike in the coal section at Witbank, where the miners are more conservative than on the Rand (as the sixty-mile gold reef is called) the native workers are carrying on mining under the direction of officials. They approached their white fellow workers on strike and asked them what they were to do. These white strikers, still "solidaire" with bourgeois society, solemnly advised the natives to obey the big "mlungu" (master). But an increasing number of trade-unionists stand for the solidarity of Labor irrespective of color.

The Nationalist festival in South Africa is held on Dingaan's Day, the day when Dingaan's Zulu army was smashed by the Dutch invaders in 1838. This is now the holy day of Afrikaner Nationalism. The honest Bantu has nothing to gain from Nationalist intervention in the present dispute. The Chamber of Mines is for him in the line of progress, if the white worker will only turn towards him as his natural ally and fellow worker. Should that come to pass, then gold, the "root of all evil", will have been for the Negro masses of South Africa the agent of proletarian development which has brought them in line with the great world movement.