

# MATRIC HISTORY

## South African working class organisation and the downfall of the Smuts government

The period 1920 - 1924 in South African history highlights the growth of the working class movement within the country. However, the working class had been divided by colonialism. Classified white workers fought to maintain racial superiority in the work-place and positions of privilege. White workers were allocated "skilled" work and higher wages within the mining industry in comparison to the wages offered to black workers, who had been recruited to perform "unskilled" work.

### The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU)

In 1919 the first trade union organising the black working class was formed in Cape Town. Clements Kadalie, together with Cape Town dock workers, recognised the needs of the working class. Low wages and rising prices contributed to the economic hardships of the people. The dock workers went on strike to demand higher wages. The army was called in to force the strikers back to work and "scab" labour was used throughout the strike period. However, the dock workers had united and organised to improve their conditions of work.

The ICU hoped to achieve a minimum wage of R10 a month, a 5 day working week and half a day on Saturday and the maximum of 8 hours per day work. It organised workers in both rural and urban areas.

The ICU was known countrywide and although many strikes were not successful, Black workers realised the need to unite and fight the racist laws, for example, the pass laws, together.

In 1920 the dock workers strike in Port Elizabeth united hundreds of workers and in the end workers received increased wages. In 1920, 70 000 black mine workers went on strike in the Witwatersrand. The police were summoned and the strike was violently stopped but it indicated that black workers were organising to redress grievances.

### Bulhoek 1921

In May 1921 the Bulhoek Massacre took place which clearly illustrated the attitude of the ruling-class government towards the oppressed people. The South African Party had passed the **Squatter and Land Acts** whereby whites and blacks were allocated land upon which to live. In terms of the 1913 Land Act, 87% of the land had been allocated to 5% of the population classified white, whereas 13% of the land had been allocated to 95% of the population classified black. In 1921, a religious sect leader, Enoch Mgijima, moved with his followers, the Israelites, to a farm, Bulhoek, near Queenstown. The authorities tried to move them but the Israelites refused on the grounds that they had gathered at Ntabelange (Bulhoek) on the orders of Jehovah to await the end of the world. The Smuts' government ordered the police and army into the area and to forcibly remove the religious sect. In reply, the Israelites stated, "Jehovah tells us that we are not to allow you to burn our huts, or drive away our people from Ntabelanga, or allow you to arrest the men you wish to arrest".

800 armed police and soldiers opposed 500 Israelites armed with only home-made weapons. In the battle which followed, 163 Israelites were killed and 129 wounded. Those not arrested were brought to trial. Mgijima was sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment. The Smuts' government was severely criticized for this incident. Do you remember from last week's article that Smuts used the same tactics against the Bondelswart Khoikhoi in 1922?

### The 1922 Strike

In 1921 the gold price fell and this had a ripple effect on the South African gold-mines. Gold is the major export commodity and enables South Africa to pay for many of its essential imports. The Chamber of Mines decided to save money by reducing wages. The Mines had always employed white workers in jobs categorized as "skilled" and paid higher wages to those workers in comparison to wages paid to black miners, employed in the "semi-skilled" or "unskilled" job categories. The Chamber of Mines decided to employ more black and less white workers as this would be a considerable saving on their labour costs. The white miners were unionised and took action.

On 31 December 1921 the capitalist owners of the coal-mines announced a reduction in wages and on 1 January, 1922 white coal miners went out on strike. On 9 January 1922, 22 000 miners joined the strike. Within weeks a general strike of all white mine workers had been called and the Union demanded the return to the **Status Quo Job Colour Bar Agreement**, in terms of which the jobs of white workers had been protected. The Chamber of Mines refused. The workers on strike physically attacked the "scabs" who were going to work on the mines.

On the government level, the ruling South African Party came out in support of the mine owners, whereas the Nationalist and Labour Parties supported the strikers. White workers encouraged all white workers in other industries to support them. Slogans, such as "Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa" were paraded.

General Smuts as Prime Minister declared martial law. This was on 10 March 1922 and has become known as "Black Friday". The striking workers attacked police stations, railways and many "scabs" were severely beaten. In retaliation, the air-force dropped bombs on the towns of Benoni and Germiston and for four days there was continuous fighting. Resistance continued and 153 people were killed and 500 wounded during the strike.

The strike came to an end on 17 March 1922 but the division between employers and employees had led to increased bitterness. An immediate inquiry into the ac-

tions of the police and defence force was called. Over 4 750 people were arrested and brought to trial. 18 received the death sentence and four men were hanged.

The South African Party under General Smuts had lost the support of the white working class.

### The defeat of the Smuts' Government at the polls

The South African Party had lost the support of many Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans because of their participation in the First World War (1914 - 18) on the side of Britain and the subsequent Rebellion. The South African Party (SAP) never recovered fully from that action. In the 1920 election, the SAP only remained in power because it appealed to the Unionist Party for support. In 1921 the Unionist Party actually dissolved and joined the SAP. This was called the "Political Blood

### Transfusion".

Before the 1924 election, JBM Hertzog, leader of the National Party, entered into an election pact with Cresswell, leader of the Labour Party. This "pact" was a mere co-operation agreement between the two parties with the aim of defeating the SAP. Hertzog also promised Labour that the secession move (i.e. the breakaway from the British Empire) would not occur.

In 1924 the "Pact" Government won the whites-only election with a majority of 28 seats. JBM Hertzog became the new Prime Minister and Smuts remained in Parliament as leader of the Opposition.

The period 1920-24 was characterised by the use of force and military action against the South African working class.

Next week we shall examine the issues facing the "Pact" Government and the attempts of the National Party to secede from the British Empire and declare a white-minority-ruled republic.

### Group activity

#### Exercise 1

Try to get together with a group of fellow students or comrades and explain the following terms. You can then go on to discuss the questions about the cartoon.

- a trade union
- The ICU
- capitalism
- the "political blood transfusion"
- Pact



Cartoon

#### Exercise 2

Refer to the cartoon and answer the questions which follow:

- Identify the military man.
- Why is he dressed in uniform?
- Identify the person in the portrait.
- Whom does he represent?

- What is the relationship between the two men?

- Which feature in the cartoon indicates the response of the Smuts' government to strike action?
- To which year is this cartoon related? Explain.
- What was the result?

### Explanations

#### Exercise 1

When workers in a particular trade or industry unite to organise workers and negotiate on their behalf with their employers.

- The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union.
- The private (individual) ownership of the means of production i.e. land, mines or factories.
- The support given by the Unionist Party to the South African Party.
- The agreement between the National and Labour Parties.

#### Exercise 2

- Smuts
- He used the defence force to solve civilian problems
- Hoggenheimer
- The capitalist employer
- Smuts as Prime Minister and leader of the SAP supported the capitalist employers during the 1922 strike.
- The baton; military action
- 1922 - the strike by white workers
- A 3-month armed struggle between workers and the government; 153 died and many were arrested and tried; white workers gained nothing; wages were in fact lowered. SAP lost the support of the ruling-class Afrikaner.