

# STRIKE WAVE HITS SOUTH AFRICA

By Barry Rubin

GUARDIAN - FEBRUARY 21, 1973

Over 50,000 African and Asian workers struck dozens of companies in white-ruled South Africa during January and February, demanding higher pay. Police attacked the workers in several areas.

The strike wave centered on the city of Durban but also involved workers in Johannesburg, Capetown, Pretoria and other cities as well, including bus drivers, dock workers, brickworkers, construction workers and municipal employees.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), liberation forces continued to wage military actions against the white settler government of Prime Minister Ian Smith.

While the current strike wave has been developing over the last five weeks, its origins go back to strikes last year. In June, 318 bus drivers in Johannesburg were arrested during wildcat strikes there and in October a strike by Durban dock workers was ended only when the government threatened to deport black workers to "Bantustans," rural reservations for Africans set up by the government where there are no available jobs.

This January, both groups of workers were in the vanguard of the walkouts, with the bus drivers meeting to establish a Transport and Allied Workers Union.

The strikes quickly spread to other workers. In Durban, 16,000 municipal workers went on strike while 4,000 more left textile mills and rubber factories, reportedly returning Feb. 9 after receiving a \$2.70 a week wage increase. The dockworkers refused a \$1.20 a week increase which would have brought basic pay to \$11.40 a week.

On Jan. 9, workers at the Coronation Brick and Tile Co., over 1000 in all, left, demanding a \$24 a week minimum wage—double the current level. In Pretoria, 57 bus drivers out of 350 were arrested when they refused to go back to work, but at Natal Safeguards in Durban, watchmen won a \$5 a month pay increase after a threatened strike.

Workers in Durban held a number of rallies and marches, all illegal under South African laws, to support their demands for pay increases. During one demonstration of 7000 workers, Feb. 7, more than 200 were arrested. Police were flown in from other cities but failed, even with their use of large amounts of tear gas, police dogs and clubs, to stop the strikes.

The condition of black workers, who furnish 90 percent of the work force in mining, construction, textile, clothing and footwear industries, has always been one of a super-exploited majority in their own country, controlled by white colonialists. Although there are 15 million Africans in South Africa and only 3.8 million whites (with 2 million people of mixed ancestry and 600,000 Asians), the white population has reserved for itself most of the land, wealth and skilled jobs in South Africa.

Black workers are faced with poor and dangerous working conditions and low pay. In early February, for example, as the strike wave was starting up, 26 African workers were killed in a gold mine fire near

Johannesburg. White workers in mining receive 20 times as much as black workers. Black workers have also been hard-hit by inflation—12 to 13 percent a year officially—and a recent South African survey showed four-fifths of black workers as being paid below the poverty level of \$25 a week.

To ensure the continuation of this highly profitable exploitative system, the South African government has made all strikes and union organizations of black workers illegal. The Native Labor Act of 1953 substituted compulsory arbitration for strikes and punished walk-outs with penalties of a \$1200 fine and-or three years imprisonment.

Little use has been made of this arbitration machinery and, indeed, much of it has never even been set up.

In addition to these worsening conditions, there are at least three other factors tending to create the strike wave at this time: large-scale unemployment, the example of the general strike in South African-occupied Namibia (Southwest Africa) early last year when black workers struck for better conditions, and the forcing of blacks onto Bantustans (tribal reservations), where their basic costs for transport and other necessities are increased. Over the last two years, the number of black strikers arrested was double that for the preceding eight years, as a result of these trends.

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African strikers on the march this month

(cont.)

There is another trend which is greatly affecting the South African job market—an increasing shortage of white workers is forcing companies to allow blacks into more skilled jobs. The report of the South African Ministry of Planning, released last week, said there would be at least 22,000 such openings over the next four years. Companies granting promotions are seeking to keep black workers near the low wage rates they are currently getting for semi-skilled work. Another strategy has been to give such jobs to Coloured workers (people of mixed ancestry) but they, too, are starting to organize for better conditions. Along with the striking Black and Asian workers, Coloured workers in Port Elizabeth demanded 22 percent increases from the auto companies where they work, including Ford and General Motors. The workers were led by the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers, which was organized in 1967 and still has not obtained government recognition.

#### Unions for blacks?

The possibility of competing for skilled jobs with black workers who might be getting one-tenth of their wages has persuaded some white trade unionists that they should organize blacks under their leadership. The Trade Union Council of South Africa, which expelled black workers in 1954, has canvassed its member unions on the question of organizing Africans. Another white labor federation, the Confederation of Labor, is completely opposed to such activity.

While white unionists offer the possibility of pacification, the racist government completely panicked over the strikes. A year ago, for merely predicting such workers revolts, Minister of the Interior Theo Gerdener was forced to resign; but now, government leaders are falling over one another in agreeing to small wage increases to stem the tide. One government board has recommended 40 percent increases for dockworkers.

Opposition leader Sir de Villiers Graaff said that labor unrest among Africans was even more dangerous than terrorism and others spoke of the crisis as being the greatest since the Sharpeville massacre where, 13 years ago, white police killed 180 Africans, setting off nationwide demonstrations.

The government is careful to avoid such an upheaval now. So far, a relatively small number of arrests have taken place although the office of the South African Students Association, the organization of African students which has recently played a militant role, was raided twice. As in Namibia, the government is waiting for the situation to quiet down before it begins the arrests of suspected leaders and activists.

Still, the black workers have shown their strength and made some important gains. They also have shown they possess the organization and leadership to carry through mass actions in the repressive police state.

While the strikes seem now to be falling off, 300 more Durban dock workers went out on Feb. 14, indicating that smaller strikes may continue for some time.

The worried South African settlers also have been watching developments to the north, in Rhodesia. The guerrilla war by liberation forces has continued, forcing the Rhodesian government to close down African schools, shops and businesses in some black areas. A fine of \$100 was levied against Chikywa village, 60 miles north of the capital of Salisbury, because the people there allegedly helped guerrillas. In the neighboring white farming district of Centenary, guerrilla attacks led to five killed and 17 wounded in December.

Most important, however, has been the announcement that the fighting is being directed by a joint military command led by the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), marking the first successful move toward unity of liberation forces in over six years. This step could well mean that a protracted peoples' war may be waged in the country.

"The quarrels between ZAPU and ZANU are a matter of ancient history," said Jason Moyo, a ZAPU leader and member of the joint command. "We have eliminated areas of conflict and have widened the areas of cooperation."

With the South African strikes and the stepped-up liberation war in Rhodesia, the African liberation forces have continued the important gains made in all the remaining white-controlled areas over the past year. While the struggle could easily go on for the next decade in the Portuguese colonies and Rhodesia, and very possibly longer in South Africa and Namibia, the corner appears to have been decisively turned.

GOAL: \$2000 - for legal defense and aid to South African political prisoners and their families. To be raised during spring 1977.

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