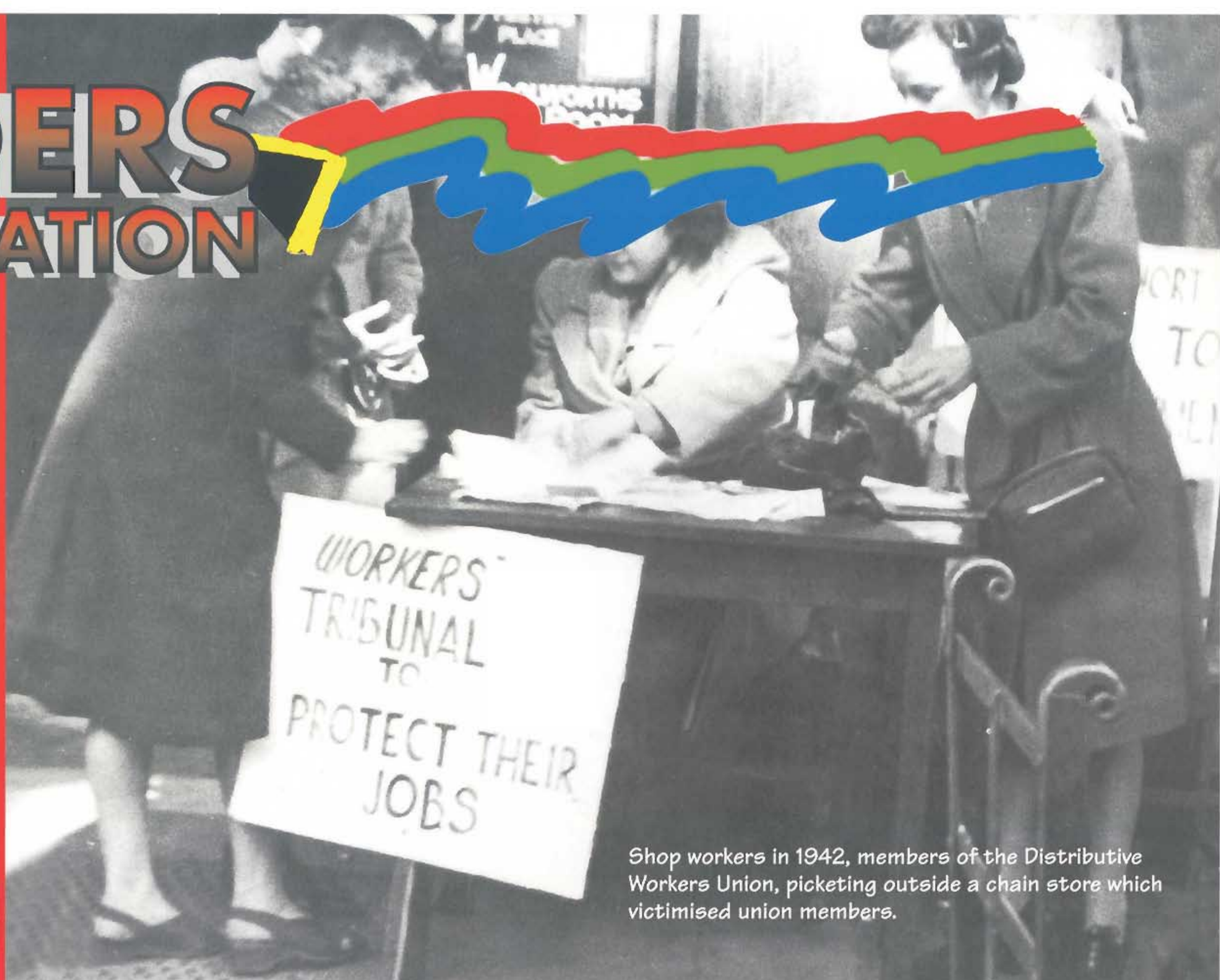


# BUILDERS OF THE NATION

## 6 MILITANT WHITE WORKERS

It is widely assumed that all whites were privileged. But this was not always the case. Many worked in dangerous conditions underground. Many were skilled artisans who experienced the rigours of dirty and dangerous manual work.



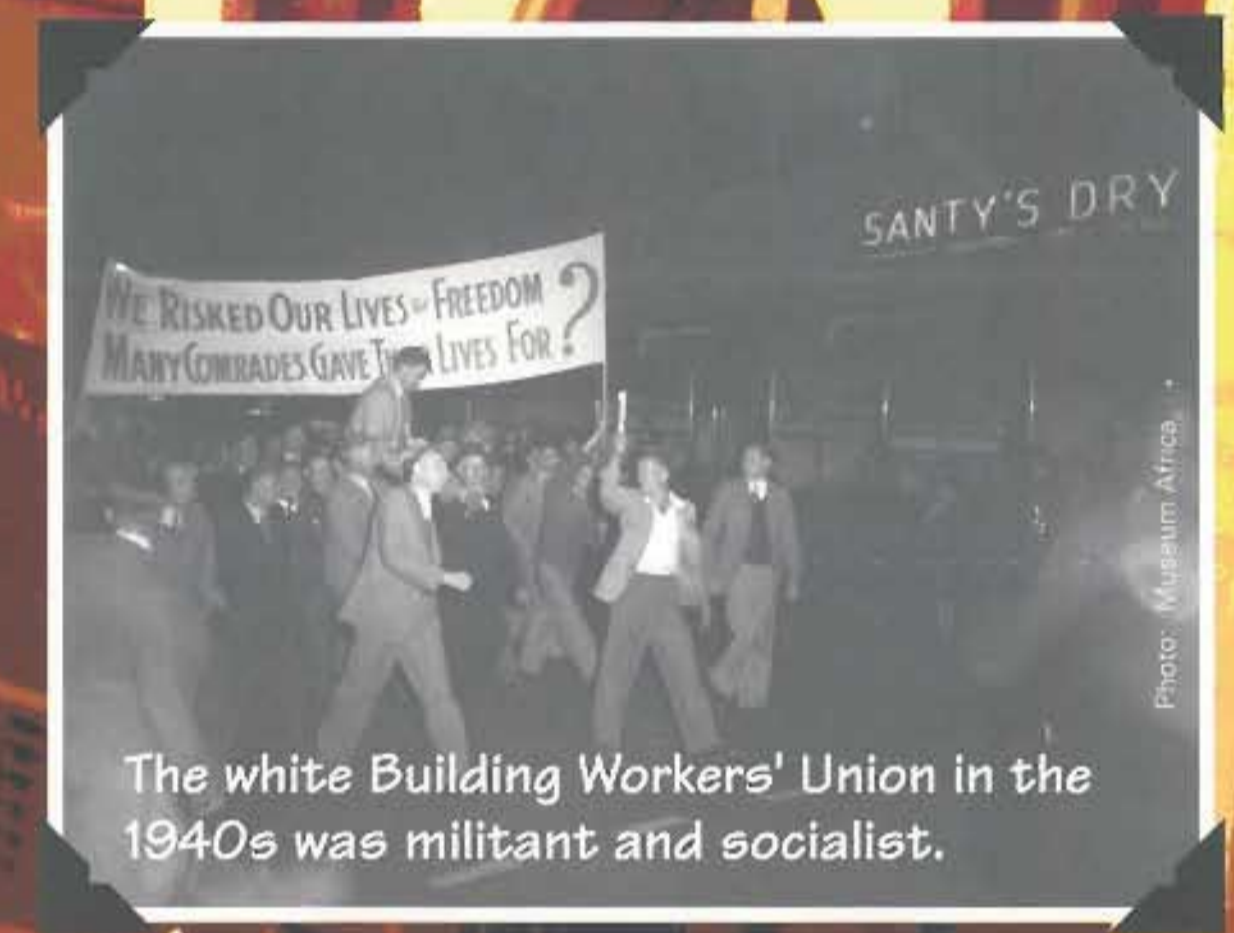
Shop workers in 1942, members of the Distributive Workers Union, picketing outside a chain store which victimised union members.



Photo: Museum Africa



Police batons beat down garment workers at a protest against the banning of the union's secretary, 1953.



The white Building Workers' Union in the 1940s was militant and socialist.

Photo: Museum Africa



Protest march against the banning of the secretary of the Garment Workers Union 1953.

In 1922, the old Transvaal was almost overwhelmed by civil war when white workers resisted the attempt by the mine owners to push down their wages. The strike was the climax of two decades of militant action by white workers. But from the beginning, it was a defensive reaction, designed to maintain their privileged status. This they did through the job colour bar, which reserved jobs for whites only. They feared that the low wages of black workers would cause them to lose their better paid jobs.

From the 1920s onwards, their access to political power ensured a steady improvement of their working and living conditions. The rise of factory production at this time opened up opportunities for white women to gain employment as semiskilled workers, often side by side with African men. For a while, non-racial solidarity seemed possible. Progressive trade unionists succeeded in drawing a generation of courageous young Afrikaner women and men from the garment, sweet, tobacco, leather, building and laundry industries into the labour movement. These workers were to make a crucial contribution to the manufacturing industry, and also helped to lay the foundations for a democratic labour movement. But the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid led to the banning of their leaders and smashed their unions. It was left to black workers to take up the banner. We salute these militant worker organisations

