

Conclusion

The Price of Progress

This book ends in 1924, when the Pact Government came into power. An age was coming to an end – an age in which the needs of the mine-owners dominated South Africa. The two parties of the new government – the Afrikaner National Party and the South African Labour Party – opposed the power of the mine-owners. From this time on, other white interest groups would also have their say in the running of the country. Commercial farmers, factory owners and even white workers had representatives in the government. And although the mine-owners remained powerful, they now had to share their power with South Africa's other capitalist groups.

The first quarter of this century was an important and formative period – it laid down the foundations of the system we live in today. For it was during this time that South Africa's industrial revolution developed. In this last chapter we examine the legacy left to South Africa by the Rand mines and their owners.

PROGRESS

'The most gigantic mining industry the world has seen.'

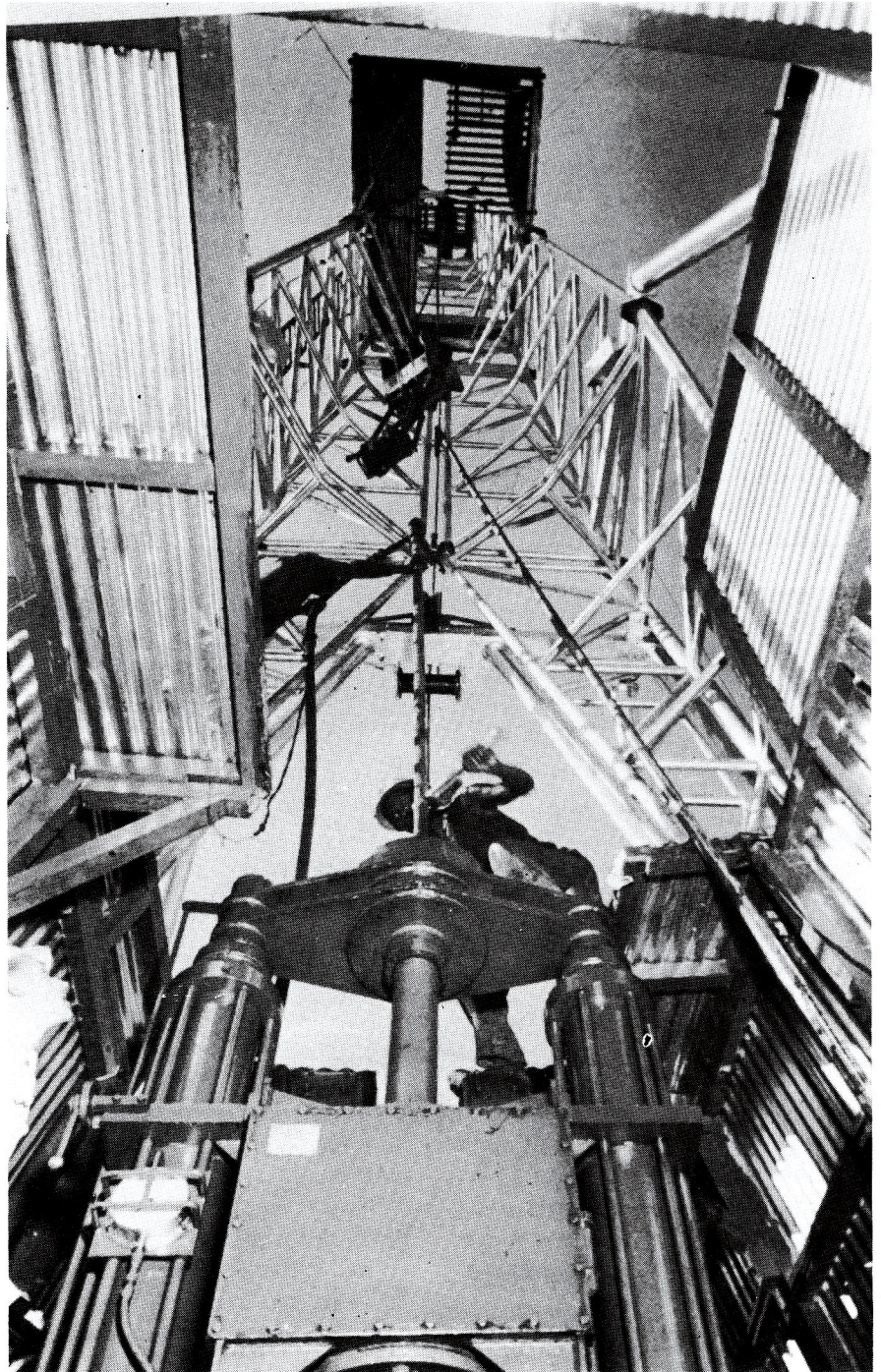
– S.A. Mining Journal,
1 October 1898.

The short period of history that we have been studying was one of dramatic change. In forty years, for example, the population of Johannesburg reached half a million. In 1930, with the price of gold still fixed at £4,28 an ounce, the mining companies made R90 million in profit.

The economy of South Africa rested on gold. Directly or indirectly half the population depended on gold.

The gold mines on the Rand advanced the study of science and expanded man's knowledge of the earth. Geologists, who study the formation of rock, learned to follow the hidden seams of gold underground. They advised the mine-owners where to sink the shafts. Machines and chemicals were developed to drill the ore, blast it, crush it, wash it, separate the gold from it; to purify the gold, melt it and pour it into trays to harden. Scientists in the service of the mine-owners were constantly working on new ways of saving costs – the invention of the jack-hammer, for example, revolutionised rock-breaking underground, and dramatically increased the production of gold.

Gold stimulated other industries, too. The coal mines were developed, providing a plentiful



source of power for the mines' machines, and for transport. Roads, railways and shipping improved to serve the Rand. Travel became quicker and safer; goods could be transported more cheaply to the towns.

More efficient methods of farming and improved transport resulted in large, commercial farms producing more food to sell to the townspeople and the mining compounds. The mines also attracted capital to South Africa for other projects, such as the development of a supply of cheap electricity for the Rand.

What was started for the sake of the mines, then, developed the capitalist economy generally, encouraging the growth of towns and factories. The wealth of the Rand mines resulted in a modern capitalist state, politically and economically united under one government.

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

These features are generally described as 'progress'. But progress came at a high price – it brought human misery and displacement to hundreds of thousands of people. For in order to make the gold mines profitable, the mine-owners had to change the methods of production and labour in South Africa, revolutionising the social system itself.

* Firstly, they had to destroy the old, land-based economy of pre-industrial times and replace it with a basic capitalist system – one of employers and wage-earning workers.

* To meet their massive labour needs, the mine-owners had to create a labour force by destroying the independence of the black farmer and removing most of his land, so that he would be driven to work for wages.

* To maximise their profits and minimise their labour costs, the mine-owners had to suppress the rights of the workers to organise and bargain. The chart on this page summarises the ways in which the mine-owners developed the wage colour bar – the system of labour control that kept the wages low for the vast majority, the black workers.

* In order to make these revolutionary changes, the mine-owners needed enormous power. They organised themselves into a united front, through the Chamber of Mines, and obtained the support of the government and people with influence. We have seen how they achieved these aims in Section II of this book. The mine-owners thus became important members of the ruling class.

The Wage Colour Bar

How Labour Control Of Black Workers Led To Low Wages

SYSTEM OF CONTROL FOR WORKERS

1. Migrant Labour – Migrant workers worked far from their homes, in the mines and the towns. They left their families behind and after six or 12 months, they came home again for a time.

2. The Compounds – Mine workers were housed and fed in compounds. They needed a pass each time they left the compound.

3. The Contract System – A black worker could not start working in the mines without a contract. It was a crime to try to change a worker's contract in any way. A worker could not try to raise his wages, or stay away from work.

4. The Pass Laws – (a) African men were not allowed on the Rand without passes. To look for work they had to get passes. They were allowed to look for work in certain labour districts only. (b) They were given three to six days to find work. Otherwise they had to leave.

5. The Maximum Wage System – Black unskilled workers on the mines could not get more than twenty-two and a half cents for a ten hour shift. This wage stayed more or less the same for 30 years.

6. The Recruiting System – The Chamber of Mines recruited cheap labour from poorer countries. This helped to stop the shortage of cheap labour. When there was less labour shortage, it was even easier to keep wages down.

HOW IT WORKED FOR THE MINE-OWNERS

Migrant labour kept wages down – mine-owners maintained that migrant workers did not need high wages because their families were already living on the land.

The employers maintained that as compound workers got free board and lodging their wages were lower. It was also easier to control workers in compounds.

Under the contract system the employer had a great deal of power over his employee. Once a worker started to work, he lost his power to bargain for higher wages or better conditions at work.

(a) The pass laws forced people to look for jobs in districts where employers wanted labour. (b) The quickest way to find a job was on the mines, where the pay was usually lowest. The pass system therefore assisted the mines in obtaining cheap labour.

The Chamber of Mines agreed not to compete for labour – all the mining companies paid black workers a maximum wage. If any mine paid more than the maximum wage, the mine-owners had to pay a fine to the Chamber of Mines. In this way, black miners' wages were kept low.

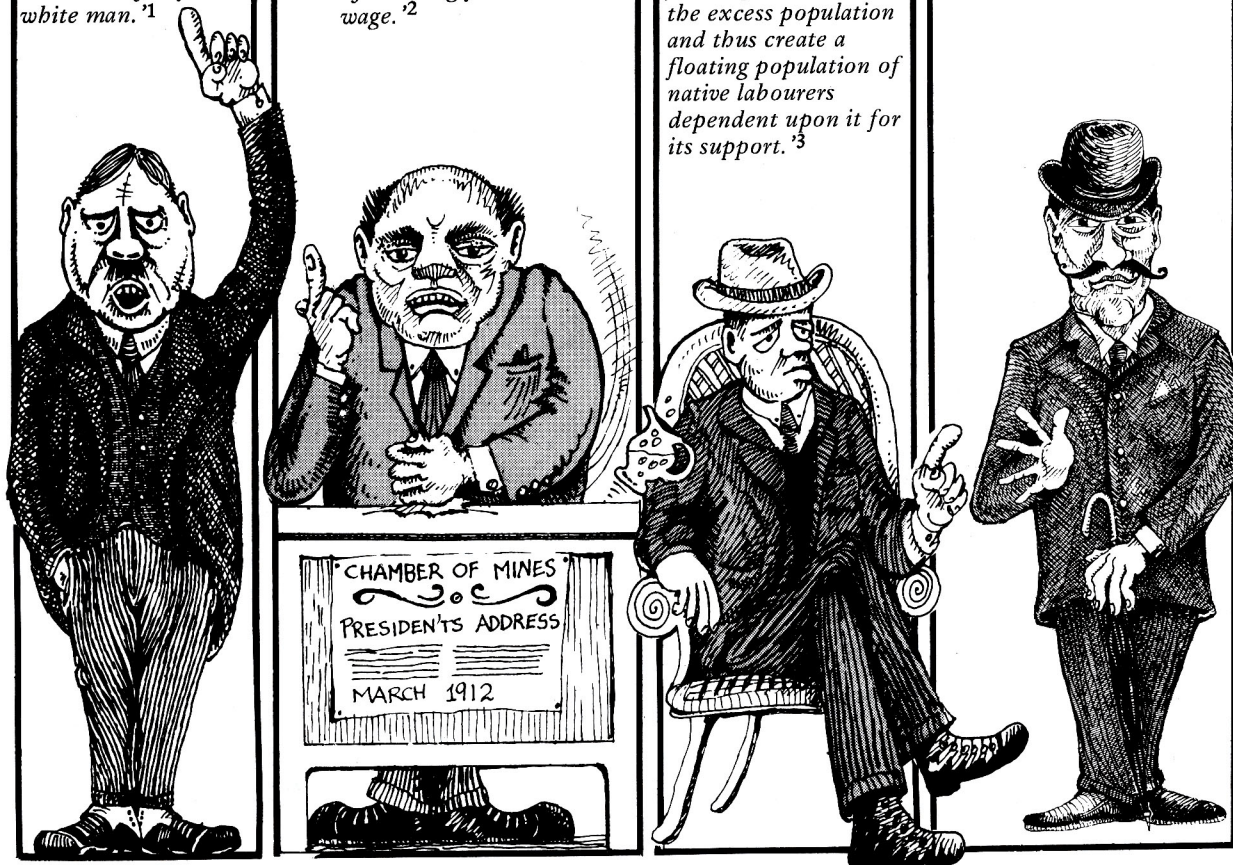
Black workers in South Africa were not free to move around the towns and offer their labour for the best wages; or settle with their families in the towns; or bargain for higher wages and better working conditions. They were forced to work under a powerful system of labour control, at ultra-low wages, thus increasing the mine-owner's profits.

'A course of six to twelve months on the mines is the best education for the natives. Here they can learn the value of discipline, regularity and the ways of the white man.'¹

'Outside of the special reserves, the ownership of the land must be in the hands of the white race. The surplus of young men must earn their living by working for a wage.'²

'Thorough and general eviction of natives from private property through the country would effectually dispose of labour troubles as it would force upon the market the excess population and thus create a floating population of native labourers dependent upon it for its support.'³

'That the native is grossly overpaid is undeniable.'⁴



Were they evil men?

These are the words of powerful men. Admired, praised and envied by members of their own class, the mine-owners were an important part of a system of forced labour, starvation wages, increasing poverty and loss of land, and a deeply divided working class. Were they evil men?

The aim of this book is to understand the forces of history, not merely to condemn the individual actors who walk across the stage. Like most people, the mine-owners tended to see what they wanted to see, and to believe what 'suited them. They liked to think that the gold mines were bringing 'progress' to the country as a whole and 'civilisation' to the workers. It was convenient to claim that the shocking living and working conditions in the mines were better for the workers than the subsis-

tence life they lived on the land.

As friends, husbands and fathers, some of these mine-owners may have been kindly and decent men – perhaps they even genuinely believed that for migrant workers the compound was 'like a club'.

But whether they believed what they said or not, they behaved as they did because they were mine-owners. Like the rest of us, they were the products of a *system* in which they occupied a particular class position.

As capitalists, they needed to

make maximum profits at the least possible expense.

As we saw in Chapter 5, two factors in particular led them to exploit the worker even more. The deep-level mining of low grade ore was costly; the fixed price of gold meant that these additional costs could not be passed on to the buyer. The only way in which they could maintain high profits was by 'ultra-exploitation' of the workers – by reducing their wages still further and extracting as much work out of them as possible.

The Industrial Revolution in England

*The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.*

(From *To the Men of England*
— P.B. Shelley.)

*'Two nations; between whom
there is no intercourse and no
sympathy; who are as ignorant of
each other's habits, thoughts,
feelings, as if they were dwellers in
different zones, or inhabitants of
different planets; who are formed
by a different breeding, are fed by
a different food, are ordered by
different manners, and are not
governed by the same laws.'*

'You speak of ...' said Egremont hesitatingly.

'THE RICH AND THE POOR.'

(From the 19th century novel,
Sybil — Benjamin Disraeli.)

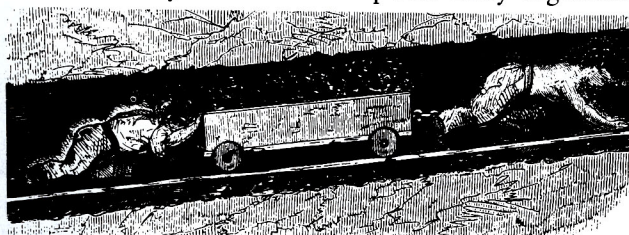


In different parts of the world at different times, the growth of capitalism and industrialisation have produced effects similar to those which South Africa also experienced — men have been forced to leave their land and sell their labour for wages.

England was one of the first countries to go through the upheaval of the industrial revolution. Powerful landlords caused laws to be made to force small farmers off the land. These men, deprived of their means of production — their land — were forced to move to the towns, the factories and the mines to sell the only thing they had left to sell — their labour.

Over a period of about 200 years, England changed from a land economy to an industrial, capitalist system. In that time, power was transferred from the wealthy landlords to the new capitalist class — coal-mine owners, factory owners, traders and ship owners, profiting from the labour of workers, both in Britain and the colonies.

The new social system created a class of capitalists and a large class of workers. As in South Africa, the 'upper' classes tended to think of themselves as superior to the workers. They spoke about the 'dirty', 'lazy' and 'ignorant' working class. They reasoned that the workers must be inferior, otherwise they would not be poor. They regarded



Children were used as labourers in the English coal mines.

the results of poverty — crime, violence, drink and ignorance — as the causes of poverty.

British employers saw themselves as the 'teachers', for they had the 'brains', while they called workers 'hands' — it was the worker's duty in life to provide labour, they felt. That was how God made the world and people must not upset this order.

'Nothing is more favourable to morals than learning to take orders early in life, hard work and regular working hours,' declared a Mr G.A. Lee, a cotton factory owner in the 19th century, who employed children from 6 o'clock in the morning to 8 o'clock at night.⁵ It was hardly surprising that this capitalist's idea of 'morality' and goodness also happened to result in the most productive and obedient work force — and bigger profits.



(Above) British police break up a demonstration of workers, 1847. The nineteenth century was a period of rapid industrial growth and labour resistance.

The Colonial Heritage

In South Africa the mine-owners developed a capitalist system — one that was closely related to the country's colonial history. When minerals were discovered, there was a ready-made situation which the mine-owners were able to exploit.

South Africa was a conquered land. Black farmers had been dispossessed of most of their land and were in a vulnerable position. The mine-owners were able to take advantage of the dispossessed in order to create a massive and cheap labour force.

South Africa's colonial history gave rise to a violent and racist society which suited the mine-owners very well. Nineteenth century employers in England justified exploitation of their workers by regarding them as an inferior class. South African employers justified exploitation of *their* workers by regarding them as an inferior race.

Race was seen as the dividing line. Yet the mine-owners were not only white: they were also capitalists. And the 'cheap labour' was not only black but was also a growing, potentially powerful working class.



One of Bambata's men killed in the field, 1906. The 'Bambata Rebellion' was one of the last acts of resistance by a chief to colonialism. Thousands of men and women under Bambata in Natal refused to pay increased taxes. The uprising was ruthlessly crushed by the British colony of Natal. After that, resistance increasingly took the form of labour and political movements in the urban areas.



A compound dormitory in Crown Mines, during demolition, showing the concrete shelves or 'bunks' upon which workers had to sleep. Workers were housed in this compound until 1979. (Photo: Les Lawson)

The Birth of a Working Class

What was the situation of the first generation of black workers on the Rand?

In this early period, there was little organisation. We have seen how, already weakened by the loss of land and the gradual destruction of the traditional economy of the chiefdoms, men came from all over southern Africa to work under strange conditions. Few were full-time workers — as we know, the migrant labour system kept most black workers tied to the land. Men who spent most of their working lives on the mines still regarded themselves mainly as farmers, belonging to a chiefdom rather than a working class.

Nevertheless, during this

period workers were already beginning to realise that their struggle was changing from a struggle over land to a fight for higher wages. Ironically, the migrant system, which prevented black workers from uniting, was also the source of their strength. Migrants were able to use their land base to boycott the Rand mines after the Anglo-Boer War, by staying at home. Formal resistance, too, was taking place as early as 1896.

The mine-owners responded to this early resistance by tightening up their labour system. In chapters 11 and 13 we saw how they introduced the compounds as a form of control soon after the early strikes and the coming of

the Chinese indentured labourers. We saw, too, how pass laws and other forms of labour control were made more effective after the war, in response to workers' resistance. Then the 1913 Land Act removed from most blacks the possibility of relying entirely on the land to survive.

Worker and black national consciousness developed as South Africa's economy expanded, especially during and after the First World War. A black population employed outside the mines was growing in the towns. The South African Native National Congress had been established in 1912, and its Transvaal branch took up workers' issues.



South African mineworkers were not only divided along racial lines. Migrant labour and the compound system kept black workers divided among themselves. In the compounds migrant workers preferred to be with friends from home, and mine managers encouraged this separation along ethnic lines. Compound police, for example, were chosen from the ranks of Zulu workers. The result of this policy was division and hostility between workers of different chiefdoms.

Its members, as well as other groups, campaigned for higher wages and against the pass laws. Black workers became more experienced and organised: their resistance culminated in the massive mine-workers' strike in 1920, which shook the labour system even though it failed to change it.

As for the white workers, their struggle against the powerful mine-owners centred mainly around their own job insecurity.

This was caused by the racial exploitation of black workers — the wage colour bar — and resulted in an unequal and racial division of the workers.

Yet the relationship between white and black workers was not always negative — the white workers' strike of 1913, for example, politicised black miners, inspiring them to examine their own forms of resistance. There is evidence, too, of communication between black wor-

kers and the socialists of the day — those 'agitators', black and white, who preached resistance against the capitalists and unity amongst all workers.

For the most part, however, the class struggle took on a racial form, and the mine-owners were able quite easily to buy off the white workers with protected jobs and higher wages, dividing them from the rest of the working class.

In this book, we have seen that the history of South Africa in the first quarter of this century was not the history of the mine-owners alone. Their supremacy was challenged by the workers in many ways. It is true that this resistance failed to change the basic system of labour control, or to raise the ultra-low wages of the black workers. But out of resistance grew a worker consciousness. The mine-owners had forced into being a labour supply to serve the needs of their mines. But the mineworkers — and those who worked in the industries that grew up with the mines — refused to remain mere units in a labour supply.

In the years that followed, more organised resistance developed, both politically and at the place of work. Workers began to make their own history. This is a story which must be told another time.