South African History Online
Towards a People's History

Home > Politics & Society > 20th Century South Africa > 1946 African Mineworkers Strike

1946 African Mineworkers Strike

Published 21 March 2011

- Updated 18 September 2025

Cite This Page Share

"Two hundred thousand subterranean heroes who, by day and by night, for a mere pittance lay down their lives to the familiar 'fall of rock' and who, at deep levels, ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 feet in the bowels of the earth, sacrifice their lungs to the rock dust which develops miners' phthisis and pneumonia." - Sol Plaatjie, first Secretary of the African National Congress (http://www.sahistory.org.za/organisations/african-national-congress-anc), describing the lives of black miners in 1914.

On 12 August 1946 African mine workers of the Witwatersrand went on strike in support of a demand for higher wages - 10 shillings a day. They continued the strike for a week in the face of the most savage police terror, in which officially 1,248 workers were wounded and a very large number - officially only 9 - were killed. Lawless police and army violence smashed the strike. The resources of the racist State were mobilised, almost on a war footing, against the unarmed workmen.

But the miners` strike had profound repercussions which are felt until this day. The intense persecution of workers' organisations which began during the strike, when trade union and political offices and homes of officials were raided throughout the country, has not ceased.

The most profound result of the strike, however, was to be the impact it had on the political thinking within the national liberation movement; almost immediately it shifted significantly from a policy of concession to more dynamic and militant forms of struggle.

Birth of the African Mine Workers' Union

Black workers were introduced to trade unionism by the early struggles of white British workers who had begun to form trade unions from 1880 onwards. During the first thirty years of their existence the white workers were occupied in a turbulent struggle for decent wages, union recognition and survival.

Writing about this period Alex Hepple states:

"It was a struggle of white men, striving for a higher standard of life and inbred with a fiery belief in their cause which carried them into bloody strikes, violence and rebellion. Their main enemy was the Chamber of Mines, a body of men who owned the rich gold mines. The quarrel revolved around the Chamber's low-wage policy. This conflict greatly influenced the pattern and direction of trade unionism in South Africa. It introduced the race factor into labour economics and steered white workers into support of an industrial colour bar, with all its damaging effects on workers' solidarity."

Indeed solidarity between white and black workers was lost in those first thirty years, never to be regained to this day. The result has been that the white workers became the aristocrats of labour in South Africa, being among the highest paid workers in the world, while their black compatriots are, in the main, still living below the breadline. What is worse, the overwhelming majority of white workers in South Africa became the main and the most vociferous supporters of successive racist regimes.

However, they taught the black workers one important lesson, i.e., in order to win their demands they had to organise. The organisation of African mine workers was and remains one of the most difficult - and the most essential - tasks facing the trade union and national movement in South Africa. Recruited from the four corners of the country and beyond its borders in Malawi, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and, up to 1973, Angola, the African miners are spread out from Randfontein to Springs in the Witwatersrand, spilling over into the Orange Free State.

They are shut into prison-like compounds, speaking many languages, guarded and spied upon.

Any attempt at organisation exposed them to the wiles of employers, the antagonism of white workers and the ferocious arm of the law.

Many unsuccessful attempts were made to form a trade union prior to 1941. But in that year, on 3 August, a very representative miners' conference was called by the Transvaal Provincial Committee of the African National Congress. The conference was attended not only by workers from many mines, but also by delegates from a large number of African, Indian, Coloured and white organisations, as well as representatives from a number of black unions. Some white unions gave their moral support and even the Paramount Chief of Zululand sent an encouraging message. A broad committee of fifteen was elected to "proceed by every means it thought fit to build up an African Mine Workers' Union in order to raise the standards and guard the interests of all African mine workers."

From the first the committee encountered innumerable obstacles. The miners were ready to listen to its speakers, but the employers and the authorities were determined to prevent organisational meetings. Speakers were arrested and meetings broken up.

Another serious obstacle was the wide-scale use of spies by the mine owners.

Time and again provisional shaft and compound union committees were established, only to end in the victimisation and expulsion from the mines of the officials and committee members. Nevertheless, the organising campaign progressed steadily and the stage was reached where a very representative conference of mine workers was held. The Conference formally established the African Mine Workers' Union and elected a committee under the presidency of J. B. Marks, who soon thereafter was elected President of the Transvaal African National Congress as well.

Background to the strike

In 1941, when the decision to launch the Mine Workers' Union was first mooted the wage rate for African workers was R70 per year while white workers received R848. In 1946, the year of the great strike the wages were: Africans R87 and whites R1,106.

In both cases it would be noticed that the wage gap between the white worker and the black worker was 12:1.

With the formal establishment of the Union, organisational work began in earnest in the face of increased harassment, arrests, dismissals, and deportation of workers by the police and the mine management. Nevertheless, the Union grew in strength and influence. The Chamber of Mines, however, refused even to acknowledge the existence of the African Mine Workers' Union, much less to negotiate with its representatives. The Chamber's secretary instructed the office staff not to reply to communications from the Union.

Unofficially, of course, the Chamber was acutely conscious of the Union's activities and secret directives were sent out to break the Union. But, with the rising cost of living, starvation of families in the reserves and increasing pressure by the mine management and white workers, the demands of the workers became more incessant.

In order to stave off the growing unrest among the African mine workers, the regime appointed a Commission of Enquiry in 1943, with Judge Lansdowne as its Chairman. Among the members of this Commission was A. A. Moore, President of the mostly white Trades and Labour Council.

The African Mine Workers' Union presented an unanswerable case before this Commission in support of the workers' claim to a living wage. The Chamber of Mines made no serious attempt to rebut the Union's case, reiterating that its policy was to employ cheap African labour. Meanwhile, however, the *Guardian*, a progressive South African weekly, the only paper which totally supported the strike, was sued by four mining companies for 40,000 pounds for publishing the Unions memorandum on the grounds that it was false and that the recruiting of mine labourers would be hindered. The Court decided against the *Guardian* and awarded 750 pounds damages to each of the four companies. No serious student of South African politics could have expected otherwise. It was surprising that the awards to the mine magnates were not higher.

The report of the Lansdowne Commission which appeared in April 1944 was a shameful document. It accepted the basic premise of the mine owners; all its recommendations were quite frankly made within the framework of preserving the cheap labour system. The miner's wage, said the Commission, was not really intended to be a living wage, but merely a "supplementary income". Supplementary, that is, to the worker's supposed income from his land. The evidence placed before the Commission of acute starvation in the Transkei and other reserves was ignored.

The report of the Commission was received with bitter disappointment by the workers. Even its wretchedly miserly recommendations were rejected, in the main, by both the regime and the mine owners.

The recommendations were:

- an increase of five pence per shift for surface workers and six pence per shift for underground workers, on the basic rate of 22 pence per shift obtained for nearly a generation;
- cost of living allowance of 3 pence per shift;
- boot allowance of 36 pence for 30 shifts;
- two weeks' paid leave per annum for permanent workers; and
- overtime wages at time and a half.

Towards the end of that year the racist Prime Minister, Field Marshal Smuts, announced that wages were to be raised by 4 pence for surface and 5 pence for underground workers, and that the extra wage would be borne by the State in the form of tax remission to the mines. The Chamber of Mines also agreed to overtime pay. All the other recommendations, miserly though they were, were completely ignored.

Obviously expecting that this would do little to allay the general discontent among the African miners, Smuts issued a Proclamation - War Measure No. 1425 - prohibiting gatherings of more than twenty persons on mining property without special permission. J. B. Marks, the President, and two other officials of the Union were arrested in December 1944, when they held a meeting at the Durban Deep Compound on the Witwatersrand. A few days later P. Vundi and W. Kanye, two organisers of the Union, were arrested on a similar charge in Springs. The arrested men were found not guilty on a technicality. The offence created by the Proclamation was that of being present at a gathering of more than 20 persons, whereas the accused had been charged with "holding a meeting". From that time, the police were more careful to frame their charges in correct legal phraseology and all trade union meetings in or near mine compounds ceased. Though the war ended, the Proclamation was not withdrawn.

Despite these difficulties the African Mine Workers' Union increased its following in numerous mines throughout the Witwatersrand. And on May 19, 1946, the biggest conference yet held of representatives of the workers instructed the Executive of the Union to make yet one more approach to the Chamber of Mines to place before them the workers' demands for a ten shillings (one Rand) a day wage and other improvements. Failing agreement, decided the Conference, the workers would take strike action.

From May till July the Union redoubled its efforts to get the Chamber to see reason. To all their repeated communications they received one reply - a printed postcard stating that the matter was receiving attention.

In his evidence at the subsequent trial of strike leaders and their supporters, Mr. Limebeer, secretary of the Chamber of Mines, said that the postcard had been sent in error. It was the Chamber's policy, he added, not to acknowledge communications from the Union.

Decision to strike

On Sunday, August 4, 1946, over one thousand delegates assembled at an open air conference held in the Newtown Market Square: no hall where Africans could hold meetings was big enough to accommodate those present. The conference carried the following resolution unanimously:

"Because of the intransigent attitude of the Transvaal Chamber of Mines towards the legitimate demands of the workers for a minimum wage of 10 shillings per day and better conditions of work, this meeting of African miners resolves to embark upon a general strike of all Africans employed on the gold mines, as from August 12, 1946."

Before the decision was adopted, speaker after speaker mounted the platform and demanded immediate action. One worker said:

"When I think of how we left our homes in the reserves, our children naked and starving, we have nothing more to say. Every man must agree to strike on 12 August. It is better to die than go back with empty hands."

After the decision to strike was adopted, the President, J. B. Marks, stressed the gravity of the strike decision and said that the workers must be prepared for repression by possible violence. "You are challenging the very basis of the cheap labour system" he told them, "and must be ready to sacrifice in the struggle for the right to live as human beings." His speech was loudly cheered, as was that of the Secretary, J. J. Najoro, who declared that their repeated efforts to secure improvements by negotiation had always ended in failure, owing to the refusal of the Chamber of Mines to recognise the existence of the Union. There was little doubt, he warned, that the regime would attempt to suppress the strike by brute force.

But the meeting was in a militant mood. An old miner shouted: "We on the mines are dead men already."

The strike and the terror

A letter conveying the decision of the meeting to the Chamber, and adding a desperate last-minute appeal for negotiations, was as usual ignored. The press and mass media, except the *Guardian* , did not print any news of the decision until the morning of Monday, 12 August, when the *Rand Daily Mail* came out with a front page story that the strike was a "complete failure". The report was obviously mischievous and a lie, as the paper went to bed before midnight, when the strike had not even begun.

The *Star* that evening, however, had a different tale to tell: tens of thousands of workers were out on strike from the East to the West Rand; the Smuts regime had formed a special committee of Cabinet Ministers to "deal with" the situation; and thousands of police were being mobilised and drafted to the area.

They dealt with it by means of bloody violence. The police batoned, bayoneted and fired on the striking workers to force them down the mine shafts. The full extent of police repression is not known but reports from miners and some newspapers reveal intense persecution and terror during the week following Monday, 12 August.

A peaceful procession of workers began to march to Johannesburg on what became known as Bloody Tuesday, 13 August, from the East Rand. They wanted to get their passes and go back home. Police opened fire on the procession and a number of workers were killed. At one mine workers, forced to go down the mine, started a sit-down strike underground. The police drove the workers up - according to the *Star* - "stope by stope, level by level" to the surface. They then started beating them up, chasing them into the veld with baton charges. Then the workers were "re-assembled" in the compound yard and, said the *Star* , "volunteered to go back to work".

In protest against these savage brutalities, a special conference of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CONETU) decided to call a general strike in Johannesburg on Wednesday, 14 August. The Johannesburg (http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/johannesburg) City Council sent a deputation to plead with CONETU to maintain essential services. Many workers heeded the call, but the weakness of the unions generally, and the failure to bring the call home to the workers in factories, resulted in only a partial success of the strike.

CONETU called a mass meeting of workers at the Newtown Market Square on 15 August. The meeting was banned in terms of the Riotous Assemblies Act, and the decision banning the meeting was conveyed by a senior police officer, backed by a large squad of armed police. Those present were given five minutes to disperse. Only quick action by people's leaders who went among the angry crowd averted a massacre. A procession of women tobacco workers marching to this meeting was attacked by the police and one pregnant worker bayoneted.

By Friday, 16 August, all the striking workers - 75,000 according to the government "Director of Native Labour" but probably nearer 100,000 - were bludgeoned back to work.

Throughout the week hundreds of workers were arrested, tried, imprisoned or deported. Leaders of the African trade unions and the entire Executive Committee of the African Mine Workers' Union, the whole of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and scores of Provincial and local leaders of the African National Congress were arrested and charged in a series of abortive "treason and sedition" trials. Innumerable police raids, not only in the Transvaal but in all the main cities in the country including Durban (http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/durban), Cape Town (http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/cape-town), Port Elizabeth (http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/port-elizabeth), Kimberley and East London, were carried out on the offices of trade unions, the Congresses and the Communist Party. The homes of leaders of the ANC, the Communist Party, the Indian and Coloured Congresses and the trade unions were also raided simultaneously. The white South African State was mobilised and rampant in defence of its cheap labour policy and big dividends for the mining magnates and big business. This marked the opening of a phase of intense repression by the racist regime of the day, led by Field Marshal Smuts, against the forces for change in South Africa. This repression continues to this day under the Vorster regime.

The African Mine Workers' Union, mainly because of the very difficult circumstances under which it operated, was never a closely-organised well-knit body. During the strike the central strike committee was effectively cut off from the workers at each mine by massive police action and the workers had to struggle in isolation. They were continually told that all the other workers had gone back to work, and apart from Union leaflets hazardously brought into the compounds by gallant volunteers - a large number being caught and arrested - there was no system of interchanging information.

Nevertheless, thousand of miners defied terror, arrest and enemy propaganda and stood out for five days - from 12 to 16 August. During the strike 32 of the 45 mines on the Rand were affected according to one report received by the Union and later confirmed by the Johannesburg *Star* . According to the estimates issued by the Chief Native Commissioner for the Witwatersrand, 21 mines were affected by the strike, 11 wholly and 10 partially. The dead, according to this official, numbered nine, of whom four were trampled to death, three died in the hospital, one was shot dead and one "killed himself by running into a dustbin".

The regime called the strike a failure. But no great movement of this character is really a "failure", even though it might not succeed in its immediate aim.

A historic event

The African miners' strike was one of those historic events that, in a flash of illumination, educate a nation, reveal what has been hidden and destroy lies and illusions. The strike transformed African politics overnight. It spelt the end of the compromising, concession-begging tendencies that dominated African politics. The timid opportunism and servile begging for favours disappeared for all practical purposes. The Native Representative Council which, in a sense, embodied that spirit, in its session on Thursday, 15 August, in Pretoria, decided to adjourn as a protest against the Government's "breach of faith towards the African people". They never met again.

Dr. A. B. Xuma (http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/dr-alfred-xuma), President-General of the African National Congress, joined a delegation of the South African Indian Congress (http://www.sahistory.org.za/organisations/south-african-indian-congress-saic) (SAIC) sent to the 1946 session of the United Nations General Assembly when the question of the treatment of Indians in South Africa was raised by the Government of India. He, together with the SAIC representatives - H. A. Naidoo and Sorabjee Rustomjee - and Senator H. M. Basner, a progressive white "Native Representative" in the South African Senate, used the occasion to appraise Member States of the United Nations of the strike of the African miners and other aspects of the struggle for equality in South Africa.

Dealing with this visit the ANC, at its annual conference from December 14 to 17, 1946, passed the following resolution:

"Congress congratulates the delegates of India, China and the Soviet Union and all other countries who championed the cause of democratic rights for the oppressed non-European majority in South Africa, and pays tribute to those South Africans present in America, particularly Dr. A. B. Xuma, Messrs. H. A. Naidoo, Sorabjee Rustomjee and Senator H. M. Basner, for enabling delegates to the United Nations to obtain first-hand information and data which provided the nations of the world with reasonable grounds for passing a deserving judgment against the South African policy of white domination.

> *"Conference desires to make special mention of the Council for African Affairs for its noble efforts to defend fundamental human rights..."*
>
> **Share this quote:**
>
> (https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike&quote=%22Conference%20desires%20to%20make%20special%20mention%20of%20the%20Council%20for%20African%20Affairs%20for%20its%20noble%20efforts%20to%20defend%20fundamental%20human%20rights...%22) (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=%22Conference%20desires%20to%20make%20special%20mention%20of%20the%20Council%20for%20African%20Affairs%20for%20its%20noble%20efforts%20to%20defend%20fundamental%20human%20rights...%22&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike) (https://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike&summary=%22Conference%20desires%20to%20make%20special%20mention%20of%20the%20Council%20for%20African%20Affairs%20for%20its%20noble%20efforts%20to%20defend%20fundamental%20human%20rights...%22) (mailto:?subject=Quote from SAHO&body=%22Conference%20desires%20to%20make%20special%20mention%20of%20the%20Council%20for%20African%20Affairs%20for%20its%20noble%20efforts%20to%20defend%20fundamental%20human%20rights...%22%0A%0ARead more at:
>
> https://sahistory.org.za/article/1946-african-mineworkers-strike) (#)

When the Native Representative Council adjourned, the Prime Minister, Field Marshal Smuts, met members of the Council and outlined new proposals to end the deadlock. Among his proposals was "a form of recognition" for African trade unions. However, he made it clear that such recognition would not include African mine workers: their affairs would be dealt with by an Inspectorate functioning under the Department of Native Affairs.

After considering this proposal, the Councillors stated:

> *"It is asking for too much to expect the African people to believe that this new Inspectorate, whatever the grade of officers appointed, will make a better job of protecting the interests of the mine workers than the Inspectorate has done in the past. The African mine workers demand the right to protect themselves through the medium of their own recognised and registered organisations."*
>
> **Share this quote:**
>
> (https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike&quote=%22It%20is%20asking%20for%20too%20much%20to%20expect%20the%20African%20people%20to%20believe%20that%20this%20new%20Inspectorate%2C%20whatever%20the%20grade%20of%20officers%20appointed%2C%20will%20make%20a%20better%20job%20of%20protecting%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20mine%20workers%20than%20the%20Inspectorate%20has%20done%20in%20the%20past.%20The%20African%20mine%20workers%20dem) (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=%22It%20is%20asking%20for%20too%20much%20to%20expect%20the%20African%20people%20to%20believe%20that%20this%20new%20Inspectorate%2C%20whatever%20the%20grade%20of%20officers%20appointed%2C%20will%20make%20a%20better%20job%20of%20protecting%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20mine%20workers%20than%20the%20Inspectorate%20has%20done%20in%20the%20past.%20The%20African%20mine%20workers%20dem&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike) (https://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike&summary=%22It%20is%20asking%20for%20too%20much%20to%20expect%20the%20African%20people%20to%20believe%20that%20this%20new%20Inspectorate%2C%20whatever%20the%20grade%20of%20officers%20appointed%2C%20will%20make%20a%20better%20job%20of%20protecting%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20mine%20workers%20than%20the%20Inspectorate%20has%20done%20in%20the%20past.%20The%20African%20mine%20workers%20dem) (mailto:?subject=Quote from SAHO&body=%22It%20is%20asking%20for%20too%20much%20to%20expect%20the%20African%20people%20to%20believe%20that%20this%20new%20Inspectorate%2C%20whatever%20the%20grade%20of%20officers%20appointed%2C%20will%20make%20a%20better%20job%20of%20protecting%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20mine%20workers%20than%20the%20Inspectorate%20has%20done%20in%20the%20past.%20The%20African%20mine%20workers%20dem%0A%0ARead more at: https%3A%2F%2Fsahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2F1946-african-mineworkers-strike) (#)

In a statement on May 11, 1947, on the Council's decision to adjourn, Dr. A.B. Xuma reiterated the demand of the ANC for "recognition of African trade unions under the Industrial Conciliation Act and adequate wages for African workers, including mine workers".

The brave miners of 1946 gave birth to the ANC Youth League's Programme of Action adopted in 1949; they were the forerunners of the freedom strikers of May 1, 1950, against the Suppression of Communism Act, and the tens of thousands who joined the 26 June nation-wide protest strike that followed the killing of sixteen people during the May Day strike. They gave the impetus for the 1952 Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws when thousands of African, Indian and Coloured people went to jail; they inspired the mood that led to the upsurge in 1960 and to the emergence of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) - the military wing of the African National Congress.

Your name

Subject

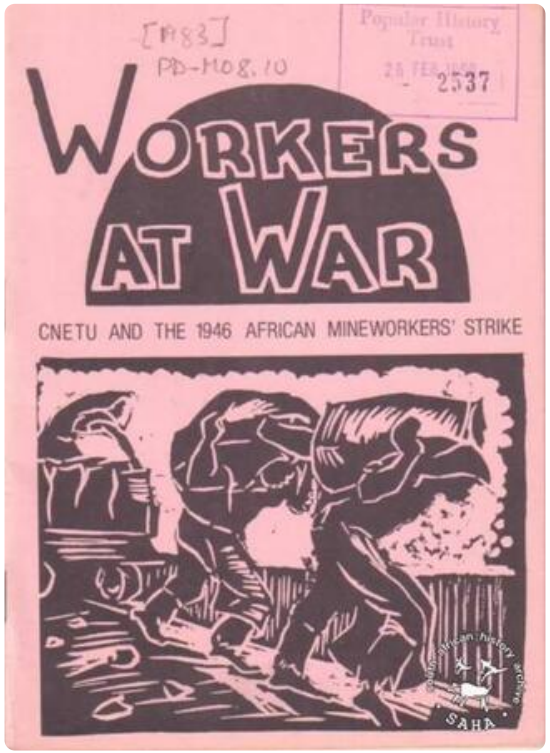
Comment *

Paragraph B I

About text formats

Save Preview

Protected by Spam Master (https://www.spammaster.org)



CNETU and the 1946 African Mineworkers *Image source (https://www.saha.org.za/workers/workers_at_war_cnetu_and_the_1946_african_mineworkers_strike_3.htm)*

Articles

1. Second World War and its impact, 1939-1948
2. Background to the strike
3. Birth of the African Mine Workers' Union
4. The Duration of the strike!
5. Council of Non-European trade unions (CNETU)
6. Fortieth Anniversary of the 1946 Mine Strike
7. A Chronological look (1943 to 1986) at the Life and Times of Mr George Ponnen
8. The Sedition Trial 1946 - 1948
9. The African Mine workers strike of 1946

People
Organisations
Timelines
Archive
Galleries

Related Content

Labour and Mining Revolution 1886-1940s

SUGGESTED READING

Related Content & Topics

Related Articles

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1995 - 1999

Read More (#)

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1991 - 1994

Read More (#)

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1987 - 1990

Read More (#)

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1986 - 1987

Read More (#)

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1983 - 1985

Read More (#)

Mining Strikes & Disturbances 1977 - 1982

Read More (#)

Follow us

(https://facebook.com/sahistoryonline1)

African-History-Online/sahistory-web/issues/new)

349 Albert Road, Woodstock

© 2026 South African History Online

NPO Registration: 037-117-NPO