

L.P. 1008/1056/10
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Feb. 1922

While the Council of Action and the Augmented Executive were conducting the strike on the traditional British trade union pattern, the Afrikaner workers, who already constituted a majority of the white miners, introduced a new factor which had already been seen in embryo form in the strike of 1914 - the commandos. These were in the closing stages to dominate the revolt. At the subsequent government commission of inquiry an undated circular was produced to show that the commandos had the official sanction of the Federation.

It purported to be a resolution signed by F.A. De Meillon (an exec. member of the Mineworkers Union) and J.W. Walker, chairman of the Federation's Central Strike Committee and read:

"Resolution.

"Whereas it is desirable and imperative that Commandoes of the following three sections of the white community, inhabitants of the Union of South Africa be immediately formed and raised with the object of protecting the interests of all white workers, namely:

- (a) Strikers' Commandoes;
- (b) Unemployed;
- (c) Employed;

And whereas it is essential and the time has arrived to fundamentally establish this country as a white man's country: it be resolved: -

That Commandoes of all sections of -

- (a) Strikers,
- (b) Unemployed,
- (c) Employed

of the white community of the Rand be immediately formed with branches in each township under officers to be elected by each platoon.

(Sgd.) F.A. de Meillon"

"This resolution has been endorsed by my Committee and recommend that the E.C. take the matter up.

(Sgd.) G.W. Walker,
South African Industrial Federation
Central Strike Committee, Johannesburg."

(U.G. 35, '22 par.27)

--- Note----

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(Note, however, that the evidence before this Commission must be treated with the utmost reserve. Even "Some of the most responsible leaders" (ibid par. 51) supported the commando movement, including Waterston, who was virtually O.C. of the Brakpan Commando and Walter Madeley. "Mr. Waterston left Johannesburg to attend to his parliamentary duties about the 12th February and the commando was placed in charge of Mr ---, now awaiting trial for the crime of High Treason," the commissioners note icily.)

The commandos were based on the traditional Boer horseback units which had waged war on the African and the British, and they were filled with a hard hatred of the black man, in no way modified by even the limited working-class understanding of their British fellow-strikers. (This lack of principle was horribly demonstrated at the revolt's end by the number of them who hastened to betray their fellow workers turning government witnesses at the hanging trials). That the fact that a high proportion did this is evidence Bunting asserts that many of them were, from the start, government agents who set off the subsequent attacks on Africans in order to supply a justification for government intervention, and who also egged on the strikers against the military, spreading false stories of platteland support, so as to provoke clashes

When the scabs began to get through it was the commandos, which feeling none of the intimidation that dominated the Augmented Executive, decided to stand no nonsense, and went to pull them out by force. In this, naturally, they had the wholehearted support of the Council of Action and the Communists.

--- "The Commando---

"The commando movement spread like a flame", says the Commission report. "Regular drills under competent instructors were practised. Each force had its own elected officers who wore the badges of their rank. A small proportion of men were mounted. Cyclist corps and ambulance corps were frequently attached to the Commando. An intelligence system was inaugurated, signalling corps established and, in some of the Commandoes, the men were exercised in movements for the unhorsing of mounted men and in bombing exercises. By the 9th of March a "General Staff" had been established and issued instructions. Women Commandoes were also formed and these took an active part in the operation known as "pulling out of scabs." (U.G. 35, '22 par.29)

Roux, who marched as a boy with the Commandos paints a picture of the result of this alliance between left-wing socialists and rabid racialists which is another one out of the Alice in Wonderland: "The Afrikaner strikers sang the Red Flag in English to the tune of the old Republican Volkslied, and the Marxian socialists not to be outdone, refurbished an old May Day banner so that its slogan read 'Workers of the World fight and unite for a White South Africa!' " (Roux)

Notwithstanding the existence of the commandos, everything in the first six weeks of the strike emphasised the desire of the strikers to avoid violence.

"Nothing that they initiated," wrote Bunting afterwards, "constituted any defiance of the ordinary rules of public order. In comparison with past experiences, and warned by them both leaders and followers preached and practised not only a wonderful solidarity but also an unprecedented orderliness, a phenomenon especially remarkable in a country where a rifle, as part of a white man's equipment is considered, in the rural districts from which most of the strikers hailed, as much a matter of course as a walking stick in England or at any rate a revolver in the 'Wild West'. As a matter of fact the strikers were right up to the

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outbreak, practically unarmed. A GOSPEL OF 'NO VIOLENCE' , including fraternisation, to the point of absurdity, with the police, was sedulously inculcated from the outset, and was persisted in long after it had become apparent that it might involve not peach but martyrdom. Not the smallest disorder preceded or justified the Government's first military measures, nor was there any sign whatever before they were taken in hand of any appeal by the strikers to arms." (Red Revolt p.13)

Bunting believed it to be certain "without question" that the chamber and the government "decided before the strike had ever begun that it would have to be stamped out by force of arms: this and nothing else, explains the actual event."

His description of the commandos is so different from that of the Commission of Inquiry (which met after the publication of the Red Revolt, and in fact attacked Bunting's booklet at some length) that they seem to be describing completely different phenomena. He calls them "Peace Commandos" and explains that they were "a means partly of relieving the monotony and counteracting the demoralising effects of enforced idleness. The Government apologists have professed to see in the adoption of the old Boer military name of "commando" an intention from the outset to resort to military action, and have instanced the case of one or two obscure bodies of "young men from the country" who did, it seems actually attempt about the middle of January to arm themselves at the expense of police posts. But in fact nothing was more striking, one might almost say more pathetic than the contrast between a march past, procession, demonstration or meeting of these unarmed bodies, with the barest apology for a military formation and scarcely a weapon, much less a firearm, between them, and the panoply of war displayed by the squadrons of police. And although they afterwards, when the police became more threatening, appeared with sticks or even pickhandles, yet right up to the last, even in the "collisions" just before Martial Law, when here and there a revolver was brandished by a striker, it is true to say that the commandos (especially those

consisting of members of one craft - the last to be formed before the outbreak) never took on a really military character; indeed, except in isolated villages, THE COMMANDO SYSTEM BECAME INAPPLICABLE AND COLLAPSED THE MOMENT THE FIGHTING BEGAN." (Red Revolt p.16) The real strength of the strikers, he points out, was their unprecedented popular support.

In the sixth week of the strike the government decided that the time had come to go on to the attack. The police were on Feb. 8th instructed to arrest strikers picketing and pulling out scabs, an activity neglected in the early days of the strike but now well organised. The Augmented Executive had on Feb. 7th in spite of a police warning reaffirmed its endorsement of the commando system and strikers were instructed to utilise the commandos in stopping scabbing (U.G. 35, '22 par. 45) as it had to do unless the strikers were to concede defeat. Mass arrests of pickets on charges of public violence followed. Enraged, huge meetings of workers passed resolutions calling for a general strike. The Augmented Executive, however, on Feb. 8th declared itself against a general strike (SAP p. 36) By now 40,000 African workers had been returned to the reserves.

Among the arrested were Fisher and Spendiff. At a mass meeting on Feb. 9th, presided over by Thompson, their release was demanded U.G. 35, '22 par. 107)

On February 11th Smuts issued a call to the workers to return to work on the best terms they could get and promised the fullest protection to those who complied. This was the government's first open alignment with the chamber against the strikers. The Federation rejected the proposal.

---The Johannesburg---

16th Feb. 1922
22nd Feb. 1922

The Johannesburg Municipality withdrew its leave to municipal employees who were on the Augmented Executive on Feb. 16th (SAP 37)

Parliament met on Feb. 17th and Smuts reported on the strike.

FIRST SHOOTING.

On February 22nd the government banned the commandos by declaring them "unlawful assemblies" In a letter written three days later to someone in Australia, Bill Andrews, out on bail after spending the 13th to the 22nd in the Fort on a charge of incitement to public violence, noted "a revolutionary under-current in the situation... Most of the Commandoes are largely Dutch. If they are armed it is sub rosa, but the discipline is extremely good, mounted, foot and cyclists."

"The political aspect of the strike is disclosed by the rapprochement between the Labour and Nationalist Parties, loose and unofficial at present, but it is possible it may develop into a working agreement on the lines of complete autonomy and independence for South Africa." (U.G. 35, '22 par. 53 & 126)

On February 27th, the armed forces of police attacked a commando, killed three workers and injured many more.

There was a huge crowd at the funeral, and the atmosphere on the Rand had, in the words of SAP apologia, become "more electric" (page 28) The Commission considered that the deaths "undoubtedly exasperated the commandoes and the strikers generally... there can be little doubt that to some extent it had a bearing on the revolutionary movement." (U.G. 35, '22 par. 105)

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But at this very first smell of blood the Augmented Executive was ready to surrender. It asked, on March 4th for another conference with the Chamber of Mines. But the Chamber was now confident enough to be arrogant. Discussion with people of the mental calibre of the Federation would be futile, it said, and threw away its chance of breeching the colour bar.

The Chamber, drunk with power, now repeated its original conditions as its terms of surrender. And to make its position quite clear it added that it would no longer recognise the Federation for any purpose and it intended to abolish May Day and Dingaan's Day (a cherished Nationalist holiday commemorating the defeat of Dingaan) as paid holidays! English and Afrikaans workers were to be punished impartially. in parliament, and Smuts, who ^{was} more astute than the Chamber, later criticised this arrogance and even the subsequent government whitewashing commission into the revolt had to agree that this reply from the Chamber "was a frank and brutal expression of their views", which "undoubtedly exasperated the rank and file" (U.G. 35, '22 par. 107 & 108)

But although the strikers were infuriated and were now ready to fight to the death, the reply had a quite different effect on the Augmented Executive. They decided to recommend another strike ballot. (U.G. 35, '22 par. 107)

The Council of Action * mounted a rapid campaign against the ballot decision. At a delegate meeting representing the local strike committees in every part of the Rand, Andrews put the Council's policy: Abandon the ballot.

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*(N.B. Bunting says the Council of Action "met only once and did not function at all as such during the strike" (Red Revolt)

Call a general strike. The delegates agreed on this course, and Andrews was invited to address that evening's City Hall meeting.

There, the representative of the Augmented Executive made his defeatist speech in favour of the ballot.

And Andrews replied.

There was no mistaking the response to his speech. Almost to a man the audience of 5,000 workers rose to cheer him, while the members of the Augmented Executive sat silent on the platform. (U.G. 35, '22 par. 121 also records a "violent speech" by Fisher;)

"Bill Andrews had no official standing, but the workers saw in him an honest, able and courageous leader. He was asked to speak. He spoke. A superb orator, Bill Andrews is able to combine in his speeches cold logic with pathos, simple language with eloquence, dignity and humility. His speech was a call to action for the workers - a real inspiration. The reactionaries faded out of the picture and Bill Andrews took the lead."

The next day (March 6th) still afraid to take any responsibility the Augmented Executive called a meeting of all the executives of the affiliated unions (th Joint Executive) - 120 men in all, in the Trades Hall.

At the call of the Council of Action strikers marched in from all corners of the Rand, surrounded the hall and filled all the passages and stairways, waiting for Executives to decide. From Andrews' office window, conveniently situated

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6th March, 1922

in the Trades Hall itself, members of the Council, among them Andrews, Fisher & Kentridge, were able to address the crowds outside and took full advantage of their opportunity. (U.G., Cope, Roux etc.)

A GENERAL STRIKE IS CALLED.

"An impatient and angry crowd calling for the announcement of a general strike virtually held a knife at the throat of the Augmented Executive," says the South African Party account. "The Executive gave in, and as a result the leadership of the strike slipped out of their hands into those of the so-called Council of Action" (SAP p.38) (The Council it describes as "mainly people from overseas, inspired by all sorts of revolutionary ideas. They were supported by a great number of misled Afrikaners".)

Bunting, however, points out that it is a gross distortion to suggest that the decision was taken because of intimidation. The correct picture is that of a call for a strike coming from the Executive to the accompaniment of a great strikers' demonstration. (Red Revolt p.21)

At 5.30 p.m. an emissary from the meeting came out on the balcony and announced that a general strike would be called from the next day and was in fact already on.

The Augmented Executive authorised a press advertisement announcing the strike then disappeared from the scene. But first they made a large rubber stamp bearing their authority, which they handed over to an unnamed group called the "Big Five"

--- who---

6-7th March, 1922
8th

who in turn called in the assistance of a "committee of Action", which appears in effect to have been, for all practical purposes, the Council of Action.

But it was too late. After the weeks of vacillation and irresolution it was impossible to win over the other unions to the general strike call. Cape Town ignored the call, as did all but a few hundred workers in Durban, and even on the Rand some workers, instead of striking took up arms against the strikers (Red Revolt p.23)

As the call was going out, on March 7th, reports came in from all over the Rand of large-scale unprovoked attacks by white workers on Africans. Twenty Non-Europeans were killed within one day and very many more seriously injured.

The press made the most of the assaults. Within hours the world heard of the strikers only as bloodthirsty murderers.

In the South African countryside the picture painted was quite a different one. The Africans were being provoked into another "kaffir rising" and troops were needed to keep them in check.

On March 8th the first units of the army were called up. The same day Major Trigger sent for Thompson. George & Lewis, officials of the Augmented Executive,. Thompson on behalf of the Augmented Executive signed a statement prepared "in consultation with" Major Trigger saying "Reports have reached the Augmented Executive that in many parts of the Witwatersrand, bodies of strikers are attacking natives wantonly, and without any reason or cause. These acts have without doubt caused considerable feeling amongst the natives, particularly

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8th March 1922

Fordsburg and Vrededorp areas, and the position on the various compounds contiguous to where these happenings are taking place is causing the utmost concern. The Executive Committee hereby instruct all strikers that attacks as above outlined must cease forthwith, and any striker observing any one of their party attacking natives must see that such offender should be handed over to the authorities without delay. It cannot be too strongly impressed that the provoking of natives must have far-reaching consequences in so far as the whole community is concerned, and must provoke ill-feeling on the part of the general public towards the industrial cause. The Executive cannot too strongly impress upon all concerned that such act on is subversive to the interests which the Executive has at heart. (U.G. 35, '22 par. 284).

Meanwhile the Committee of Action, not anticipating the war which was about to explode, was meeting with commando officers in the hope of bringing about some form of unified control and stopping what Bunting inexplicably describes as "the native trouble that had then broken out." (Red Revol p.23). This description lends authenticity to a subsequent statement by a striker that the notice calling this meeting read: "owing to unrest among the natives all Commandants are requested to be at the Trades Hall, Johannesburg at 8.p.m." (U.G.35, '22 par. 34).

Fisher was in the chair.

The Committee found itself unable to obtain any information on what, if anything, the commandos intended doing. The commandants refused to accept instruction from the Committee (Red Revolt p.23).

The Committee contented itself with a declaration of attitude, endorsed by the communists that: "we are not prepared to let our industrial strike weapon pass out of our hands or to involve ourselves in any political move to set up a rival government, we intend to fight this as an industrial struggle and to keep contro of it as such." (Red Revolt p.24) ---The ---

10th March 1922

NB check

The Communist Party issued a statement claiming that the attacks were carried out by the Chamber of Mines provocateurs as a deliberate plot against the strikers. But true as this charge no doubt was, such large scale provocation would not have been possible had not the conditions existed for it in the willingness of the racialist workers to turn on the unarmed Africans.

Until this time the Africans had been completely neutral about the strike and the strikers had ignored the Africans. Although the strike would have been won if the whites had succeeded in obtaining the support of the Africans the possibility was not even considered. At Witbank the coalminers advised the African workers to continue working. They did and as a result the collieries continued to produce throughout the strike. When they saw the African doing their skilled work they did talk of calling them out, but never really attempted to do so (Red Revolt p.12). Nor, perfectly sensibly, did the Africans see any reason to come out of their own accord. The whites were certainly making no demands on their behalf, and it was obvious that their feeling was, to put it mildly "largely against native advancement of any kind". (Red Revolt p.26)

--- Martial Law ---

10th March 1922

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MARTIAL LAW

On March 10th, three days after the attacks on Africans first began and when the country had been saturated with propaganda about plots to dynamite railways, designed to prevent any show of sympathy with the strikers, the entire strike leadership was arrested. In the Fort they heard that martial law had been proclaimed. There was strict postal censorship. The International and the Nationalist Transvaal Post were banned.

Simultaneously headlines blared out that there was a Bolshevik plot to overthrow the state (quote some Star headlines) with all the lurid details of Moscow gold, godless free-lovers and the like.

Reading the newspapers of the period it is difficult to believe that in spite of all the discoveries trumpeted out, not a single member of the Communist Party was among the 864 who subsequently found themselves faced with charges of treason.

Twenty thousand troops* marched against the strikers with air support, bombs were actually dropped, artillery, machine-
 ---guns---

*(Footnote: The number of troops used is disputed. The Commission of Inquiry stated that the total number of soldiers, home guards and police was 7,077. On Jan. 10th this number had been increased to 2,783. On Feb. 28th there were 3,248 and on March 10th 4,077, augmented by the 3,000 civic guards who had been called out on Feb. 27th.

But Bunting says "During the early part of January...

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guns and even a tank. The strikers had only a few hundred rifles (but 1914-18 had made them no strangers to war and two soldiers were killed for each one of the 39 strikers who lost their lives. (See U.G. 35, '22 pars. 71 & 75). 24 non-Europeans were killed. (Check: U.G. 35- 22 says total was 7,077) (? force before strike was 2,488) (only 377 rifles and 1,251 revolvers and other arms were found by the government - U.G. 35, '22 par. 75).

According to the S.A.P. booklet the strikers even managed to shoot down one of the aeroplanes, and damage 10 others (SAP p.41)

Fisher and Spendiff out of the Fort on bail were killed in the Fordsburg fighting on March 14th. The government claimed that they committed suicide when they saw that the battle was lost.

4,692 men, 62 women and four children were arrested (Red Revolt p.30) 1,409 were prosecuted.

By March 16th everything was over. The Augmented Executive announced the end of the general strike.

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(Footnote cont. from previous page : ...while the strike was almost oppressively peaceful, hundreds and thousands of mounted and foot police were drafted, fully armed, from all parts of the country, but especially from non-African districts to the Rand, so much so that while the strike was still confined to the Witbank coalfields, where to the last there was never the slightest threat of a violent collision, it was commonly remarked that there seemed to be two police there for every one striker. This armed force was increased, not suddenly at the last moment, but progressively and steadily throughout the strike period." (Red Revolt p. 14) His estimate of the government forces is 15,000 (p.31))