

## RURAL MASTERS AND URBAN MILITANTS IN EARLY-TWENTIETH CENTURY SOUTH AFRICA

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*White farmers in South Africa, a landowning class that subordinated black tenants and workers, also participated in the suppression of white workers' movements before and after the First World War. This article explores how class interest limited and then overrode the farmers' expected ethnic and political solidarities. It focuses especially on the contradictory ways in which farmers related to the great mineworkers' strike and rebellion of 1922. Some contemporaries expected that racial solidarity, Afrikaner nationalism and familial links would lead landowners to side, even militarily, with the white workers. Appeals were made to farmers by both sides of the struggle in 1922, and there was some significant support for the strikers from them. But the upheaval ran counter to landowners' interests, notably by dislocating their primary urban market at a time of severe economic difficulty. In the end, farmers rode once more into the towns against the workers.*

More than once in early-twentieth century South Africa, the government mobilised Afrikaner landowners against militant urban workers. Much of the military force that overwhelmed a general strike by white workers in January 1914 was drawn

from the countryside.<sup>1</sup> About a decade later, in 1922, there was a historic strike by white workers on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, the conurbation centred on Johannesburg. When the strike erupted into armed insurrection, thousands of white farmers – these would have been military reservists organised into mounted units known as burger commandos – swept into action at the behest of the government. The air force, artillery, permanent military units, reserves not based in the countryside (for example, the Durban Light Infantry, the Imperial Light Horse, the Transvaal Scottish Regiment) as well as a militarised police force were also thrown at the rebels.<sup>2</sup> But the farmers under arms constituted a substantial portion of the purely military forces that suppressed the rebellion.<sup>3</sup>

This study is the first systematic exploration of how the rural masters related to the struggle of 1922. Beyond adding a neglected dimension to our understanding of a signal moment in South African history, it makes an argument of wider interest regarding the relationship of class to politics. For various reasons, the landowners in 1922 were expected by many to side with the strikers and rebels. They did so to some degree, but their support was limited decisively by their class differences from urban workers, and by the ways in which the struggle of 1922 militated against their

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<sup>1</sup> For the use of commandos from the countryside (which the Afrikaans term *burgerkommandos* would generally denote), see – for example – A. G. Oberholster *Die mynwerkerstaking. Witwatersrand, 1922* (Pretoria, 1982), p. 31; David Yudeman *The emergence of modern South Africa. State, capital and the incorporation of organized labor on the South African gold fields* (Westport CT and London, 1983), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> See Oberholster *Die mynwerkerstaking*, chapter 6; J. Krikler *White rising. The 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa* (Manchester, 2005), chapter 9; and the source cited in the next footnote.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of Defence (Gp 2), Box 1378, File DC 30433B, Vol. II, ‘Mobilization Scheme Strike 1922’, loose documents. See ‘Summary of Forces’ dd. 18 March 1922. The figures provided for various areas suggest a total of 3 668 commandos in the Government forces. Total military (as opposed to police) forces mobilized were around 9600, so the burger commandos amounted to over a third of these. The police force deployed amounted to over 7 000, although this included more than 3000 unarmed civil guards, who cannot be considered a military force. This source is part of the Archives of the Secretary of Defence, now part of the South African Defence Force Archives, Pretoria.

economic interests. The analysis, then, might be considered as something of a case-study in how class interest shapes political response.

There was certainly a belief that the farmers, unlike their compatriots who suppressed the general strike in 1914, would side with the rebellious strikers and thereby immeasurably strengthen the armed revolt of 1922. In the 1914 case, it is not surprising that Afrikaner landowners rode in against the strikers. The party then in power – the South African National Party led by Generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts – represented the great majority of Afrikaner landowners, and the farmers could be expected to rally to the call of the government when its authority was challenged. Moreover, organised labour – this was always white labour at this time – was still largely associated with people of British (or British imperial) stock, the historic enemy of Boer/Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaner farmers also had something of a suspicion of the supposed corruption of the urban world,<sup>4</sup> the world after all dominated by *uitlanders* (foreigners) who had brought war and imperialism to the Boer republics.

However, developments in the decade after the general strike of 1914 might have been expected to alter the relationship of many white farmers to urban militants. There were now substantial numbers of Afrikaners amongst the strikers. Moreover, there had been a notable fragmentation and re-alignment in white politics. Afrikaner nationalists had begun to peel away from the ruling South African National Party. In 1914, nationalist-minded SANP MPs from the Orange Free State joined General Hertzog in forming the National Party. When South Africa joined Britain in the First World War, this so outraged many rural Afrikaners that they joined a rebellion. This was crushed by the Botha-Smuts government, but led to a rising wave of Afrikaner

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<sup>4</sup> See J. Krikler, 'The Commandos', *Past and Present*, No. 163, May 1999, pp. 202-244, at pp. 219-20 where the important findings of Sandra Swart are alluded to.

nationalism that spread support for Hertzog's National Party. It now became a country-wide force. Moreover, by the time of the 1922 strike, the party in power, now called the South African Party, had fused with the pro-imperial Unionist Party, and it was led by General Smuts, viewed by many as a collaborator with British imperialism. Increasing numbers of Afrikaners were alienated from the Smuts government. Perhaps the farmers amongst them could no longer be counted on to obey its orders to scotch a workers' rebellion.<sup>5</sup>

Elements of this argument might be persuasive, but one should nevertheless be careful about supposing that Afrikaner landowners were overwhelmingly Nationalist supporters by this time. Indeed, even in 1924, when the South African Party lost power to a coalition of the National and Labour Parties, it was still getting markedly more votes in every province of South Africa (except for the Orange Free State) than the Nationalists: in the Cape, the SAP held perhaps 60% of all parliamentary seats.<sup>6</sup> A fair number would have been rural.<sup>7</sup> It is true that, by the time of the 1924 general election – both in the Transvaal province, where the Witwatersrand was located, and in the Orange Free State, whose northern reaches were close to the Rand – farmers' constituencies revealed a pronounced (and sometimes overwhelming) tendency to incline to the National Party. But it must still be emphasised that, in the general election of 1921, the year before the great strike and rebellion, many rural constituencies in the Transvaal did *not* elect Nationalist parliamentarians: one of the great *gains* of the National Party in 1924 lay particularly in the Transvaal's farming

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<sup>5</sup> For a superb account of the political developments referred to, see W. K. Hancock's classic *Smuts. The sanguine years, 1870-1919* (Cambridge, 1962) and *Smuts. The fields of force*, (Cambridge, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> See C. E. M. O'Dowd, 'The general election of 1924', *South African Historical Journal*, No. 2, November 1970, pp. 54-76, at pp. 72ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Bouch, 'Farming and politics in the Karroo and Eastern Cape, 1910-1924', *South African Historical Journal*, No. 12, November 1980, pp. 48-64, at pp. 62-3, which focus on the importance of rural constituencies that the Nationalists either lost or were unable to take from the SAP in 1924.

constituencies.<sup>8</sup> We must take care, then, in assuming a Nationalist grip on farmers' loyalties. The most one can say with respect to the Transvaal, as opposed to the strongly-Nationalist Orange Free State, is that the period during and after the War saw growing support for the National Party amongst farmers, but that this did not become decisive for that party until 1924.

Even so, when the possibility of military action against the strikers in 1922 was discussed, there was evidently a worry that Afrikaner nationalism might affect the mobilization of farmers. Hence Winston Churchill, then the colonial secretary, was warned by the governor-general of South Africa:

On the last similar occasion, in 1914, the Government relied largely upon the burghers from the districts surrounding the Rand. It is said that since then the attitude of these men has undergone a considerable change owing to the spread of Nationalism and to the fact that numbers of them now have relatives employed on the mines.... It has been rumoured that, if these burghers were called out, some would refuse service or alternatively, after enrolment, would range themselves on the side of the strikers.<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that the governor-general referred to a phenomenon other than nationalism that that might now lead the burger commandos from the countryside to side with strikers: their familial connections with miners. If, in earlier industrial upheavals, white strikers tended to be associated principally with people of British or British imperial origin, this was no longer so. Such had been the pace of Afrikaner urbanisation that, at the time of the 1922 strike, at least half of the strikers were Afrikaners: the general secretary of the white miners' union, E. Hendrikz, was himself an Afrikaner. Moreover, a very high proportion of these Afrikaner mineworkers did indeed have ties to the countryside.

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<sup>8</sup> For this last point, see O' Dowd, 'The general election of 1924', pp. 72-73. See also, Bouch, 'Farming and politics', p. 63, where the Nationalists' 'decisive swing' in 1924 is identified as the Transvaal. This would have been the rural Transvaal, as the party did not fare so well in its urban constituencies.

<sup>9</sup> GG [Archives of the Governor-General of South Africa, 1905-1974], vol. 965, file 19/640, Governor-General to Winston Churchill, 31 January 1922. These archives – hereafter referred to merely as GG – are held in South African National Archives in Pretoria and are part of the Sentrale Argiefbewaarkblek/Central Archives Depot, the archival designation of which is SAB.

Their country origins were manifest in a number of ways – whether in that evidence of mineworkers keeping cows;<sup>10</sup> in the way in which scores of mineworkers worked agricultural plots in Putfontein near Benoni, east of Johannesburg;<sup>11</sup> and – most dramatically – in the very large numbers of horses that the strikers paraded on. When the white workers’ movement, influenced by ex-servicemen in its ranks, elaborated a paramilitary structure known as strike commandos (not to be confused with the burger commandos referred to above), these frequently had mounted sections.<sup>12</sup> It was to one of these that a leader of Germiston strikers referred when he spoke of *die perde Kommando* (‘the horses Commando’) under his authority.<sup>13</sup> That large numbers of mineworkers continued to keep horses – this could be costly for an urban worker, given costs of stabling and forage – is highly significant. The horse had always been a powerful cultural emblem for Afrikaner farmers. When workers held on to it in an urban milieu, this announced their origins on the land and the hope, perhaps, that they would return to it.<sup>14</sup>

If the rural origins of many mineworkers provided a link to Afrikaner farmers that might lead landowners to support the strike, another factor could facilitate this. The strikers of 1922, the men whose movement ultimately became a rebellion against

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<sup>10</sup> See SCC [Archives of the Special Criminal Court, Johannesburg, 1922-3], case No. 59A/1922, Rex v. R. K. de Boer et al: testimony of Clifford Ferreira, striker; and case No. 3/1922, Rex v. M. Olivier et al: preparatory examination testimony of Frans Werner, mineworker. This archive – hereafter referred to as SCC – is held in the South African National Archives in Pretoria. It is part of the Transvaal Argiefbewaarplek/Transvaal Archives Depot, the archival designation of which is TAB

<sup>11</sup> See SCC, case No. 62A/1922, Rex v. D. van Zyl et al: testimonies of Sergeant Edgar Holmden and Henry Boy, a detective.

<sup>12</sup> For the strike commando movement, see J. Krikler, ‘The commandos: the army of white labour in South Africa’, *Past and Present*, No. 163, May 1999, pp.202-244; and – generally – Jeremy Krikler *White rising*.

<sup>13</sup> UWL [University of the Witwatersrand Library Historical Manuscripts], AH646, Records of the Trade Union Council of South Africa [TUCSA Records], South African Industrial Federation Papers [SAIF Papers], Bd6.2.1, File 3, case concerning Primrose Mine shooting: statement (Afrikaans typescript, 3 pp) of Gabriel Mare of Germiston, p. 3, crossed out portion. (Note: this statement is distinct from a two-page typescript statement of Mare’s in this file .) Hereafter, this source is referred to as UWL, AH646, TUCSA Records, SAIF Papers.

<sup>14</sup> See W. M. Macmillan *Complex South Africa* (London, 1930), pp. 85-6 with respect to urban Afrikaners’ desire to return to the land.

the government, were fighting above all to prevent the semi-skilled amongst them – perhaps 10% of the white labour force – from being replaced by black workers at much lower wages. (The South African mining companies, worried by falling profits and the power of white labour, had provoked the strike by seeking to impose wage cuts, a reorganisation of production and a policy of racial substitution in the semi-skilled grades.)<sup>15</sup> Landowners, highly committed to white supremacy, were expected to show sympathy with the racial cause at the heart of the strike.<sup>16</sup> As the governor-general informed the colonial secretary: ‘The allegation that the Chamber [of Mines, the employers’ body] is trying to displace white men by natives may enlist the sympathy of the Dutch [i.e. Afrikaner] farmers, whose attitude on the colour question is traditional.’<sup>17</sup> By the time this message was sent to London, a Nationalist politician had already told strikers at an ‘overflowing’ meeting ‘that they had the full sympathy of the farmers in his district in their fight for the maintenance of the colour bar’.<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, then, there was a plausible contemporary view – held for the reasons sketched above – that the rural masters would show solidarity with the white labour movement in the year of its great struggle. This article explores the nature, limits and – ultimately – the violation of that solidarity. However, before commencing the analysis, certain difficulties with regard to sources should be emphasised. The archives of the Department of Agriculture, the state institution most concerned with the landowners, may well have nothing on the farmers’ relationship to

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<sup>15</sup> For the context and nature of the company drive against the conditions of white labour, see Jeremy Krikler *White rising*, chapter 1; Frederick Johnstone, *Class, race and gold. A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa* (Lanham MD, 1976), chapter 3; Yudelman *Emergence of modern South Africa*, chapters 4-5; Oberholster *Die mynwerkerstaking*, chapter 3; Jack and Ray Simons *Class and colour in South Africa* (International Defence and Aid Fund edition, 1983), chapter 13.

<sup>16</sup> See *Die Burger*, 17 February 1922, p. 5, ‘Boere steun stakers’ for evidence of farmers supporting the racial demand of the strikers.

<sup>17</sup> GG, Vol. 965, file 19/640, Gov-General to Winston Churchill, 31 January 1922.

<sup>18</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 January 1922, p. 10, ‘Protracted struggle expected’.

the strike.<sup>19</sup> The Department of Defence files that relate to the workers' rebellion offer a few tantalizing glimpses of the burger commandos but they do not deal with them extensively.<sup>20</sup> (The nature of the defence records perhaps explains why A. B. Oberholster, the historian who has most immersed himself in the military record, has little, if anything, to say about the farmers' relationship to the strike.)<sup>21</sup> One also has to look very hard elsewhere in the voluminous state records related to the upheaval of 1922 to find references to farmers – I deploy here ones gathered in many years of research into a much wider project on race, class and violence.

Gleanings from newspaper research are certainly rich. The Afrikaans press provided much evidence for this study, but it is the great English-language newspaper of Johannesburg, the *Rand Daily Mail*, that has proved most useful. This comparatively well-resourced newspaper was published from the heart of the Rand during the struggle of 1922, and it offered an extraordinarily-comprehensive account of virtually all phenomena related to the strike. Indeed, when the Strike Legal Defence Committee came to offer an analysis of the upheaval, it based its 'detailed chronological history' on what the *Rand Daily Mail* provided. The paper served capital, the committee declared, and it was given to condemning strikers, but – as it pointed out – 'its reports of facts were usually correct'.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, the *Rand Daily Mail* detailed farmers' aid to the strike, and it also provided evidence of the

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<sup>19</sup> See LDB [Argief van die Sekretaris van Landbou /Archives of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1896-1969]. It is part of the SAB collection of the South African National Archives. In 2013, I fruitlessly searched the LDB archive for material on the farmers' relationship to the strike and came up with nothing. I searched consecutively through correspondence files that comprehended 1922 – for example, those in correspondence file volumes 2-7 and 9-13. After searching all volumes up to volume 34 that contained any material relating to the year 1922, I ceased my consecutive trawl since the files were yielding nothing of relevance. I drew a blank also in my study of the Register of Outgoing Letters, vol. 5065, as also in my study of the following volumes of the Registers of Incoming Letters (individuals): vol. 4997, 4998 and vol. 4999. All volumes of registers mentioned cover the period of the strike.

<sup>20</sup> A guide to sources regarding the 1922 strike in the Archives of the Secretary of Defence was compiled by M. Fraser and is held in the South African National Defence Force Archives, Pretoria.

<sup>21</sup> See Oberholster *Die mynwerkerstaking*.

<sup>22</sup> See *The story of a crime* (Transvaal Strike Legal Defence Committee, Johannesburg, 1924), p. 9.



difficulties the strike caused for agriculturalists in the great market of the Rand. However, notwithstanding the high quality of this press reporting, one must be on guard with respect to items ‘planted’ in the press by the employers, as also with respect to the exaggerations that sometimes coloured pronouncements from the strikers’ camp. The contending parties were, after all, engaged in something of a propaganda war and appeals to farmers had a place in this.

## I

Opponents and supporters of the strike were certainly framing their ideological contest with an eye to the farmers. This can be shown in the employers’ propagation of the abstract and rather unconvincing idea that farmers were suffering because of ‘the high wages paid to organised labour’. Farmers had to be able ‘to exchange products with those of other producers on a...fair basis’, it was argued, and they would never be able to do so ‘while organised labour on the railways, on the mines, and in town industries persist[ed] in claiming the right to be sustained...in a superior position to that of the farmer’.<sup>23</sup> This argument was reiterated by the Chamber of Mines – the collective organisation of mining companies – which also stressed that the income of mineworkers ‘had risen enormously since 1914’ while that of farmers ‘remained stationary’.<sup>24</sup> (Actually, whilst in monetary terms, white mineworkers’ wages had risen markedly during the First World War, given inflation, they had, in real terms, remained more or less fixed between 1914 and 1920.)<sup>25</sup> The farmers,

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<sup>23</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 January 1922, p. 7, ‘Why farmers go bankrupt’, recounting views of the head of the Crown Mines complex.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 20 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Farmers in grave difficulties’: an extensive report of the views of ‘a member of the Chamber of Mines’.

<sup>25</sup> UWL, AH646, TUCSA Records, SAIF Papers, box Bd1-5 (SAI F memoranda), document Bd3.11, J. Boyd (Assistant Secretary, Dept of Labour, Chamber of Mines) to General Secretary, SAIF, 1 June 1921, which admits that in October 1920 the cost of living was ‘practically 57 per cent above the 1914 level’. For a broadly similar increase in wages over the same period, see Johnstone *Class, race and gold*, p. 100.

argued the Chamber opaquely, were exploited by white mine workers: ‘an unfair exchange of labour’ was taking place.<sup>26</sup>

Representatives of labour, meanwhile, made their own appeal to the farmers. A miners’ leader in Brakpan, east of Johannesburg, described some of the work of his ‘Propaganda Committee’: ‘We sent out men to tell the country people exactly why we had come out on strike, and [why we] were remaining out...’<sup>27</sup> A leaflet in Afrikaans, meanwhile, included a message from a leading trade unionist, and advanced the idea that the strikers’ cause was in the interests of farmers. If black labour edged out whites on the mines, it was argued, the consequences for the farmers would be dire: *die annvraag vir hul[lle] produkte sal verminder* (‘the demand for their products will diminish’) and black farm labour would become prohibitively expensive.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, argued the general secretary of the miners’ union, black workers would be drawn away from the farms as they sought new and better-paid positions once held by whites: ‘the backveld farmers would lose seriously in native labour, because farm labourers would flock to the mines to get the higher pay’.<sup>29</sup> A defeat of the white workers, it was publicly declared to a crowd of strikers in Johannesburg, would mean that ‘the farmers must go down, too, once and for all’ for, as the strike had demonstrated, they depended upon a white working class market.<sup>30</sup> This idea was taken up by an Afrikaner nationalist newspaper, which urged farmers to support the

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<sup>26</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Farmers in grave difficulties’

<sup>27</sup> SCC, case No. 77/9/1923, *Rex v. William Fraser and E. W. Gibbs*: testimony of Edwin Gibbs, chairman of the Brakpan Strike Committee. See *Die Burger*, 25 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Die saak aan boere verduidelik’ for a trade unionist addressing a meeting in Colligny, Orange Free State, in which the strikers’ cause was held to be in the economic interests of farmers.

<sup>28</sup> PM [Archives of the Secretary to the Prime Minister], vol. 1/1/422, file 3/22, vol. III, ‘Industrial Situation. Strike. January 1922’, leaflet entitled ‘Die volksiel word geskend!’: enclosure of J. van der Merwe [?] to Captain Lane (PM’s private secretary), 1st Feb. 1922. The leaflet reproduced at length the views of General J. J. Pienaar which had appeared in *Ons Vaderland* newspaper. These archives – hereafter referred to as PM – are held in the South African National Archives in Tshwane/Pretoria and are part of the SAB collection.

<sup>29</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1922, p. 9, ‘Nurahs and the colour bar’.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 21 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Advice to farmers’.

white workers in their struggle because, it asserted, they were ‘better buyers [*beterer kopers*] ...of the products of the farmer’.<sup>31</sup>

In the speeches to strikers, the rural masters were frequently mentioned. The mineworkers desperately needed to hear that their cause was supported by other constituencies of whites, not least the farmers who had proved so potent an enemy in the past. Thus, when crowds of workers gathered, they were repeatedly told that the farmers were with them, as in a speech that referred to the “backveld” having ‘come up to the scratch’, realising that the employers were seeking ‘to starve the men into submission’; or in that address in which it was argued that the mining companies had been wrong footed by the ‘sympathy of the country for the townsmen’. The farmers, it was strongly implied, would not allow the workers to be starved back to work and the employers were now ‘shaking’.<sup>32</sup>

Such speeches – with that emphasis on preventing starvation – remind us that the strikers needed food supplies from the farmers. This is why the leader of the miners’ union was described in early February 1922 as ‘leaving immediately for the country districts to collect foodstuffs from the farmers’.<sup>33</sup> As one leader of strike commandos remarked after the workers’ movement of 1922 had been suppressed: ‘Prominent strikers did go out into the country to collect, and held meetings all over the Transvaal and the Free State.’<sup>34</sup> The strike of 1922 was, after all, no brief affair and the funnelling of food to the strikers and their families was crucial to sustaining it. This is why a trade union leader called upon the wider public to prevent the strikers

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<sup>31</sup> *Die Burger*, 24 February 1922, ‘Boer en werker een belang’.

<sup>32</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 February 1922, p. 5, “Withdraw the ultimatum”; and 1 February 1922, p. 8, ‘Political fighting foreshadowed’. See also the reference to the farmers’ solidarity as conveyed to workers in the Johannesburg Town Hall: *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Distress owing to strike’.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 3 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Distress owing to strike’.

<sup>34</sup> SCC, case no. 1/22, *Rex v. R. P. Erasmus*, testimony of Rasmus P. Erasmus, commandant of a Johannesburg strike commando.

from being ‘beaten by the barbarous weapon of starvation.’ He made his appeal more than a month into the dispute, and commented that: ‘The people of this country had...risen nobly to the occasion...’<sup>35</sup>

Had the people of the countryside so nobly risen? One Labour parliamentarian implied that farmers, generally, were demonstrating ‘their sympathy with the strikers by providing them with foodstuffs’.<sup>36</sup> According to another: ‘The Heidelberg farmers were placing all their cattle and...crops at the disposal of the strikers, to be paid for when they could. Rustenberg and other districts had made similar offers.’<sup>37</sup> This was surely hyperbole. However, the National Party, which had a strong focus on farmers, put its weight behind provisioning the strikers. When trade union representatives met with the Transvaal executive of the party, they specifically ‘asked for assistance in the matter of food supplies’. Sympathetic to the racial demands of the strikers, the executive resolved ‘to give its full support [to the workers] in so far as it affects the supply of provisions from the country side’. A party committee was to be formed to receive such, and soon enough the governor-general was remarking on what was held to be ‘an excellent response’ to the Nationalist initiative.<sup>38</sup> The party’s branch structure in the rural districts of the Transvaal appears to have been enlisted to collect supplies.<sup>39</sup>

East of Johannesburg, in Germiston, farmers were certainly represented on the committee overseeing the relief fund aiding those fallen on hard times because of the strike. Close by, in the settlement of Alberton, Hans Meyer, a prominent local farmer,

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<sup>35</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Thompson’s message’.

<sup>36</sup> GG, vol. 966, file 19/646, Governor General to Winston Churchill, 24 February 1922, citing comments of the parliamentarian, T. Boydell.

<sup>37</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 January 1922, p. 7, ‘Making or marring the country’.

<sup>38</sup> GG, vol. 965, file 19/643, Governor General to Winston Churchill, 7 February 1922; quotations from this letter. A report of the meeting between the National Party and the union representatives may be found in *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 February 1922, p. 5, ‘Give strikers rations’.

<sup>39</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Distress owing to strike’. See *Die Burger*, 16 February 1922, p. 3, ‘Nasionale Party’ for mobilization in support of the strikers by the party’s Marico branch.

made a speech in which he attacked the government and ‘promised the strikers...quite a bounteous supply of foodstuffs from the neighbouring farmers’. West of Johannesburg, meanwhile, in the Krugersdorp-Randfontein area, there was a ‘well-attended meeting of farmers...at Mulder’s Drift’. A vote in support of the strikers was taken ‘and the farmers promised to lend assistance by giving supplies of produce’. Within a week, wagons trundled out of Krugersdorp to bring in sustenance from ‘the country districts’: it was said that ‘a most generous response’ was guaranteed.<sup>40</sup>

Certainly, some reports do suggest a generous response. A single farmer, it was said, ‘had donated ten head of cattle’. Very late in January, an assembly of the farmers of Jackson’s Drift resolved to back the strikers with ‘moral and material support in every direction’; in fact, they had by then provided to the workers’ movement a ‘large quantity of potatoes, fruit, vegetables and meat’. It mid- February, it was reported that J. L van Deventer, presumably a farmer, had donated to the Germiston Relief Fund not only over half a dozen bags of corn and potatoes, but more than 30 sheep and goats.<sup>41</sup> An Afrikaans newspaper printed a *lang lys van bydrae* (a ‘long list of contributions’) that had been made by rural folk to the strikers.<sup>42</sup>

## II

A closer look at the organisation and dispensing of food to the strikers and their families, however, reveals a limited role played by the farmers. For the strikers were overwhelmingly resourced by urban groups and organisations. The South African Industrial Federation, to which the various unions of mineworkers belonged,

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<sup>40</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1922, p. 7, ‘Helping distressed strikers’; 1 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Meeting at Alberton’; 24 January 1922, p. 5, ‘The workers’ propaganda’; 30 January 1922, p. 10, ‘Strike relief work’.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 3 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Distress owing to strike’; 1 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Gifts from Jackson’s Drift farmers’; 17 February 1922, p. 10, ‘Events on the East Rand’.

<sup>42</sup> The newspaper was *Ons Vaderland*, which was cited by *Die Burger*, 18 February 1922, p. 8, ‘40,000 mense per dag gevoed’.

rapidly set up a Central Strike Distress Fund to coordinate the distribution of food to those in need. It was linked to 'various district committees' to which foodstuffs were sent. Not much more than a month into the strike, the movement was already issuing rations for 30 000 people through a highly-organised system entailing registration, depots and coupons.<sup>43</sup> Most of the cash for the Fund came from 'trade union sources'. Goods in kind, then held to be worth over a fifth of the Fund's resources, were contributed by 'tradesmen and sympathisers'. And of the total resources in cash and kind donated to the Central Distress Fund, 'less than 8%' was said to 'have come from the country'. Writing in mid-February 1922, a journalist who wrote admiringly of the organisation of relief by the strikers, spoke of a 'little more' having recently 'come in from the country', but he referred to the 'hopes that the frequently expressed sympathy of the farmers will materialise substantially'.<sup>44</sup> The implication is that the assertions regarding the support of the farmers seemed out of kilter with the actual volume of aid so far received from them. There was no flood of provisions.

Of much greater importance to the strikers were urban sources of support. These came not only from the strata and organisations already alluded to. The resources of local government could also be tapped. In a mining town like Brakpan, the white community was dominated by mineworkers and they could ensure that municipal resources were utilized in their support. In early March, the strike now two months old and burning on towards insurrection, the employers sought to evict strikers and their families from residences on mining property. So powerful a hold on the local municipality did the white working class have, that the mayor immediately brought to the attention of his Finance and General Purposes Committee the 'disgust'

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<sup>43</sup> See *The Star*, 17 February 1922, 'Feeding the strike': cutting to be found as enclosure 29 of GG, vol. 965, file 19/645. Further information on the organisation of relief may be found in *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 February 1922, p. 7, 'Distress owing to strike'.

<sup>44</sup> *The Star*, 17 February 1922, 'Feeding the strike': cutting in the GG source cited in note 43.

of a 'Mass Meeting of Citizens'. They had condemned what was described as an attempt 'to throw women and children out on the veld, at the mercy of the elements'. Shelter was needed for any who were evicted, and the municipal council was requested to take responsibility for this. Within a day of the mass meeting, the committee had formed a special group, including the mayor, 'to inspect and ascertain if any vacant houses or shops [were]...available and...if any tents [could]...be leased'.<sup>45</sup> But even before this, the local authorities in Brakpan were working with the strike movement to alleviate hardship: there was a 'Municipal Fund' to that end, as also official action to galvanise school boards to 'organise the distribution of food to necessitous school children'.<sup>46</sup> On the Rand in 1922, municipal support of this kind would have buttressed that coming from unions and urban sympathisers. Aid from the countryside was helpful, but far from decisive and it was utterly dwarfed by the total that came from town dwellers and organisations. Much was made of rural support in the speeches of labour leaders because it implied wide support for the strike, but it was actually rather circumscribed.

Which factors limited the farmers' support? Firstly, we need to remember that Afrikaners who migrated to the Rand had failed to maintain their positions on the land: landlessness, the pressures of landlords commercialising their estates and preferring black tenants and labourers, had driven them into town. Insofar as Afrikaner workers retained familial connections in the countryside, they were often to folk who were relatively marginal and who could therefore offer them little support.

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<sup>45</sup> See MBP [Archives of the Municipality of Brakpan], vol. 219, file S 51, 'Strike Papers. 1922 Strike', extract from minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting of 7 March 1922. The extract quotes both the resolution of the mass meeting referred to, and a resolution of the committee itself. This archive – hereafter referred to as MBP – is held in the South African National Archives in Pretoria and is part of its TAB collection.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, letter from secretary of the Strike Distress Fund (of the SAIF, Johannesburg), 24 February 1922; and acting secretary, Town Clerk's Office, to secretaries, English and Afrikaans Medium School Committees, 1 February 1922.

Moreover, all farmers were afflicted by a post-war recession and they were likely to view a long, disruptive strike as running counter to their interests. During the strike itself, the president of the Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU) told its annual congress that agriculturalists had been hit very hard by ‘the cessation of work in the gold mines’ which was ‘paralysing their chief local market at a time when they were least able to bear it’.<sup>47</sup> In fact, a sizeable number of letters was received by the TAU from farmers concerned about the issue.<sup>48</sup>

It was not merely that the usual agricultural sales in the white community were disrupted by the strike. The mining industry itself was a major purchaser of farm products for the feeding of black mineworkers. But the work stoppage had led the companies temporarily to terminate the recruitment of black labourers to replace any whose contracts expired. While most black mineworkers remained on company property and were paid throughout the strike, the black workforce was seriously depleted by the cessation of recruitment, the endless departure of workers whose contracts ended, as also through the apparent right given to the employers to terminate contracts where black workers were ‘desirous of returning home’.<sup>49</sup> By the end of January, the strike only three weeks old, the black workforce on the goldmines had been reduced by almost 38 000 workers.<sup>50</sup> About three weeks later, an ‘army of 43, 000 expatriated labourers’ was referred to and the public was reminded that no black migrant workers were ‘now coming into the labour districts’.<sup>51</sup> By the time the strike

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<sup>47</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Farmers and state interference’.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 17 February 1922, p. 10, ‘Farmers and Rand crisis’.

<sup>49</sup> See GNLB [Archives of the Government Native Labour Bureau], vol. 312, file entitled ‘Papers in connection with Industrial Trouble...1922’, ‘Circular to Inspectors’ (rough draft), no date but it refers to an earlier ‘Circular Minute...of the 12<sup>th</sup> [presumably January]’. These archives – hereafter referred to as GNLB – are held in the South African National Archives, Pretoria.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, table headed ‘Strike: January 1922. Suspension of Recruiting and Repatriation of Native Labourers’.

<sup>51</sup> GG, Vol. 965, File 19/645, enclosure 36: newscutting (‘Steady drain’) from *Sunday Times*, 19 February 1922. It is possible that some of these workers were not employed on the mines since the men referred to were ‘time-expired mines and works labourers’.



was almost two months old, the size of the black workforce on the Rand had been slashed by about 47 000.<sup>52</sup> This would have reduced considerably the food purchases of the mining companies. ‘The native exodus affects the farmer and local producer considerably,’ declared one newspaper at a point when this exodus was set to grow. It then enumerated the losses suffered by producers and sellers of agricultural goods:

It is estimated that the consumption of mealie meal in the compounds [the residential complexes for black workers] has been reduced by 400 or 500 bags...per day. As the regular weekly ration of the mine boy includes 3 lbs. of meat, as well as  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. of “soup” meat, the farmer and butcher equally stand to lose. The...compound ration of vegetables normally requires a considerable quantity of potatoes, pumpkins, carrots, beans, and so forth. The bread bill for the underground native is a big item. Suppliers of all these commodities are affected...<sup>53</sup>

To take merely one of the products mentioned above – meat. The total weekly ration amounted to about 4 lbs. per worker. To understand the weekly loss to farmers and butchers one has to multiply that figure by tens of thousands – that is, the number of ‘repatriated’ black workers. And to this figure must be added the losses to butchers and farmers resulting from the collapsing market for meat amongst the strikers. By the mid-point of the strike, for example, the butchers of the mining town of Benoni had to inform strikers who had not settled debts from the preceding month that they could no longer buy on credit.<sup>54</sup> As to the ramifications of such developments even far away in the countryside, *Die Burger* could report on one livestock auction in the Cape where the sellers evidently would not agree to sell anything *omdat die pryse so laag was* (‘because the prices were so low’). The reason given for the paltry amounts offered by potential buyers? The strike.<sup>55</sup>

It is possible that some press reports regarding the strike’s impact on farmers were propaganda placed by the mining companies, which historically had powerful

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<sup>52</sup> See *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 March 1922, p. 6, ‘Recruiting to start again’.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid Daily Mail*, 13 Feb. 1922, p. 8, ‘Smaller food bill’, sub-section of ‘Biggest exodus yet’.

<sup>54</sup> *Die Burger*, 13 February 1922, p.6, ‘Slagters in Benoni stop krediet’ (sub-title).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 14 February 1922, p. 7, ‘Rouxville’.

connections to newspapers of the Witwatersrand.<sup>56</sup> Business archives disclose that the employers spent a great deal on propaganda during the strike: some individuals received what were substantial sums for the day – in one case 250 guineas; in another, 400 guineas – ‘for their services in regard to propaganda’ . And after the strike, the employers were required to provide £10 000 to their representative organisation ‘to meet the expenses of the Propaganda Sub-committee’.<sup>57</sup> Scores upon scores of interventions were drafted, some specifically addressed to farmers’ concerns.<sup>58</sup> Certain anonymous letters in the press ostensibly from farmers pressed the case for *not* supporting the strikers or asserted that the overwhelming bulk of white agriculturalists in the Transvaal were ready ‘to obey the legally constituted authority of the country when called upon’.<sup>59</sup> That was a way of announcing that the farmers would be ready once more to ride in to suppress the strikers. There is something suspiciously tailor-made about such anonymous letters, not least because one can demonstrate that a letter of this kind could specifically counter sentiments in support of the strikers that were earlier reported in the same newspaper.<sup>60</sup> And, certainly, one *Rand Daily Mail* report headed ‘Giving the stuff away’ (sub-title: ‘Farmers’ complaints about Rand strike’) was so crafted as to raise suspicions that it was serving a propaganda function. After citing a farmer talking of ‘the impossibility of selling any kind of produce’ at a profit, the article closed off with this alleged quote from

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<sup>56</sup> The *Rand Daily Mail* itself was owned by the South African Mails Syndicate, which was led by a businessman with mining interests, Abe Bailey: see Maryna Fraser and Alan Jeeves (eds) *All that glittered. Selected correspondence of Lionel Phillips 1890-1924* (Cape Town, 1977), p. 359, note 1.

<sup>57</sup> Chamber of Mines Archives (Johannesburg), Transvaal Chamber of Mines, Executive Committee Minutes, minutes of meeting, 27 March 1922.

<sup>58</sup> See Chamber of Mines Archives, 42/1922, ‘Strike Propaganda 1922’. A content list of ‘Draft Strike Propaganda 1922’ has 153 entries: nos 52, 63, 73, 79, 82, 84, 149 seem to have been of particular relevance to farmers.

<sup>59</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 January 1922, p. 3, ‘Farmers and the strikers’; 26 January 1922, p. 5, ‘The backveld view’; 30 January 1922, p. 3, ‘Farmer and the strike’. The quotation in the text is from the letter published on 26 January.

<sup>60</sup> Note how the anonymous letter in the *Rand Daily Mail* (24 January 1922, p. 3, ‘Farmer and the strikers’) counters the assertion by W. Madeley of farmers’ support for the strikers (*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 January 1922, p. 7, ‘Making or marring the country’).

him: 'The disturbed state of affairs on the Rand has added to the troubles of the farmer a hundredfold, and it is hard to see who expects to benefit by the strike.'<sup>61</sup>

This kind of report may have been placed by the companies. However, there is a great deal more information (some of it already cited) that appeared in the press which cannot be explained away as propaganda. It suggests just how worrying the strike would have been for farmers, and it could appear *en passant* in the course of reportage not specifically focused on farmers, or in the course of commercial reporting for the benefit of buyers and sellers in the Johannesburg market. To give some examples: the strike of 1922 was also one of coal miners and, even before the workers on the goldfields came out, union members were instructed by their umbrella federation not to utilize coal designated as scab. There was something of a flashpoint regarding the question in the Vereeniging area south of Johannesburg early in January 1922, where it looked as if power generation might be radically affected. A report on the question contained a throwaway line on the 'uneasy feeling amongst the farming population' that they might be set 'to lose their markets'.<sup>62</sup>

The reporting of commerce in the regular *Rand Daily Mail* column, 'The Johannesburg markets', pointed to how the struggle of 1922 troubled buyers and sellers of agricultural goods. Trade did, of course, continue but there are many reports which reveal the impact of the strike. At one point, there was 'a sudden collapse' in the cattle market. The quality of beasts brought to market was one reason, but it was not the only one, for even animals described as 'good mediums' drew virtually no bids. As the report ran: 'Butchers bought only for bare necessities, and speculators who despatch cattle to other centres did no business at all. In fact, many of the big buyers were absent from the market. This, of course, is directly due to the labour

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<sup>61</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 March 1922, p. 5. The report came from Kimberley; the farmer – unnamed – was held to come from the Herbert district.

<sup>62</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1922, p. 7: 'Power station to be rationed'.

troubles.’<sup>63</sup> Later on, the market was reported to be suffering to such a degree that any farmers who were able to do so were advised to ‘keep back their stock and produce’. ‘As the strike continues so does business become worse’, it was stated: ‘Farmers are feeling the effects of the industrial troubles severely.’<sup>64</sup> There were days at market during this time that ‘old hands’ would consider the worst in memory.<sup>65</sup> It was also reported that there had been a colossal reduction in purchases of fruit on the Rand – ‘the elimination of the Johannesburg market’ was actually referred to. This had combined with economic difficulties in the diamond mining centre of Kimberley and a bounteous fruit harvest to create the most acute difficulties for sellers of fruit from the Western Cape. Other markets were sought, most notably Port Elizabeth, but the situation was dire, with fruit prices sinking dramatically.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, this disruption of the agricultural market by the strike was afflicting white farmers who were already sorely tried by an acute economic crisis. Helen Bradford has most powerfully demonstrated just how crushing the economic situation was for white farmers in the 1920s generally: the terms of trade had swung severely against agricultural producers, and prices had declined considerably in the war and post-war years.<sup>67</sup> As the strike on the gold mines began, an Afrikaans newspaper quoted an official publication to the effect that the income of farmers had ‘sunk lower’ (*lager gedaald*) than their expenditure.<sup>68</sup> *Die Burger*, a Nationalist newspaper that supported the strikers, was emphatic in pointing to the inability of the country to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 14 January 1922, p. 5, ‘The Johannesburg markets’.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 16 February 1922, p. 5, ‘The Johannesburg markets’. The article offers much evidence of sales, prices fetched and so on. One is not denying sales, but these were clearly taking place in the context of a dislocated and depressed market.

<sup>65</sup> Note the commentary with reference to the Newtown stock yards in *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 February 1922, p. 5, ‘The Johannesburg markets’.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 28 January 1922, p. 8, ‘Apples 1d. per 100’. The article dealt with much more than apples and it flagged the impact of the strike: one of its headlines was ‘Effect of the strike’.

<sup>67</sup> Not the plummeting of prices in 1920-21, the years before the strike, as graphically illustrated in Helen Bradford *A taste of freedom. The ICU in rural South Africa* (New Haven, 1987), p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> *De Volkstem*, 10 January 1922, ‘Sporwegtarieven en kosten’.

soak up its agricultural production; and it warned early on that the work stoppage would rapidly affect farmers dependent on the Johannesburg market. When the same newspaper ran a giant advertisement placed by the mining employers that was addressed to farmers and that reminded them that the gold-mining zone was the country's greatest market, and which asserted that the strike was threatening it with catastrophe, it may have given many farmers pause for thought.<sup>69</sup>

In these circumstances most farmers would have been impatient with urban movements that made matters worse for them. Reuters reported from one rural area: 'the public in this district show no sympathy with the strikers' because of 'the low price of agricultural products' then obtaining. The report came during a very early stage of the stoppage, and yet – even then – the view expressed by the whites of the district was a desire for the strike to end immediately.<sup>70</sup> An exceptionally angry – but anonymous – letter in the press came from a Transvaal farmer and may have been invented and placed in the *Rand Daily Mail* by the employers. However, when it poured scorn on the idea of provisioning urban 'hot-heads', and spoke of how even a good number of better-off farmers had been 'completely broken' by the economic situation, and that others were mortgaged to the hilt, it was speaking a language that a great many farmers would have understood.<sup>71</sup> Like the best propaganda, this letter pointed to facts.

The farmers were a rural master class who lorded it over black tenants and workers, but many of them were struggling members of such a class, and it is clear that a common view amongst them was that the white mineworkers were a rather prosperous lot. A. J. Venter, a farmer in the Northern Transvaal who had once been

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<sup>69</sup> *Die Burger*, 17 February 1922, p. 4, 'Die nood van die Boer'; 17 January 1922, p. 8, 'Die kans vir die veeboer'; and 13 February 1922, p. 7 (for the advertisement).

<sup>70</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 January 1922, p. 7, 'No sympathy with miners'.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 24 January 1922, p. 3, 'Farmer and the strikers'.

employed on the mines, complained that the working hours of the farmer were longer than those of the white mineworker; that, unlike that worker, he had no guaranteed annual leave, and – he reminded – his readers: *Hier kan jij nie staak nie...* ('Here you can't strike...').<sup>72</sup> In a speech before a few thousand people on the east Rand during the strike, Tielman Roos, the leader of the Transvaal National Party and a man sympathetic to the strikers, felt compelled to tell his audience that: 'The country people were led to believe that the miners earned enormous sums in wages; it would be an eye-opener to these people if the miners gave publicity to their actual earnings.'<sup>73</sup>

It is not clear that this would have convinced a farmer such as A. van Graan, despite the fact that he must have lived relatively near white mining communities – he came from the district of Krugersdorp. So far as he was concerned, the strike was calamitous to farmers and, he believed, it was engaged in by people who generally procured a higher income than them.<sup>74</sup> The struggling landowner was a common image, which is why an Afrikaner nationalist newspaper during the strike stressed the hard life of the 'thousands and thousands' of farmers whose toil went unrewarded.<sup>75</sup> Such people would not necessarily be sympathetic to the white mineworkers. Perhaps a belief in their prosperity explains why, in Cradock in the Eastern Cape, farmers met together – a Nationalist MP in their midst – and condemned the mineworkers' objectives as 'unreasonable'.<sup>76</sup> The mining companies, of course, were wont to rub in the idea of the high-rolling white mineworker.

Another, more complex, part of the farmers' consciousness and position needs to be emphasised. The white workers overwhelmingly made their appeal to the

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<sup>72</sup> *De Volkstem*, 10 January 1922, 'Die landbouer en mijnwerker'.

<sup>73</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1922, p. 5, 'Racialism dead on Rand'.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 18 February 1922, p. 6, 'Farmers and Rand crisis'

<sup>75</sup> *Die Burger*, 17 February 1922, p. 4, 'Die nood van die boer'

<sup>76</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 February 1922, p. 7, 'Support for the government'.

farmers on a racial basis: after the suppression of the strike, it was affirmed in court that the strikers, in procuring provisions from the rural areas, ‘*always represented*’ their cause ‘to the country side’ as a struggle ‘for a “white South Africa”’.<sup>77</sup> That struggle was construed in terms of ensuring that black labour did not displace white labour on the mines. But the farmers’ attitude to white labour was not that different from the mine managers’. Commercial farming in South Africa, as much as mining, depended upon cheap, black labour. Generally, farmers would avoid using white labour where they could use black. The mining companies’ intention to substitute black for white workers at far lower wages expressed a logic that virtually every white farmer could appreciate. Indeed, white farmers commanded an economic regime that had taken this logic to its extreme. One sixth of the wage workers in the mining sector were white; the proportion of white wage workers in agriculture was so miniscule as to be barely discernible. If one was looking for a sector of the South African economy from which white wage workers had been more or less completely excluded by employers, it was agriculture.

This point was rubbed home during the strike in a propaganda initiative damned by one newspaper as a *lompe bedrog* (a ‘clumsy deceit’).<sup>78</sup> Actually, the initiative, clearly sponsored by the mining companies, was rather clever. In mid-February 1922, a pamphlet in both English and Dutch (or Afrikaans, presumably) ‘circulated...throughout the country districts’. It was ‘An Appeal To Farmers’ from a bogus organisation (‘The National-White Labour Party of South Africa’) and it cunningly used the discourse of the strike to ram home the fact that the mining companies were being asked to support white labour on a basis that farmers would

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<sup>77</sup> SCC, case No. 1/1922, *Rex v. R. P. Erasmus*: testimony of A. Trigger, divisional criminal investigation officer; my italics. The quoted words are those of the lawyer questioning Trigger, who endorsed them.

<sup>78</sup> The declaration is from *Ons Vaderland*, cited in *Die Burger*, 18 February 1922, p. 8, ‘N vervalste vlugskrif’ (sub-heading). It is not clear if the words are a quotation.

never tolerate. For it called on farmers to contribute to the ‘struggle to make South Africa a white man’s country’ by identifying black employees whom they could replace with white workers; those workers were then to be paid ‘a fair living wage’, even if one ‘substantially below that which the Chamber of Mines now offers’. All that was required was ‘about twenty pounds per month, together with board and lodging for each white man employed’. If the farmers could right away offer such conditions to strikers, they were to inform the party, which would soon be pressing for appropriate legislation. What the party hoped ‘to see [was] every mine and every farm in South Africa supporting the largest number of white men it possibly can employ’. The federation to which the mineworkers’ union belonged immediately condemned the pamphlet as ‘issued by the agents of the Chamber of Mines’; and it also sought to reassure farmers that agriculture was a sector that organised labour considered exempt from a demand that the ratio of whites to blacks employed be commensurate with their proportions in the South African population as a whole.<sup>79</sup>

### III

To understand the complex and varied responses of farmers to the Rand strike of 1922, we must concede that in some instances nationalist politics, ethnic solidarity, familial links, social concern, or a shared commitment to the ideology of ‘a White South Africa’ led farmers to send provisions to the workers. Not all of these factors needed to operate in order for some solidarity to be shown. One did not, for example, have to be an Afrikaner nationalist to act charitably: farmers in a district which was said to support the South African Party were described as being *in simpatie met die*

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<sup>79</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 February 1922, p. 10, ‘National White Labour Party’. The article reproduced the leaflet and the federation’s response.



*stakers* ('in sympathy with the strikers').<sup>80</sup> Nationalism, however, was likely to buttress support by landowners. There were evidently many Afrikaner workers who originally hailed from the Orange Free State, a nationalist stronghold, and it was held that generous aid to the strikers came from this area. According to the man who gave this evidence, support from the countryside generally was rising as the strike wore on.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, we should remember that the farmers' preference for utilizing black labour instead of white was actually even stronger than that of the mining companies, and that this preference was motivated by similar concerns: above all, a desire for a labour force that was cheap, unorganised, and politically undefended. The logic of what the mining companies were proposing in 1922 must have been readily intelligible to many farmers. We should also be careful about assuming that Afrikaner nationalism might dictate an overwhelming solidarity on the part of nationalists with the white workers' movement of 1922. It is perhaps significant that *Die Huisgenoot*, a publication with a transparently Afrikaner nationalist ethos and project, didn't carry a single article on the strike in the months in which it proceeded. Indeed, it had barely a mention of mineworkers at all.<sup>82</sup> During the work stoppage, a cartoon in *Die Burger*, the pre-eminent Nationalist newspaper, warned against what it saw as a government-employer ruse to trap the National Party in the revolutionary possibilities of the strike.<sup>83</sup> The fact is that the struggle on the mines did not sit simply or easily with nationalism. Those addressing the meetings of

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<sup>80</sup> *Die Burger*, 20 February 1922, p. 7, 'Ventersdorp (Tvl.)'

<sup>81</sup> SCC, case No. 1/1922, *Rex v. R. P. Erasmus*, testimony of George Thompson, leading trade unionist. Insofar as I discerned places of birth of those charged before the Special Criminal Court, I frequently came across men who were from the Orange Free State.

<sup>82</sup> See *Die Huisgenoot*, issues for January, February and March 1922. This was primarily a women's magazine, but the 1922 strike movement was one in which women were very involved: see Krikler *White rising*, chapter 3. There is a glancing mention of the strike and mineworkers in the March issue of *Die Huisgenoot* (pp. 463-4) in an article on 'Afrikaans in Johannesburg'.

<sup>83</sup> See the cartoon ('N mislukking') published in *Die Burger*, 11 February 1922, p. 6.

workers in 1922 certainly attempted at times to bring nationalism into the struggle – hence their references to the historical mythology of Afrikaner nationalism: the trekkers of the nineteenth century, the defeat of the Zulu leader Dingane.<sup>84</sup> However, very substantial numbers of the workers – perhaps as many as 50% – and a high proportion of their leaders were *not* Afrikaners. Moreover, a class ideology strongly inflected by racism – rather than nationalism – was the dominant discourse of the strike, at least if the speeches to workers are taken as a guide.<sup>85</sup> Tielman Roos, the Transvaal Nationalist leader, may have pronounced upon a desire for workers and farmers to rule South Africa ‘through means of the National Party’ (*deur middel van die Nasionale Partij*).<sup>86</sup> But Nationalists would have been fully aware that organised white labour on the Rand could not yet be approached principally through the aims and objectives of Afrikaner nationalism. Attempts to create an Afrikaner nationalist trade union on the mines during the First World War had failed. Moreover, we need to be very careful about extrapolating a worker-farmer alliance from the emerging electoral pact between the party most associated with organised workers, the Labour Party, and the National Party.

Both of these parties had strong reasons to oppose General Smuts’s government. For the Labour Party, Smuts was strongly associated with repressive action against white labour. This was the man who had successfully deployed the army against a general strike in 1914, who had detained leading figures of the Labour Party and illegally deported union leaders.<sup>87</sup> He was seen – with justice – as taking sides with the employers in 1922. For the National Party, Smuts was inextricably

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<sup>84</sup> For examples of such references in speeches, see *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1922, p. 9, ‘Nurahs and the colour bar’; and 12 January 1922, p. 10, ‘Arbitration the solution’.

<sup>85</sup> I explore the discourse of the strike in Krikler *White rising*, chapter 4.

<sup>86</sup> *De Volkstem*, 10 January 1922, ‘Die gesag kan maar ophou!’.

<sup>87</sup> See Jonathan Hyslop *The notorious syndicalist. J. T. Bain: a Scottish rebel in colonial South Africa* (Johannesburg, 2004), pp. 230, 232, 240 (in the context of chapters 19-20); and Simon and Simon *Class and Colour in South Africa*, pp. 167-170.

associated with British imperialism, the reviled enemy of Afrikaner nationalism. He was the man who had led South African forces in support of the British during the First World War, who had seen off an Afrikaner rebellion in 1914-15, and whose South African Party had absorbed a party (the Unionists) that strongly supported the Empire. But neither the National Party nor the Labour Party could put Smuts out of government. They needed each other. Their emerging alliance – it proved electorally successful in 1924 – should not be taken to imply Labour’s ideological support for the Afrikaner nationalist project, or the National Party’s support for the militant struggles of white labour. Certainly, we should not assume that the electoral coming together of the Nationalist and Labour Parties implied that the farmers amongst the Nationalists viewed the interests of workers and themselves as similar. Even *Die Burger*, despite its support of the strike, subconsciously betrayed a lack of conviction in positing the notion of such common interests. The very idea, it noted, must have seemed odd to its readers: ‘how strange it must sound’ (*hoe vreemd dit mag klink*), it declared.<sup>88</sup>

Above all, we must recognise that farmers – whether or not they sympathised with the workers, and whether they supported Smuts’s South African Party or Hertzog’s National Party – stood to lose a great deal from the Rand strike: their economic situation was already very difficult in the early-1920s and the strike entailed a reduction in their market. When the Rand strike became the Rand Revolt, then, and the government sought to mobilize farmers for action against the strikers, it was in the class interests of the farmers to suppress the workers. Perhaps this was one reason why General Smuts, the prime minister, was confident that the reservists from the countryside – the burger commandos – could be counted on: ‘We could...get thousands of suitable men from rural areas’, he declared, as the strike was about to

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<sup>88</sup> *Die Burger*, 24 February 1922, ‘Boer en werker een belang’.

enter its last weeks. Later, on the eve of the workers' rebellion, he supported the calling up of men from 'surrounding districts' and expressed himself in terms that suggest he felt no possibility of the farmers inclining to the workers' cause for any reason whatever: 'we shall have the most loyal support of the burghers in this crisis'.<sup>89</sup>

The workers in 1922, of course, hoped that the farmers would not ride in to suppress them: a union leader recalled the workers' awareness of how strikers had been 'roughly treated' by the burger commandos in the past.<sup>90</sup> In fact, in the early days of the strike, there was certainly a fear on the part of organised labour that the farmers might once more be mobilized against them. This is surely what accounts for that early attempt of the general secretary of the miners' union to dissuade farmers from coming into town in order to maintain order. It is true that this was framed in terms of racial order: organised labour was perfectly capable of dealing with any disturbances that arose amongst the black population, it was asserted, and 'the farmers have no need [*die boere nie nodig het nie*] to leave their farms for such a purpose.'<sup>91</sup> But this was really a coded call to the farmers not to obey any government call to ride into the towns as they had done before. It was tantamount to saying: 'Stay away. We don't really trust you.'

However, as the strike wore on and as it was seen as more and more likely to lead to a test of arms, the farmers came to be viewed by the most desperate and committed of the strikers as a source of potential military support. Hadn't they received foodstuffs from the farmers? And hadn't the leaders of the workers endlessly

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<sup>89</sup> PM, Vol. 1/1/423, File No. 3/22 (Vol. VII), telegrams from General Smuts to De Wet, 23 February 1922, and to the minister of justice, 9 March 1922. For a public acknowledgement by Smuts of his confidence in the burger commandos to do their duty by the government, see his comments as reported in *Die Burger*, 20 March 1922, p. 5, 'Genl. Smuts en die burgers'.

<sup>90</sup> SCC, case No. 1/1922, *Rex v. R. P. Erasmus*, testimony of George Thompson, president of the South African Industrial Federation in 1922.

<sup>91</sup> *De Volkstem*, 10 January 1922, 'Sit maar stil!'

assured them of support from the countryside? Given this, it is hardly surprising that some in the labour movement came to believe that, when their rising began, the farmers would turn upon the government forces. At a meeting of military leaders of strikers – this was a week before the rebellion of 1922 – the possibility of the rapid arrival of military aid from the rural areas was mooted; should this occur, it was implied, the appropriate military strategy was to hold the urban zone until these reinforcements arrived: ‘you have to keep the town until assistance comes from the country’.<sup>92</sup> On the day before the rebellion, a key strike commando leader in Johannesburg – Rasmus P. Erasmus – made a speech to his fellow workers in which he declared ‘that he had just returned from [the] Free State where seventeen thousand Burghers were ready to come and help the strikers’; the prime minister, he declared, was all but defeated.<sup>93</sup> This belief turned out to be millenarian. Insofar as farmers came to Johannesburg, they came in support of General Smuts.

During the rebellion of 1922, when a force of burger commandos under Piet de la Rey passed through Krugersdorp, a mining town to the west of Johannesburg, local citizens – evidently strikers or their supporters – congregated about them, calling them ‘Bloodhounds’ (*Bloedhonden*) and asking: ‘Are you going to shoot your brothers[?]’<sup>94</sup> This appeal had no effect whatever on dissuading the burgers from engaging in the military drive upon the rebellious strikers. Indeed, in the operations against the workers, these forces from the countryside were to play an important role

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<sup>92</sup> SCC, case No. 67/1922, *Rex v. J. Garnsworthy et al*: testimony of Christiaan C. van Vuuren, The words quoted were allegedly said by another man at the meeting. My research has established that Van Vuuren was a strike commando leader of some kind in Brakpan but that he turned state witness. One might be sceptical of some of his evidence because of this; however, evidence from elsewhere also points to a belief in military aid from the countryside.

<sup>93</sup> SCC, case No. 1/1922, *Rex v. R. P. Erasmus*: testimony of Benjamin Fouche, striker. See also – for corroboration – the testimony of Anneas Balt, mineworker, in this case. Erasmus denied having made the comment about the force of 17 000: see his testimony in this case. However, given that he was being charged with treason, one would expect him to deny this. The judge found the testimony of Fouche and Balt compelling: see judgement in this case.

<sup>94</sup> SCC, case No. 11/1922, *Rex v. Jan van den Berg*: preparatory examination testimony of Pieter de la Rey.

in the western Witwatersrand, and they also participated in the campaigns in the east and in Johannesburg itself. Their casualties were light, but the effect of their deployment was great: on the East Rand, where the armed insurrection was initially formidable, the fact that the burger commandos had arrived in the zone was held to be fundamental to the rebels losing heart.<sup>95</sup> And the rural masters under arms were to be particularly saluted by the more conventional military forces when they made their appearance in central Fordsburg, the last significant stronghold of the workers' rebellion. Here 'a big contingent of burghers....were greeted by their comrades in arms, both in blue and in khaki, with resounding cheers. All sides doffed hats and helmets...'.<sup>96</sup>

To understand why farmers rode in against white workers in 1922, perhaps we need to consider that, by the end of the strike of that year, many farmers had had enough of the upheaval that was exacerbating their economic distress. This factor might have been considered by that historian who has found it so 'surprising' (*verrassend*) that rural commandos, said to have been Nationalists, so readily participated in the drive against the rebellious workers.<sup>97</sup> As the strike entered its eighth week, the prime minister was informed by one intimately involved in the deployment of forces against the strikers that 'Feeling in [the] country districts [of the] Transvaal [was] changing materially.' The next line, conveyed in an idiomatic if sometimes archaically-spelled Afrikaans, made clear that there were farmers (called *Party boere* in the telegram) who had simply lost patience with the strikers: *ons het eers aardappels gestuur*, they said (i.e. 'we first sent potatoes), *nou word dit tijd om*

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<sup>95</sup> See Secretary for Defence (Gp 2), Box 1378, file DC 30433B, Vol. II ('Mobilization Scheme Strike 1922'), loose documents, 'Casualties To Government Forces 10<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1922'. For the point regarding the East Rand, see Oberholster *Die mynwerkerstaking*, p. 177.

<sup>96</sup> GG, vol. 966, file 19/652: cutting from the *Cape Times* of 16 March 1922. See the sub-section 'Arrival of burghers' in 'Scenes and incidents at Fordsburg'.

<sup>97</sup> See Oberholster *Die Mynwerkerstaking*, p. 177.

*blaauw boontjes te stuur* ('now it's time to send ounces of lead').<sup>98</sup> Perhaps there was more than a little truth in the words of Kommandant S. P. Kloppers who had earlier written to the prime minister from what seems to have been a farm, *Leeuwpoort*, in the Rustenburg area of the Transvaal. He noted the reports of rural aid to the strikers. Nevertheless, he was convinced that both supporters of Smuts's party and the National Party would, if it came to it, obey the summons *om wet en orde te handhaaf* ('to uphold law and order').<sup>99</sup> He had every right to this confidence: a month earlier, even Nationalists were being advised by one of their leaders that maintaining order was *die plig van die Regering* ('the duty of the Government') and if the burgers were called to arms on that basis, they were to answer it.<sup>100</sup>

At any rate, when the government began to mobilize its forces, it was evident that it could count on help from the rural areas. There is a little evidence that the authorities investigated an accusation – it was denied – that a farmer had been discouraged on nationalist grounds from enlisting against the strikers.<sup>101</sup> But the state record generally discloses something else: a pleasure in the farmers' response. 'Regiments filling up fast', the prime minister was informed by telegram on the day before the workers' rebellion, 'and volunteers even from country districts [are] coming up well.'<sup>102</sup> And during the rebellion itself a member of the cabinet was informed that the burger commandos were 'mobilizing fast'.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the nationalist

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<sup>98</sup> PM, vol. 1/1/423, file No. 3/22 (Vol. V), 'Industrial Situation. Strike. 1922', telegram from Colonel Mentz to PM, 1 March 1922.

<sup>99</sup> PM, vol. 1/1/422, file 3/22 (Vol. III), 'Industrial Situation. Strike. January 1922', S. P. Kloppers to General Smuts, 27 January 1922.

<sup>100</sup> *Die Burger*, 11 February 1922, p. 3, 'Genl. Kemp se houding'.

<sup>101</sup> See Secretary for Defence (Group 2), Box 502, 'Declaration by Mr. M. J. Marais regarding Statements by Rev. van Schoor', various documents. The farmer – who proved himself loyal – came from the far northern Transvaal, and the authorities did not anyway need in the end to mobilize farmers from so far away.

<sup>102</sup> PM, Vol. 1/1/423, File No. 3/22 (Vol. VII), Colonel Mentz to General Smuts, 9 March 1922.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, Mentz to Minister Malan, 11 March 1922. Although Mentz here spoke only of 'commandos', it is obvious that it was the burger commandos (not the strike commandos) to whom he referred because he was referring to state forces being mobilized.

press reported a 'Splendid turn out' (*Pragtige opkoms*) on their part; it went on to assert that even a participant in the Afrikaner Rebellion of 1914 was in their ranks.<sup>104</sup>

As has been shown, the factors that divided the countryside from the town, the rural masters from the urban militants, were as powerful as those that seemed to press them into an alliance. Given their economic interests, most farmers – even those who didn't ride in to suppress the workers' rebellion – were probably relieved when the strike of 1922 was ended. The South African farmers' relationship to this workers' struggle suggests just how important it is for the historian to assess carefully the bearing of class interests upon landowners' responses to urban movements. For in the end, those interests trumped the ethnic and political factors that had seemed likely to dictate the landowners' response.

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<sup>104</sup> *Die Burger*, 16 March 1922, p. 5, 'Pragtige opkoms van burgers'. The paper was citing an article from *De Volkstem*.