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Grounds for a Strike: South African  
Gold Mining in the 1940s

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GROUNDS FOR A STRIKE: SOUTH AFRICAN GOLD MINING  
IN THE 1940s\*

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The strike of about eighty thousand African gold miners in August 1946, the third recorded strike involving African miners, has a special place in the annals of South African history. In Class and Colour in South Africa the Simons' spend a good part of a chapter describing the events surrounding the strike, as does Edward Roux, in his Time Longer than Rope.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, writes Dan O'Meara, the strike was a "watershed event," separating one epoch of South African history from another.<sup>2</sup>

O'Meara makes two important points about the strike. Firstly, he notes that even though it lasted for merely five days, the strike unsettled the economy and imperilled law and order to such an extent that the Government seriously began to reappraise its labour policies. In the midst of the reappraisal came a change, as it were, in government, when in 1948, the National Party took power. The Nationalists would have nothing of the freer labour market countenanced by some their predecessors--

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<sup>1</sup> N.J. and R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); pages 369-378. Edward Roux, Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); pages 333-342.

<sup>2</sup> Dan O'Meara, "The 1946 African Mineworkers' Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa," Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, 13, 2 (1975); page 147.

especially by those in the Department of Labour—and came down on the side of labour repression and control.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, O'Hearn writes that the strike literally made the African National Congress (ANC) sit up and compelled it to take heed of the Government's behaviour, directed at the time by renowned liberal Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hofmeyr.<sup>4</sup> Even though the Government's own Lansdown Commission and Department of Labour were sympathetic to the miners' grievances regarding wages and, despite the wide public support given to the miners' cause, the Government nevertheless repressed the strike.<sup>5</sup> The strike, and mass action, made an impression on the younger generation of ANC members, who, in any case were disenchanted with the elitist petitionary politics of the ANC's old guard. The 1949 Programme of Action and the movement of the younger activists into leadership positions took the ANC into a decade of mass campaigns and passive resistance, in the 1950s.

In sum, O'Hearn's account places an enormous burden of historical responsibility on the 1946 strike. Little is offered, however, by way of explaining the strike's social and economic origins. O'Hearn couples the strike to the deterioration of the African Reserves, the subsistence base of the migrant labour system, and to the surging war-time industrial trade unionism experienced in the Witwatersrand. But there is little documentation on the social and economic processes of gold mining proper where, after all, the strike took place. It is in response to this void in historical documentation that the present essay directs its attention.

To write about origins and causes is a difficult and somewhat hazardous undertaking. Historical causation is, at best, difficult to establish, and often comes down

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<sup>3</sup> Dan O'Hearn, "The 1946 African Mine Workers' Strike"; page 164.

<sup>4</sup> Dan O'Hearn, "The 1946 African Mine Workers' Strike"; pages 167-170.

<sup>5</sup> See South Africa, Report of the Witwatersrand Mine Natives' Wages Commission, (Cape Town: Government Printers, UG 21/1944.)

to a matter of argument. In this writing origins refer to those economic and social processes in gold mining which brought about a confrontation between the African Mine Workers Union, representing African miners, and the Chamber of Mines, representing mine owners. These processes are the customary concerns of political economy, having to do, among other things, with labour supplies, the labour process, profit margins, capital accumulation and state-capital relations. Too crude perhaps a way of putting the issue, these processes, and the individuals involved in them, created the dynamic from and in which the strike of August 1946 played itself out.

## II

Migrant labour, the gold mining industry's manner of sourcing its African labour, is a very stable and reliable means by which annual complements of African labour are delivered to the mines. Its success is due to the fact that the industry draws on not a single but multiple sources of supply, and is able to increase supplies from one source when another shows a decline. David Yudelman and Alan Jeeves liken the migrant labour system to an empire, able to sustain itself as long as there is room for expansion.<sup>6</sup>

Yudelman and Jeeves also note, however, that the overall stability of the migrant labour system veils another aspect of the system which, "by contrast, has exhibited considerable fluctuation. The mines could never count for long on the reliability of their individual sources of low wage labour."<sup>7</sup> During the 1930s and 1940s, labour supplies from individual sourcing areas went through fairly major changes, initiating what turned out to be a long transition period from domestic labour sourcing to foreign labour sourcing. In the 1930s, a majority of migrants were sourced from within

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<sup>6</sup> David Yudelman and Alan Jeeves, "The Closing of the Frontier: Labour Migrancy to the Rand Gold Fields 1920-1985," (New Haven: Yale University, Southern African Research Program Workshop paper, April 1986); page 5.

<sup>7</sup> David Yudelman and Alan Jeeves, "The Closing of the Frontier"; page 3.

South Africa. By the 1960s, domestic sources supplied a minority of migrants.

As an odd, almost misleading, prelude to the longer-term decline in domestic sourcing, the mines experienced a boom in local labour supplies during the late 1930s. Between 1936 and 1940, local labour supplies increased from 235 392 to 290 433 migrants, a twenty-three percent increase.<sup>9</sup> Foreign sources of supply increased marginally, so that the bulk of the overall increase came from domestic sources. Evidently pleased with the upturn of the migrant labour market, the president of the Chamber of Mines, P.H. Anderson, was heartened by "the success which have attended our efforts in connexion with the supply of Native labour ...".<sup>10</sup> The mining industry's Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC), responsible for domestic recruiting, had done well during the period leading up to the Second World War. During the war, however, the supply of domestic labour declined significantly.

The economic consequences of the war considerably altered the mining industry's competitive position in the labour market. Recruitment levels from domestic sources fell as sharply during the early 1940s as they increased during the late 1930s. From the 1940 high of 290 433 migrants, recruitment was down to 185 658 in 1944, 177 717 in 1947, a decline of thirty-six and thirty-nine percent respectively.<sup>10</sup> Labour supplies from domestic sources had not been this low for quite a while: "We have experienced considerable difficulty ... in maintaining an adequate labour supply" complained the president of the Chamber.<sup>11</sup>

The war, in effect, created a labour shortage in the mining industry. Industrial expansion, stimulated in part by war-time conditions, and the growth of

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<sup>9</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>10</sup> Transvaal Chamber of Mines (TCM), Annual Report, (Johannesburg: 1940); page 63.

<sup>10</sup> see Figure 1.

<sup>11</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (Johannesburg: 1944); page 57.

defense works, created more and higher paying employment for African workers in the cities.<sup>12</sup> African labour, as one would expect, flowed more readily into manufacturing industry rather than the poorer-paying gold mining industry.<sup>13</sup> Africans from South Africa and the High Commission Territories also enlisted in the British Imperial militaries. To encourage enlistment, the British High Commissioner requested from the Chamber of Mines a suspension of recruiting activities in the High Commission Territories. Recruiting was suspended in Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana on July 1 1942 only to be resumed in all three territories by February 1943.<sup>14</sup> Finally, good rainfall and harvests in 1943 choked labour flows to cities and affected migration to the mines, if only for the particular harvesting season in that particular year.<sup>15</sup>

In order to make up for the shortfall of African labour from domestic sources, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (Wenela), the agency responsible for the recruiting of foreign labour, turned its attention to Mozambique and central Africa. Recruiting in Mozambique was governed by terms laid down by the Mozambique Convention of 1928 which set upper and lower limits to the number of Mozambicans permitted to work in the mines. The Chamber of Mines was not allowed to employ more than 80 000 or less than 45 000 Mozambicans at any one time. The arrangement held from 1928 to 1936, at which time the maximum was increased to 90 000. It was increased, once again, to 100 000 in 1940 but when the Chamber requested another increase in 1942, it was turned down. The request was a statement of optimism and intent, since Mozambican labour fluctuated between 70 000 and 80 000 during the 1940s, showing no sign of any major increases, and

<sup>12</sup> TCM, Gold Producers Committee, Statements of Evidence, Statistics and Memoranda, submitted to the Witwatersrand Mine Natives Wages Commission, (Johannesburg: TCM, June 1943.)

<sup>13</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (Johannesburg: 1943); page 55. Francis Wilson, Labour in the South African Gold Mines, 1911-1969, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1972); page 71.

<sup>14</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (Johannesburg: 1943); page 22.

<sup>15</sup> TCM, GPC, Statements of Evidence, Statistics and Memoranda; page 12.

certainly not of the order sufficient to compensate for the shortages on the South African side of the labour market.<sup>16</sup>

With regards to central and south-central Africa, these were closed to recruiters since 1913 for health reasons.<sup>17</sup> Mortality rates among central Africans were to the government and, to some degree the Chamber of Mines, unacceptably high.<sup>18</sup> Thus, their contribution to the complement of mine labour amounted to 3.37% in 1936.<sup>19</sup> The Chamber of Mines persuaded the government in 1933 to allow a small number of central African miners to work in the mines on an experimental basis. After the Chamber produced evidence of an improvement in their health statistics, recruitment proceeded without impediment from 1937 onwards.<sup>20</sup> A heavy demand for African enlistment in the war effort resulted in a temporary suspension of recruiting in Zambia, Malawi and northern Botswana in 1942 and, after one year, recruiting was resumed in Malawi and northern Botswana with Malawi imposing a quota restriction of 5 000 miners in 1943, 8 000 in 1945.<sup>21</sup> Despite the interruption and restrictions, the supply of central and south-central African labour increased from 3.37% in 1936 to 31.90% by 1946.<sup>22</sup> The increase, in this short time,

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<sup>16</sup> Sheila van der Horst, Native Labour in South Africa, (London: Oxford University Press, 1942); page 220. Simon E. Katzemellenbogen, South Africa and Southern Mozambique: Labour, Railways and Trade in the Making of a Relationship, (Manchester: The University Press, 1982); pages 144-155. TCM, Annual Report, (Johannesburg: 1942); page 50.

<sup>17</sup> Sheila van der Horst, Native Labour in South Africa; page 221.

<sup>18</sup> Earlier in its history the (pneumonia) mortality rate for central Africans was 60 persons per 1 000 per year, whereas average mortality was 30 per 1000 per year. By using drug S & B 493, the mortality rate of central Africans was brought down to 4.28 per 1000 by 1942, still higher than the 2.94 per 1000 average for the rest of the African labour force. TCM, GPC, Statements of Evidence, Statistics and Memoranda; page 22.

<sup>19</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>20</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1941); page 22.

<sup>21</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1942); page 21. TCM, Annual Report, (1943); page 22. TCM, Annual Report, (1945); page 45.

<sup>22</sup> See Figure 1.

while significant, did not make up for the shortage created by the slump in domestic supplies.

The shortage was compounded by the absence of about five percent of the white labour force, volunteers released by the Chamber for the war effort. The colour bar and union closed shops prevented the Chamber from using African and non-unionized white labour in place of the absentees. Given the political risks involved in tampering with white employment security, the Chamber of Mines did not challenge the colour bar nor the closed shops, though they complained about these racial monopolies constantly. Partly as a result, the combined shortage of African and white labour put considerable pressure on the mines to maintain production levels with reduced workforces, and to develop strategies of increasing the productivity of labour.

III

In 1937, an assistant mine manager at the Sub-Nigel mine by the name of R.B. Saart presented a paper on mine mechanization to the annual meeting of the Association of Mine Managers of the Transvaal (AMMT).<sup>82</sup> "As the supply of native labour available for the mines decreases", he argued, "it will become necessary to obtain the same or greater production with fewer natives."<sup>83</sup> Saart advocated mechanization as a panacea for the labour shortage and as a solution to the productivity problem. In support of his argument he claimed that the mechanization of stoppings, development cleaning and ore transportation doubled the output in extracted ore at Sub-Nigel, using half of the normal complement of African labour.<sup>84</sup> One other mine, the Van Dyke, explicitly followed the

<sup>82</sup> R.B. Saart, "Mechanization Applied to Mining in Relation to Native Labour on the Sub-Nigel," *Papers and Discussion*, 1937-1938. (Johannesburg: ICM and AMMT, 1939).

<sup>83</sup> R.B. Saart, "Mechanization Applied to Mining," page 315.

<sup>84</sup> R.B. Saart, "Mechanization Applied to Mining," page 329.



example of Sub-Nigel, and reported a twenty percent increase in output.<sup>66</sup>

The Sub-Nigel and Van Dyke were the most developed and exceptional examples of a core general process of limited mechanization taking place in the gold mining industry at the time. During the late 1930s, the mines began to use mechanical scrapers in stopes and stope-quillies to remove blasted rock from the workface. Usually a manual, labour-intensive process, stope-cleaning became much more efficient and the overall productivity of labour—measured in terms of ore output per person per year—increased by about ten percent.<sup>67</sup> In his writing on technological progress in deep level mining, H. Wagner of the Chamber of Mines notes that this was the second most significant technological development in the history of gold mining—the first was the introduction of reciprocating rock drills in the 1910s.<sup>68</sup> This development was not, however, an explicit response to the labour shortage, but part of a core general process of technological change in the 1930s. The managers of Sub-Nigel and Van Dyk argued that it ought to be a response to the labour shortage and advocated large-scale mechanization of mine work. The mechanization of stope-cleaning, one of essentially four phases of mining, was welcome but too limited, they argued.

There was enough capital around to fund large-scale mechanization, especially during the late 1930s, which were very profitable years. However, capital was invested in the development of two new areas, the so-called Hect Hils line and Klerksdorp in the Orange Free State.<sup>69</sup> As the beginning of the western and southern expansion of the industry, 15

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<sup>66</sup> W.F. Thomas, Manager of Van Dyk, response to R.D. Soort, Progress and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2, (Johannesburg: ICW and ANMT, 1949); page 336.

<sup>67</sup> H. Wagner, "The Challenge of Deep-Level Mining in South Africa," Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, (September 1986); page 382.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> John Lang, Bullion Johannesburg: Men, Mines and the Challenge of Conflict, (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1986); page 351.

new mines were opened and 23 new shafts were sunk in 1936.<sup>20</sup> Though the war delayed the development of the (especially Orange-Free State) deposits, capital was committed to and development proceeded at a reduced pace of what were considered to be very exciting prospects by the industry.

Thus, for the industry as a whole, outward expansion was preferred to large-scale inward mechanization. And, as Yudelson and Jeeves also note, the majority of mines did not mechanize because they expected in any case the labour situation to normalize.<sup>21</sup> Of course, some of the mines were beyond mechanization, either because they were too old or didn't have much life left, or both. Whatever the particular reason in particular circumstances, a majority of the mines did not explicitly invest in mechanization as a solution to the problem posed by the labour shortage.

The other approach to the productivity problem was scientific management, advocated by J.S. Ford, the general manager at Langlaagte. Ford and his colleagues from Daggafontein, East Rand Proprietary Mines (ERPM) and Modderfontein B. argued that African miners would work harder if management treated them better and if the working environment was made more humane.<sup>22</sup> Ford was particularly adamant about changing what one could call a racially despotic labour process. Racism in the workplace was an impediment to greater productivity and something had to be done about it, Ford argued.

Ford's colleagues from Daggafontein, ERPM and Modderfontein B. underscored his counsel: "A large percentage of labour," U. V. Giathar, assistant underground manager at Daggafontein, noted, "is due to the wrong attitude, unfair methods and arrogant,

<sup>20</sup> ibid

<sup>21</sup> David Yudelson and Alan Jeeves, "The Closing of the Frontier," page 13.

<sup>22</sup> J.S. Ford, "Scientific Management with particular application to a Witwatersrand Gold Mine," Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2, (Johannesburg: TCM and AMMT, 1948); page 878.

blustering ways of some officials towards workmen.<sup>26</sup> Leadership too often, he continued, "made use of such factors as domineering power, overbearing exercise of authority, demand for absolute obedience."<sup>27</sup> G. Hildick-Smith, the general manager of Rodderfontein B., described the white underground official as a "nigger-driver," the type who assumes that "the native is inherently stupid."<sup>28</sup> And, indeed, "boas boys and other natives dressed in a little brief authority tend to ape their superiors, and so the abortive method of labour control is recapitulated ..."<sup>29</sup>

The issue for them was not the substance but the style and manner of managerial authority. Steeped in racism, coercion and, quite often, reliant on physical violence, the managerial tradition militated against the adoption of what were, after all, in this setting, quite outrageous ideas. Aware of this reality, and keen to see his ideas accepted by the broader managerial staff, Ford trimmed the concept of scientific management to simply encompass so-called written standard practice.<sup>30</sup> He explained: "it is the duty of managements to make a comprehensive study of all underground work and ... to lay down written standard practice instructions for the performance of every task."<sup>31</sup> The hard, technocratic side of scientific management Ford thought would win over management. The softer, humanistic side he knew was a clear loser.

Ford and his colleagues took themselves seriously enough and implemented written standard practice. By 1941 all the institutions of written standard practice—the study

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<sup>26</sup> H.V. Glatthar, Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2, (Johannesburg: TCM and ANMT, 1949); page 906.

<sup>27</sup> ibid

<sup>28</sup> G. Hildick-Smith, Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2, (Johannesburg: TCM and ANMT, 1949); page 927.

<sup>29</sup> ibid

<sup>30</sup> J.S. Ford, "Scientific Management," page 881.

<sup>31</sup> ibid.

department, time-and-motion studies, the training schools—were in place and functioning at Langlaagte, ERFB, Daggafontein and Modderfontein B.<sup>30</sup> Ford was the proud author of the training manual, compiled after hours and months of intensive observation, note-taking and writing. The key-word was standardization, and Ford expected his workers to know the written instructions in detail. As to its success as strategy Ford had little doubt: "By the application of written standard practice instructions the underground efficiency has increased in almost all branches and is still improving."<sup>31</sup>

A third response to the labour shortage was a concern for tighter supervision, or as it was called, "more intelligent supervision" of the African workforce.<sup>32</sup> In practice "more intelligent supervision" amounted to a more efficient system of labour checking. African workers underground had to be monitored more carefully, the managers from these mines argued, for they often were paid for work not performed.<sup>33</sup> The surface checking station and the so-called underground native checker, introduced at four mines in 1936, became a popular form of monitoring the work-time African workers spent underground. The purpose of the surface checking station, the general manager of West Springs explained, was to "give a central point for the control of native gang strengths and ... it affords a means of recording native time."<sup>34</sup> The underground native checker, known colloquially as a fokkie, "visits each working place in the section and checks the gang, job number and

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<sup>30</sup> J.S. Ford, "Scientific Management," and responses, Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2; pages 878-927.

<sup>31</sup> J.S. Ford, "Scientific Management"; page 881.

<sup>32</sup> J.A. Becking, response to R.B. Smart, Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2; page 335.

<sup>33</sup> J.G.W. Couperthwaite, general manager of West Springs, "Surface Checking of Underground Native Labour at West Springs, Limited" Papers and Discussion, 1942-1945, Volume 2.

<sup>34</sup> OR file; page 789.

class of work of every boy in the section."<sup>43</sup> By 1945, at least 14 of the 44 mines used either the surface checking station or the underground native checker, or both.<sup>44</sup>

It is difficult to assess the impact of these approaches on the processes of work for every mine. On the whole the industry reported a ten percent gain in output per worker over the period 1935 to 1945, but it is problematical to attribute the gains to any one or any particular mix of the three approaches.<sup>45</sup> But aside of the gains claimed by the industry on the level of production, there was another dimension of some significance to the process. For African workers—and probably white workers—the managerial responses to the labour shortage and productivity problems became a source of grievance, best illustrated by the events at Langlaagte, home of J.S. Ford's written standard practice.

Towards the end of 1942 African miners, acting on own initiative, staged sit-down strikes and engaged the Langlaagte management in a series of confrontations. On January 6 1943 underground workers from Block B Compound called a meeting to which J.S. Ford was summoned. "In a rowdy and insolent manner ... the machine boys ... put their complaints," a somewhat ruffled Ford noted.<sup>46</sup> Their complaints had everything to do with the labour process under written standard practice. The miners protested against, Dunbar Moodie writes, the fact that they had to work double, even treble shifts, and that they received insufficient remuneration for overtime. They also complained about management's

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<sup>43</sup> G.B. Daity, general manager of Sub-Nigel, response to Couperthwaite, Papers and Discussion 1942-1945; page 797.

<sup>44</sup> J.S.M. Couperthwaite, "Surface Checking of Underground Native Labour"; pages 789-809.

<sup>45</sup> H Wagner, "The Challenge of Deep-Level Mining in South Africa"; page 382.

<sup>46</sup> 11/1/1943, NTS 7675, 102/332 (Department of Native Affairs: Transvaal Archives, Pretoria.) Cited by Dunbar Moodie, "The Role of the State in Industrial Conflict: The 1940s War Years," (New York: unpublished ess, 1985); page 12. See also his companion essay, "The Moral Economy of the Mine and the African Mine Workers Union: The 1940s Mine Disturbances," (New York: unpublished ess, 1985.)

requirement that a measuring string to be used with machine drills, that they be able to recite underground working regulations by the numbers of the paragraphs and, failing which, they were liable to violent assault.<sup>80</sup> Ford heard them out, promised to meet with the miners again, this time with Colonel Morak of the Witwatersrand Police, in case he was needed.<sup>81</sup> But Ford insisted that "learning instructions and the string ... had been used for the past five years and was in the interest of the African."<sup>82</sup>

In the event, five hundred miners were arrested during the Langlaagte disturbances and had to stand trial. Mine management and the police were uncertain about how to proceed, given the number of miners involved and the fear of further disturbances if they were all brought to trial. In the end the ringleaders were tried--partly at the insistence, interestingly enough, of Colonel Morak of the Police--and defended by counsel provided by the African Mine Workers Union (AMWU). Everyone except eight ringleaders were re-employed by the mine.<sup>83</sup>

For the young AMWU, formed as recently as 1941, this was valuable experience. For the first time the miners' cause was defended in a court of law, a useful propaganda platform for the AMWU and a serviceable test of the latitude of the law in relation to miners' rights. The outcome of the trial was eminently favourable and, as the AMWU provided counsel, gave it a credibility and standing it did not enjoy among African miners before. After all, of the five hundred miners arrested, only eight were tried, fined and dismissed from their jobs. In a world where mass dismissals and mass repatriation were possible, this was seen as a victory, even though the AMWU was not

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<sup>80</sup> Dunbar Moodie, "The Role of the State in Industrial Conflict"; page 12.

<sup>81</sup> Brink memo, 11/1/43, NTS 7675, 102/332. Cited by Dunbar Moodie, "The Role of the State in Industrial Conflict"; page 12.

<sup>82</sup> The Guardian, 21/1/1943. Cited in Dunbar Moodie, "The Role of the State in Industrial Conflict"; page 12.

<sup>83</sup> Dunbar Moodie, "The Role of the State in Industrial Conflict"; page 16.

wholly responsible for it.

#### IV

All of the gold mines provided African miners with their daily meals. The meals were prepared in compound kitchens and served to Africans in compound dining halls, in a fashion approaching the decorum of a prison. One of the reasons why the mining industry undertook this responsibility was to ensure that on the average workers remained fit for the rigours of underground mining.<sup>82</sup> It certainly was not a cheaper form of food provision.<sup>83</sup>

The diet consistently mainly of maize—a maize based gruel—and meat, with lesser quantities of beans, vegetables, bread, beer and other more minor items rounding off the annual supply of food.<sup>84</sup> For example, in 1940, the average African miner received 600 pounds of maize, 230 pounds of meat, 80 pounds each of bread and vegetables, 60 pounds of beans and beer derived from 50 pounds of malt.<sup>85</sup> Compared to mine supplies and the wage, the cost of these food supplies was, however, a relatively minor item, making up three percent of working costs.

Mine managers were nevertheless encouraged to be parsimonious in this regard, as part of the overall attempt to keep working costs down.<sup>86</sup> Mine managers were quite aware of the fact however that a reduction in food supplies would be cause of dissatisfaction in the compounds and for this reason dismissed any thought of deliberate cutbacks. In response to one such a proposal tendered at the 1939 annual meeting of the AMWT, B.S.

<sup>82</sup> Francis Wilson, Labour in the South African Gold Mines; page 57.

<sup>83</sup> ibid

<sup>84</sup> See Figure 6.

<sup>85</sup> See Figure 6.

<sup>86</sup> TCW, Annual Report, (1941); page 47.

Bushell, general manager of West Springs cautioned that "if the weight of solids were reduced to that suggested ... there would be serious complaints in the compounds."<sup>87</sup> On this issue, the mine managers and, indeed, the compound managers stood firmly against any deliberate pruning of African diets.

They had good reason to be careful. Food was an enormously sensitive matter in the compounds. African miners did not need much persuasion to stage food riots. If any savings were to be without such fuss, it was in the area of food preparation, and a reduction in the amount of food wasted daily. This is what mine managers from Government Mining Areas, Durban Roodepoort, Marievale and West Springs advocated in their paper presented at the AMNT meetings in 1939 and 1940.<sup>88</sup> The modernization of the compound kitchen, the rationalization of food preparation, these they felt would do the trick. They reported significant savings in food costs following the modernization of their food preparation facilities.<sup>89</sup>

The problem, as it turned out, came from the farmers. In 1943 a poor harvest reduced the quantity of maize and as a result garew served to African miners.<sup>90</sup> 1944 registered a slight improvement but the quantities were reduced even further in 1945 and 1946. Whereas the average African miner received about 660 pounds of maize in 1940, in 1943 it was down to 550 pounds, 520 in 1946. A reduction in staple food, down from quantities to which the African miner had become accustomed, was cause for grievances which even the Chamber of Mines and the mine managers could not regard as illegitimate.

Meat supplies also declined in 1944 but then slowly improved to the 1943 level by

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<sup>87</sup> TCM, AMNT, Papers and Discussion, 1939-1941; page 606.

<sup>88</sup> TCM, AMNT, Papers and Discussion, 1939-1940; pages 592-606.

<sup>89</sup> ibid.

<sup>90</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1943); page 24.



1948.<sup>43</sup> To make up for the decline, the Chamber of Mines imported frozen and canned meat from East Africa in quantities that could not, however, make up for the shortfall.<sup>44</sup> The African miners were not particularly pleased with the food prepared from frozen and canned meat. Neither were they pleased with the increased quantities of vegetables--particularly beans--and bread served in an attempt to substitute for the shortage of maize and meat.<sup>45</sup>

Concerned about the possible consequences of the food shortage, the Chamber of Mines responded by, on the one hand, explaining to the workers that the situation was not the industry's fault but caused by forces outside its control. "National shortages and restrictions on the supply of essential foodstuff, such as meat and maize, have made it necessary to adjust the normal ration scale . . .," the president pointed out in 1942.<sup>46</sup> The Department of Native Affairs was specifically asked to place posters in the compounds explaining to workers that the food shortage was a national matter, brought about by conditions of war and drought.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand the Chamber of Mines criticized the government's agricultural policies, regarding as unsound the practice of support pricing. In a bitter exchange of letters between the Chamber and the Department of Agriculture, a case is made against government intervention in the food market and in favour of free trade and market determined pricing. "I feel that I am justified in uttering a word of warning," the president of the Chamber of Mines noted in most unusual tone of language, "to those in authority who, in the control of commodities and the regulation of food supplies,

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<sup>43</sup> See Figure 6.

<sup>44</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1944); page 27.

<sup>45</sup> Dan O'Neare, "The 1946 African Mine Workers' Strike"; page 159.

<sup>46</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1942); page 50.

<sup>47</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1945); page 26.

sometimes fail, when making their determinations, to realize the possible repercussions on the vast labour force in our care."<sup>66</sup> In their correspondence of July 16 1945 to December 14 1945, the Chamber first politely, then aggressively requests of the Department of Agriculture to remove agricultural price supports.<sup>67</sup> The Department, concerned for political reasons about the prosperity of farming constituencies, politely and firmly refused.<sup>68</sup>

Unable to control the supply and price of agricultural commodities, the Chamber of Mines and mine management lived through the years of the food shortages with considerable angst. Indeed, 1945, the year prior to the strike, was "for compound managers and their staff ... full of anxiety."<sup>69</sup> They were referring to rioting in the compounds resulting from the food shortages. There is some uncertainty as to when the rioting started, but the Chamber of mines recorded its first food disturbance on 7 February 1945 at Marievale, to which the Nigel police attended.<sup>70</sup> At East Geduld, in the same month, "certain Basuto Natives had refused to draw food at the proper times. By the time the Police reached the compounds the Natives were quiet and in their rooms, and they drew food later."<sup>71</sup> At first it appeared as if the situation was under control, thanks or no thanks to the police.

More food disturbances were reported at Grootvlei, Government Gold Mining Company,

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<sup>66</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1942); page 51.

<sup>67</sup> Correspondence of the Chamber of Mines and the Department of Agriculture, 16 July to 14 December 1945. Reprinted in TCM, Annual Report, (1945); pages 84-96.

<sup>68</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1945); pages 95-96.

<sup>69</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1945); page 65.

<sup>70</sup> TCM, Gold Producers Committee (GPC), "Native Labour-Native Trade Unions-Strike." Unlisted source, Chamber of Mines archives. (1945, np.) Note that Marievale was one of the mines which modernized its kitchens.

<sup>71</sup> TCM, GPC, "Native Labour-Native Trade Unions-Strike"; np.

Van Ryn Estate in February 1945, and, on March 6, at Modderfontein East arising from a complaint about issues of *sarewa* ... a Native had been killed and another had since died of injuries."<sup>72</sup> Matters had indeed become a little desperate. In January 1946, at one (unknown) mine, "the mine manager told the workers that there was not enough food owing to the drought ... ."<sup>73</sup> The miners replied by "raiding the compound kitchens and (steal) all the food."<sup>74</sup> More food riots were reported in the newspapers for the months March and April of that year.<sup>75</sup>

The food disturbances were a direct result of maize and meat shortages, and they were the organized responses of miners, acting on their own initiative. The AMMU seized upon the issue, and in almost every speech made, every pamphlet produced, the matter of food featured prominently.<sup>76</sup> Between the food riots and the August 1946 strike, the AMMU turned the food issue into a union issue, and made one of the demands leading up the strike that miners be permitted to feed themselves one of the major demands of that year. Given the importance of food to the miners, and given their immediate history of trying to do something about food shortages by rioting, the AMMU could not go far wrong riding the issue as something to strike over.

In the 1930s and 1940s--as indeed before and after this period--the international gold market functioned under a relatively constant and stable gold price. A fine ounce of

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<sup>72</sup> YEN, BPC, "Native Labour-Native Trade Unions-Strikes"; op.

<sup>73</sup> *Inkululeko*, 28 January 1946; page 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>75</sup> See *Inkululeko*, March and April editions, 1946; page 5 of every edition.

<sup>76</sup> See Dunbar Hoodie, "The Moral Economy of the Mine and the African Mine Workers Union."

gold was valued at 7.01 pounds sterling in 1936, increased to 8.4 pounds in 1940 and 8.62 pounds in 1946. Only in 1950 did the price increase sharply, relative to the trend, to 12.41 pounds per fine ounce.<sup>77</sup> The price was set independently of producer cost, which meant that any increases in the costs of production could not be passed on to consumers and had to be absorbed internally. On the other hand, the demand for gold at this time was virtually limitless. The consumers—mostly government reserve banks—were willing to buy all the gold that came on to the market.<sup>78</sup>

These facts are of importance simply because, on the one hand, the industry could never overproduce and had an interest in maximizing output. A consequence of the shortfall of African labour discussed earlier was that it could not maintain its annual output, never mind increase it. Between 1941 and 1947 ore production fell by fourteen million tons (from 67.25 to 53.71 million) and gold bullion three million fine ounces. The level at which gold bullion dropped was marginally greater than that of the ore, as a result of the declining quality or grade—measured in gold demi-weights per ton of treated ore—of the mined ore.<sup>79</sup> The industry's prior commitment to and investment in low-grade mining operations made a shift to higher-grade mining over this short term difficult. In a world of limitless demand for gold, less ore of declining quality meant less gold to be sold and, as a result, less revenue accumulated.

In itself, declining output was not such a bad thing, for the industry still recorded reasonable output.<sup>80</sup> What was more worrisome was the escalation of working costs which, as they could not be transferred by price increases to the consumers, directly

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<sup>77</sup> ICB, Annual Report, (1956); page 135.

<sup>78</sup> Timothy Green, The New World of Gold, (New York: Walker and Co., 1981); pages 18-20.

<sup>79</sup> See Table 1.

<sup>80</sup> See Table 1 and Figure 5.

ingested into revenues and profits. At their annual meeting in 1941, W.H.A. Lawrence, president of the Chamber of Mines, lamented that "working costs have increased steadily since the outbreak of war and, in the present abnormal circumstances, the likelihood of further increases cannot be disregarded."<sup>88</sup> In 1942 the president felt that "the operations of the mines are tending to become increasingly subject to embarrassment."<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the industry faced a sixty-nine percent increase in working costs during the war, a ten-fold increase over pre-war working costs.<sup>90</sup> This was so alarming a trend that the Chamber of Mines warned that low grade mining operations would have to cease, a signal usually aimed at government begging relief rather than a statement of fact.<sup>91</sup> Low grade mines did not close down during the war.

The escalation in working costs was nevertheless real enough. It was due mainly to rise in the costs of mine supplies and equipment, the largest item of working costs. Shortages of these items as well as war induced inflation drove prices up, sharply so particularly after 1945. White wages, the second most important item of working costs, also rose steadily during this period, doubling in absolute terms between 1936 and 1950.<sup>92</sup> These were a result of collective agreements previously made, as well as cost of living increases imposed upon the industry by government. Demands for wage increases outside these arrangements were strenuously resisted by the Chamber. African wages remained relatively constant, except for a seventeen percent increase awarded and paid for by government, in response to the recommendations of the Lansdown Commission in

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<sup>88</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1941); page 44.

<sup>89</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1942); page 32.

<sup>90</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>91</sup> TCM, Annual Report, (1944); page 60.

<sup>92</sup> See Figure 4.

1943.<sup>66</sup> With no recognized union and little bargaining power, African workers watched as their wages improve slightly in absolute terms but decline in real terms. Finally, domestic shortages and inflation drove up food prices, but since this was a relatively minor item of working costs, its contribution to the increase of working costs was marginal.

The net effect of a decline in output and a global increase in working costs was that by the mid-1940s the profit margin of the industry narrowed considerably. In 1940, the heyday of labour abundance, the industry made 3.51 pounds profit on every fine ounce of gold produced. In 1943 profits declined to 3.08 pounds, 2.29 pounds in 1946 and 1.08 pounds by 1947, the leanest year of the decade.<sup>67</sup> Given the declining profit margin, the Chamber of Mines resisted absolutely any wage increases for African miners. Ordinarily stubborn when it came to African wage increases, the Chamber in 1940s conducted a vigorous defense of its cheap labour policies. From its point of view, the industry could not afford to have any wage increases for African miners. The stance brought the Chamber of Mines into conflict with the AMMU, whose leaders and members thought differently.

In 1943 the Lansdown Commission recommended wage increases to African miners, but the Chamber of Mines successfully persuaded the Government that it could not afford them and the Government agreed to carry the cost.<sup>68</sup> However, only a part and not all of the increases were awarded to the miners and it is this difference--i.e. between the Commission's recommendations and the actual awards--that the AMMU turned to its advantage. The AMMU counterpoised the Commission's recommendations against the increases actually

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<sup>66</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>67</sup> See Figure 5.

<sup>68</sup> TCM, GPC, Statements of Evidence, Statistics and Memoranda.

received and blamed the Chamber for not making up the difference.<sup>89</sup> A clever strategy, no doubt, for it gave the wage demands the weight of state legitimacy. Armed with the demand for higher wages and a different system of food delivery, grievances generated by the political economy of gold mining in the 1940s, the ANMU took about 80 000 miners into an unprecedented strike on August 12, 1946, and probably double the number in sympathizers.

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<sup>89</sup> TCM, GPC, "Native Labour-Native Trade Unions-Strike" sp.

TABLE 1

Gold Production: 1936-1948

Year	Tons Milled	Fine Oz.	Grade Dots/Ton
1936	48 221 120	11 015 776	4.569
1937	50 725 750	11 329 397	4.662
1938	53 834 150	11 707 254	4.349
1939	58 340 200	12 352 099	4.234
1940	64 515 350	13 535 504	4.196
1941	67 255 450	13 677 275	4.127
1942	66 979 700	13 572 339	4.053
1943	59 952 900	12 291 855	4.097
1944	58 504 400	11 992 717	4.039
1945	58 697 600	11 936 147	3.997
1946	56 927 500	11 645 646	4.024
1947	53 712 300	10 914 028	3.982
1948	53 285 700	11 304 044	4.012

Source: TCM, Annual Reports, (1936-1948.)



FIG. 1: EMPLOYMENT

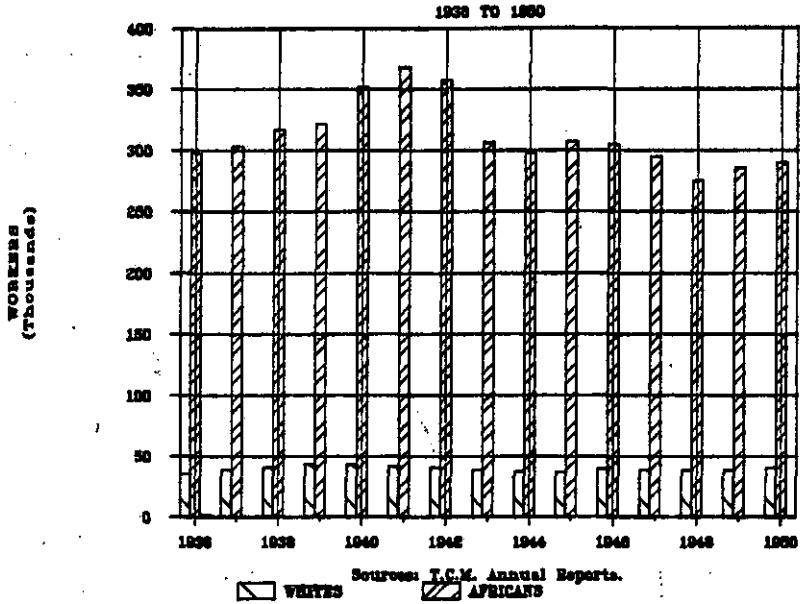
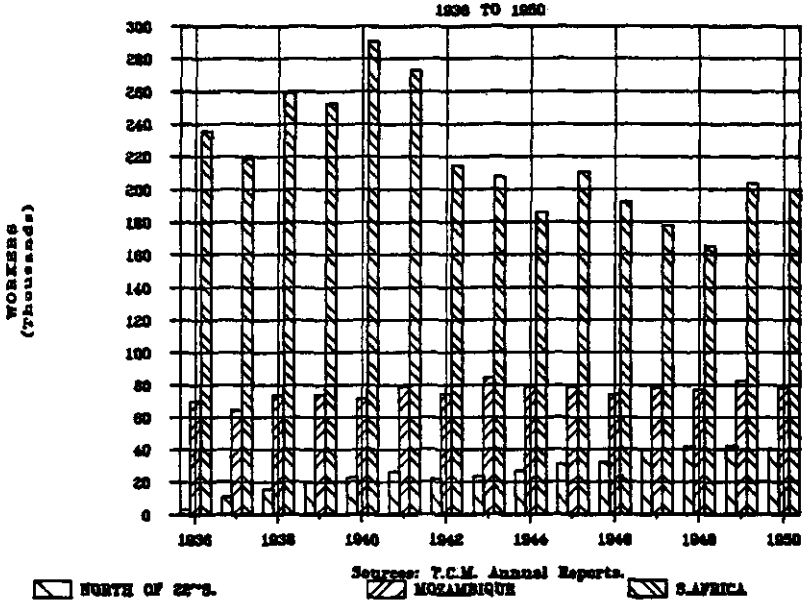


FIG.2: LABOR SUPPLIES, ORIGINS



**FIG. 3: EMPLOYMENT AND OUTPUT**

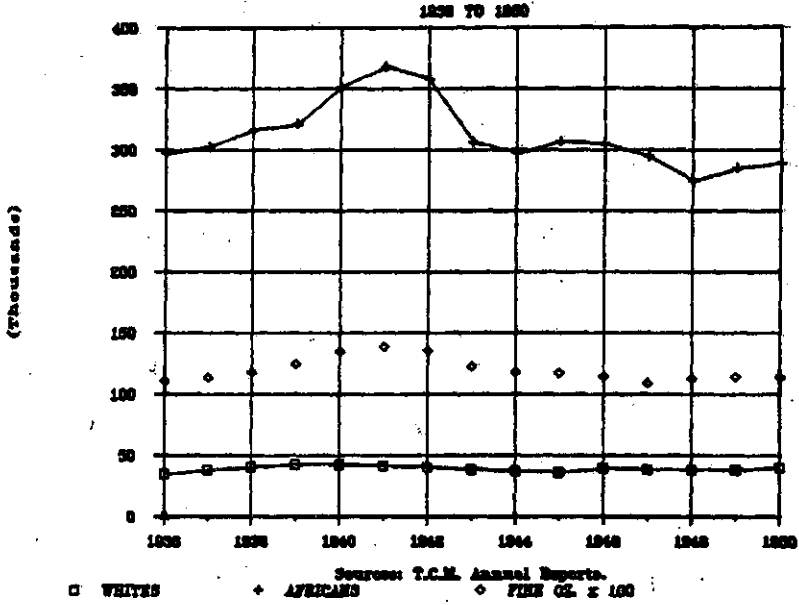
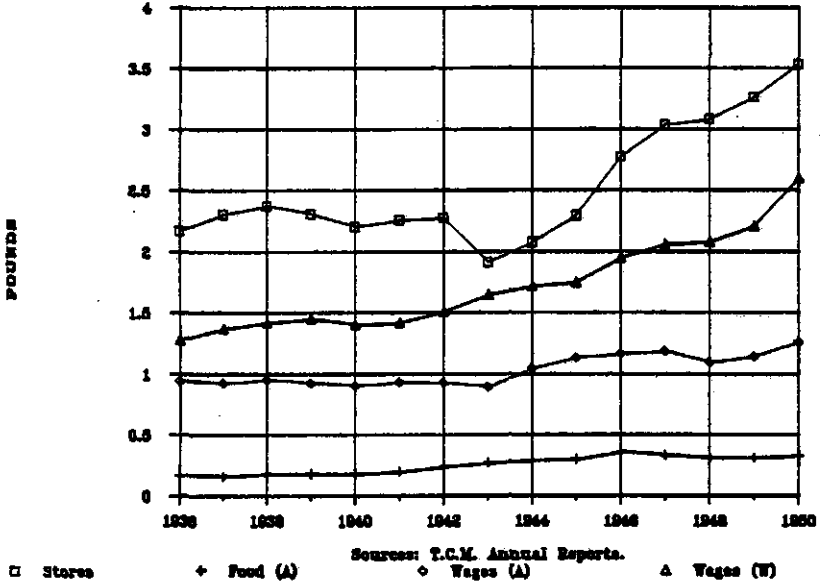
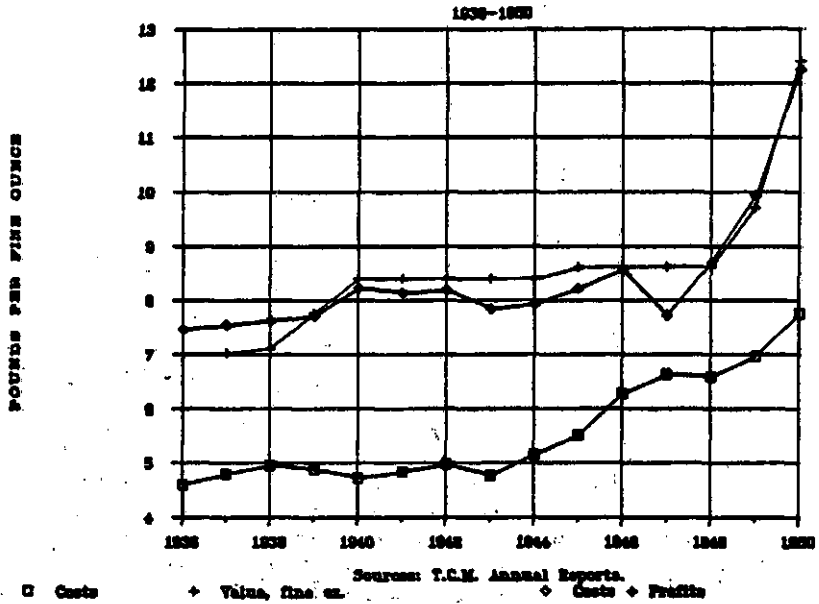


FIG. 4: WORKING COSTS PER FINE OUNCE

1938 TO 1950



**FIG. 6: PROFIT SQUEEZE**



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FIG. 6: FOOD PROVISION

POUNDS (WEIGHT) PER AFRICAN WORKER

