The 1922 Rand Revolt: white workers' Marikana?

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By Duncan Money and Danelle van Zyl-Hermann

AMONGST THE CROWDED headstones of a neglected Johannesburg cemetery lie buried two men killed "in action against the revolutionaries". They were South African air force pilots who had been bombing insurgent strongholds when they were shot down. But this wasn't a battle in one of the world wars, far beyond the borders of South Africa. They had been bombing Benoni on the East Rand, and the insurgents were heavily armed workers who had seized the town as part of a strike turned insurrection.

This was the Rand Revolt of 1922, a series of events during which the full force of the state – aerial bombardment, artillery, tanks and thousands of troops – was deployed against striking workers. To be sure, strikes, uprisings and state violence are regular features in South Africa's history. What was extraordinary about this event is that this spectacular violence was directed against whites – the supposed beneficiaries of the new Union of South Africa, established in 1910.

Forgotten event?

2022 marks the centenary of the Rand Revolt, today a largely forgotten event. And there are strong parallels with the 2012 Marikana massacre. In both cases, miners rose up against a newly-formed state and a government that was supposed to be ruling in their interests. Arguably, Marikana, too, is fast being forgotten.

White industrial conflict in the first two decades of the twentieth century was continually motivated by white workers' fear that they would be displaced by black workers who were paid very low wages. Major strikes took place in 1907, 1913 and 1914 – all centred on the mining industry. In each case, the state intervened in favour of mining interests. At least 20 strikers were killed in 1913 when troops opened fire on crowds outside the Rand Club, and in 1914 a large-scale military mobilisation halted strikes.

1922, however, was of a different magnitude. Amid rampant inflation and falling gold prices, the Chamber of Mines announced its intention to replace 2,000 semi-skilled whites with cheaper black workers. Crucially, for these white workers, there was much more at stake than jobs and incomes. Living in a racially ordered society at the mercy of exploitative capitalism, they viewed the Chamber's move as an assault on their very identity and race-based privilege.

The broader white mining workforce, fearing it would soon face the same fate, reacted with outrage. In January, a major strike broke out on the gold and coal mines, escalating by early March to a general strike across the Transvaal (watch footage of this here). This took a revolutionary direction as armed strikers seized control of parts of the Rand and formed commandos to directly confront the state.

This challenge took two main forms: republican strikers, animated by the memory of the Boers' conflict with Britain during the South African War, sought the formation of an independent republic; anti-capitalist strikers, drawing on revolutionary currents influential in the white labour movement, sought the formation of a communist state. The meshing of anti-capitalist and racist sentiments was embodied by the strikers' slogan, emblazoned on banners during the unrest: "Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa".

Insurrection and repression

Many strikers had military experience and intense violence engulfed the Rand.

The Standerton Burghers, one of the many Boer commandos who arrived in Johannesburg to support the striking workers. Armed strikers seized control of parts of the Rand and formed commandos to directly confront the state.

White working-class women too formed commandos that attacked police and publicly thrashed strike-breakers. While the insurrectionary violence was mainly directed against white employers, suspected strike-breakers and the state, the strikers also targeted African residents and miners in massacres at Vrededorp, Ferreirastown and Germiston. Dozens were

killed. Jeremy Krikler has argued that this racial massacre wasn't simply a product of the threat black labour was seen to pose to white jobs – white workers were also lashing out against those they most feared becoming themselves: rightless, wageless, racially-despised, unfree blacks.

The revolt was suppressed only with the full force of the state. The final death toll remains uncertain, though diligent work checking of cemeteries across the Rand and death notices from 1922 has produced a list of 181 named casualties. Additionally, 4,750 people were arrested, 18 sentenced to death and four were executed. As police disarmed the white population in Johannesburg, it seized 1,400 rifles, 745 revolvers and over 60,000 rounds of ammunition.

In the wake of this defeat, there was a sense of despair among those who had joined the revolt. Taffy Long, a Welsh miner who received the death sentence for killing a suspected police informer, declared at his trial: "What has our generation known except slaughter, strife and more slaughter?" He sang the Red Flag as he went to the gallows and 10,000 people marched in his funeral procession to Brixton Cemetery.

A decade on from Marikana, we may well hear the echo of this lament among black workers and their families who form the backbone of South Africa's mining industry. Yet despite the defeat of 1922, the consequences of these two events were very different.

"Civilised labour" and the co-optation of white workers

Although defeated, the strikers in 1922 secured most of their demands within a few years. In the 1924 general election, workers used their power at the ballot box to oust Jan Smuts' pro-mining government. The new Nationalist-Labour ruling alliance passed South Africa's first Industrial Relations Act. This enshrined an industrial colour bar and race-based job reservation, higher "civilised" wages for white workers, and an industrial conciliation system.

This was a disaster for black workers, who were expressly excluded from this system. For the next half century, white workers benefitted from this notorious policy of "civilised labour".

This reconfiguration of relations between the state, capital and white labour saw white workers much more thoroughly incorporated into the ruling social alliance than before.

Yet these changes also served to paralyse the white labour movement. The 1924 Act placed controls on organised labour, notably by limiting strike action, and led to the bureaucratisation of trade unions. The Rand Revolt proved to be the last serious challenge by white workers. White labour was effectively co-opted into state-controlled structures of power and the working classes even more firmly divided along racial lines, diffusing challenges to the interests of capital.

Trench warfare in Fordsburg. The revolt was suppressed only with the full force of the state.

White labour politics, too, was irrevocably changed. South Africa's Communist Party was founded in 1921 from the white labour movement. It had strongly supported the strike. Yet it emerged deeply disillusioned with white workers, deciding from then on to concentrate on mobilising black workers.

The "mauling" of workers at Marikana ended very differently, with little change for the workers involved. Only two years after the massacre, platinum miners embarked on the longest strike in South Africa's history, a dispute during which four people were killed.

Age of global workers' revolution

One important difference between the events at Marikana and those of 1922 lies in their wider contexts. The Rand Revolt occurred during a period of global revolutionary labour ferment following the Russian Revolution, and during intensified anti-colonial uprisings with conflicts in Egypt, Iraq and Ireland. Europe witnessed a wave of revolutionary upheaval and some events had strong parallels with the Rand Revolt. In 1920, for instance, a general strike by miners in the Ruhr region escalated into the Ruhr Uprising. Revolutionaries seized control of urban areas across the region before the revolt was bloodily suppressed by the army and paramilitary forces, who killed around 1,000 people. Two years earlier, striking workers in Rio de Janeiro had tried to overthrow the federal government. They, too, were violently repressed.

However, despite states' initial impulse to repress industrial action, they still feared a workers' revolution. Hence, states around the world – like the Nationalist-Labour alliance in South Africa – moved to accommodate working-class demands and placate workers. Important labour and political rights were won in this period.

We might hesitate before grouping the Rand Revolt among this revolutionary wave as the Rand's strikers enacted pogroms against Africans and fought for racial segregation. Yet, while we might today consider anticapitalism and racism mutually exclusive, this was not the case at the time. Moreover, state authorities clearly considered the strikers revolutionaries. So, too, did revolutionaries in other parts of the world: Lenin, upon learning of the Rand Revolt, sought to establish contact between the Comintern and "the insurgents who have not yet been shot or jailed."

The way that white miners revolted against a state that was supposed to govern in their interests, and the manner in which that state moved to crush workers and working-class communities, belies any automatic identification between people and the state. This remains relevant today. Even with the former General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers in the presidency, South Africa's miners still struggle.

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