

## EARLY TRADE UNIONISM ON THE GOLD MINES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND AUSTRALIA: A COMPARISON

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### Vroeë Vakbondbewegings op die Goudmyne in Suid-Afrika en Australië: 'n Vergelyking

Die Suid-Afrikaanse en Australiese samelewings word gekenmerk deur heelwat gemeenskaplike eienskappe en ervarings, onder meer 'n Britse setlaarerfenis, goud, die stukrag wat die Britse vakbondwese verleen het en 'n koloniale tydperk wat feitlik gelyktydig was. Ten spyte hiervan was die vakbondbeweging wat gedurende die eerste twee dekades na die ontdekking van goud in die mynbousektor van dié twee lande ontplooi het, opvallend verskillend. Die Suid-Afrikaanse vakbondbeweging het organisatories swak gebly en bly vaskleef aan 'n erg eksklusiewe, "ou unionistiese" beleid; in Australië daarenteen waar die goudmynwerkers nie die uitwerking van grootskepe georganiseerde kapitaal in die gesig gestaar het nie, het die vakbondbeweging in die goudmynbedryf ironies genoeg 'n aansienlike aantal lede getrek en deur die aanvaarding van die gedagte van 'n breër bondgenootskap van werkers in die rigting van 'n "nuwe unionisme" beweeg. Hierdie verskil kan verklaar word deur die spesifiek plaaslike ekonomiese omstandighede in die twee lande, byvoorbeeld die geologiese aard van die goudriwwe, die metodes om goud uit die erts te onttrek, die samestelling van die arbeidsmag, die oorsprong van kapitaal en die beheer daaroor, asook die politieke bedeling. Hierdie faktore het 'n vakbondbeweging wat uniek was ten opsigte van albei lande en ten volle verinheems is, vorm laat aanneem.

South African and Australian societies share many common elements and experiences including a British settler heritage, gold, similar British trade union impetus, and a colonial period which was roughly contemporaneous. Despite this, the mining trade unionism which evolved in the first few decades after the discovery of gold in each country, was markedly different: South African trade unionism remained weak in its organization and adhered to a thoroughly exclusive and "old unionist" policy; in Australia on the other hand, where the gold-digger was not faced with large-scale organized capital, gold-mining trade unionism ironically attained formidable membership and moved in the direction of "new unionism" by embracing the idea of a broader worker alliance. The reasons for this include various specific local material conditions in the respective countries, such as the geological nature of the gold reefs, the methods of gold extraction, the structure of the labour force, the origin of capital and its control, as well as the political dispensation. These factors shaped a trade unionism which was unique to each country and fully indigenized.

### Introduction

During the early years of South African gold-mining the magnates were obsessed with a fear that there would be an 'increase of Trade Union influence on the Australian model'<sup>1</sup> and that "the same troubles [would] arise as [were] . . . prevalent in the Australian colonies viz. that by combination the labouring classes [would] become so strong as to be able to more or less dictate, not only on the question of wages, but also on political questions . . ."<sup>2</sup> They dreaded an "Australian democracy influencing the political and economic future of the Rand . . ."<sup>3</sup>

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BRA: HE 208 Record Department, file 12, Selbourne to Phillips, 13.1.1906: Memorandum on the Position of White Miners on the Witwatersrand.

2. BRA: HE 253 Record Department, Subject Correspondence Files: Labour, file 48, no. 897, Creswell – Tarbutt letter, 3.7.1902.
3. H. Samuel, "The Chinese Labour Question", *Contemporary Review*, April 1904, p. 463.

This phobia was probably not unfounded particularly in view of the virtually exclusive monopoly the magnates had on the Witwatersrand mines during the first few decades of its gold history. A closer analysis of the early gold-mining trade unions in Australia is thus called for, in order to assess this apparent "threat". Given the various similarities between South African and Australian societies, the common industry in which they were involved and the relative uniformity of periodization, there is an even more important need to consider why the respective gold-mining trade unions were so markedly different during the first few decades of their existence.

Historians W.M. Macmillan, C.W. de Kiewiet, and W.K. Hancock have all referred to the similarities between the two countries, particularly during their colonial phases,<sup>4</sup> while subsequently both Elaine Katz and David Ticktin have made numerous comments on the Australian influence on early South African labour history.<sup>5</sup> Recently, more extensive comparative work has been done on Australia and South Africa by historians such as Deryck Schreuder and Brian Kennedy,<sup>6</sup> but it remains a relatively unresearched field. In the *Tale of two mining Cities*, Kennedy has focussed particular attention on race relations as they developed on the two mining frontiers, and has also emphasized the contribution made by Australians to early twentieth century South African history.<sup>7</sup> He states that it is important "to emphasize . . . the many elements and experiences that [these] societies share . . . [for] what is truly distinctive in the history of each can only be brought into sharper relief by a comparative perspective."<sup>8</sup> This comment on the comparative perspective is endorsed by Van den Braembussche who claims "that 'uniqueness' is only meaningful when contrasted with something else".<sup>9</sup>

In the light of these imperatives, it is thus the purpose of this article to explore the differences between the gold-miners' unions as well as to suggest some of the reasons for the dissimilitude. Issues that will be considered include the general similarities and differences between the two countries, an overview of British trade union development, initial trade unionism in South Africa and Australia, the impact of gold and the subsequent unionization, and finally, the first two major strikes that took place in each country.

### Similar characteristics

Before discussing trade union development in the respective countries, some points of similarity must be established to make the comparison meaningful as Frederickson states: "it is essential to show that one is dealing with the same type or category of phenomenon in each

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B. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities: Johannesburg and Broken Hill, 1852-1925* (Cape Town, 1984), p. xii.

E.N. Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy* (African Studies Institute, Johannesburg, 1976); D. Ticktin, "Origins of the South African Labour Party" (Ph.D, U.C.T., 1973).

D. Schreuder, "An Industrial theme in comparative perspective: South Africa and Australia" (Twelfth Biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society, January 1989); Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities* and "Miners, Preaches and Politics: Methodism in Australian and South African Mining Communities, 1885-1925" (International Mining History Conference, German Mining Museum, Bochum, September 1989).

7. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, pp. 18-23.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

A.A. van den Braembussche, "Historical Explanation and comparative Method: Towards a Theory of the History of Society", *History and Theory*, vol. xxviii, no. 1, 1989, p. 10.

case, and that the larger historical contexts are sufficiently alike to make comparison more than forced analogy or obvious contrast."<sup>10</sup>

The basic similarity which renders such a comparison meaningful is their common "settler" history as "supplanting"<sup>11</sup> societies of European origin. Both countries were at one or other stage, part of or within the orbit of the British Empire. This phenomenon goes a long way to explain the numerous similarities between the two countries, as the immigrants took England as a pattern "for everything" and brought with them a "network of values".<sup>12</sup> They shared in a common heritage and therefore initially also had similar ideologies, institutions and traditions. Among these common institutions was the trade union – Great Britain was the birthplace of trade unionism and it was therefore carried to all her colonies, including South Africa and Australia.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the "settler" experience was in itself another common feature with its social isolation, economic self-sufficiency and local political structures, as well as processes such as the expanding frontier, dispossession of land and confrontation with the indigenous peoples.

During the mid to late nineteenth century gold was discovered in both these countries, which were at that time predominantly agricultural and/or pastoral settlements. These discoveries were to permanently influence the history of both the colonies. Although Australia was only settled by Europeans more than a century later than South Africa, it took less time for it to discover its mineral wealth. The first authentic recorded discovery of gold took place just 35 years after European settlement,<sup>14</sup> and within another 26 years the gold which launched the Australian gold-rush was discovered. Gold was only found by Europeans in South Africa two centuries after 1652, with the discovery of the main gold Reef taking place 234 years later.

Australia's richest mineral lands were far closer to the east coast (where the first Europeans disembarked) and were also extremely fertile, which attracted shepherds who thus opened up the interior.<sup>15</sup> In South Africa it was also the agro-pastoral *Voortrekker* who first moved into the gold-bearing regions, but these were far further inland and were therefore only reached much later. In both countries it was the European "farmer" who was initially aware of the presence of gold, and as he was primarily concerned with finding good sheep and cattle country,<sup>16</sup> showed very little interest in the mining of gold. Moreover, they had little, if any, knowledge of mining<sup>17</sup> and also had no desire to attract those who did.

It is interesting to note that in both countries the first reports of discoveries were alleged to

G.M. Frederickson, *White Supremacy: A comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York, 1981), p. xv.

D. Day, "Aliens in a hostile Land: A Re-appraisal of Australian History", *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 33, November 1988, p. 3. Here it is argued that "supplanting society" is a more appropriate term as it carries the connotation of occupation and of dispossession.

K. Buckley and T. Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers: Capitalism and the Common People in Australia, 1788-1914* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 103; C. Turnbull, *A concise History of Australia* (Great Britain, 1965), cover flap.

I. Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics* (Canberra), p. 7; K.L. Thorpe, "Early Strikes on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines (1886-1907), with specific reference to the 1907 strike" (MA, Univ. Stellenbosch, 1986), vol. 1, p. 15.

14. R. Cotter, "The golden Decade" in J. Griffin (ed), *Essays in economic History of Australia*, 2nd ed. (Brisbane, 1970), p. 113.
15. G. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended* (3rd ed., Hong Kong, 1978), p. 5.
16. B. Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia: An economic History, 1834-1839* (Reissued, Australia, 1969), p. 103.
17. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended* p. 6; D. van Zyl, *The Discovery of Wealth* (Cape Town, 1986), p. 49.

have been suppressed by the respective authorities – the so-called “obstructionism” of wealth<sup>18</sup> by a “gubernatorial fear”<sup>19</sup>. In 1853, in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, Pieter Marais was sworn to secrecy by the Volksraad on penalty of death as it did not want foreign exploiters flooding the newly independent area<sup>20</sup>; in New South Wales, in 1832-1842, the two geologists, William Clarke and Count Strzelecki, claimed that they were ordered by Governor Gipps to keep the matter a secret for fear of the convicts rioting. This latter account has however subsequently been entirely refuted.<sup>21</sup>

The relevant point in this regard is that the actual “gold-rushes” to both countries did not commence immediately after the first gold was found. In the case of Australia, the pre-1851 discoveries were by no means large and neither was Hargraves’s discovery in 1851.<sup>22</sup> The gold discoveries in the 1870s, primarily in the Eastern Transvaal, also resulted in comparatively small and short-lived “booms”, and it was only the 1886 Witwatersrand discovery that caused the “rush”.<sup>23</sup> Besides the obvious limitations of the pre-1850 discoveries, there were other factors besides circumstance and luck,<sup>24</sup> that contributed to the rushes taking place in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The great Californian gold strikes – the “forty-niners” – had focussed world attention on and quickened interest in gold, and thus the announcements made thereafter elicited an overwhelming hysteria.<sup>25</sup> After 1849 it became a case of discovering a new “El Dorado” as the imagination of the Old World had been stirred and the actual search for gold was intensified.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, by the mid nineteenth century obstacles which existed earlier, such as lack of skill and primitive mining methods, had been overcome. Methods of gold extraction had developed and improved, and personal experience on mines such as those in California, gave impetus to the “rushes”. Some of the “gold discoverers” of Australia and South Africa had in fact worked in the Californian mines: E. Hargraves (1851) and P. Marais (1853) had just returned from California, while others had come to South Africa from the Australian gold-fields: such as H. Lewis (1874) and G. Harrison (1886).

Another possible contributory factor, on a more local level, was the development of other mining activities. In South Africa the mining of diamonds had established both capital and technology in the region, as well as a keen interest in mineral development. In Australia too, copper and coal mining was held to have increased expectations of mineral wealth.<sup>27</sup>

In both countries the gold-rushes commenced two or three decades after the initial discoveries, yet whatever the causes were for the delayed response, once the rushes had begun there was an overwhelming influx of immigrants. The majority of them came from Britain,

18. G. Blainey, “Gold and Governors”, *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 9, no. 36, May 1961, pp. 340-344; E. Rosenthal, *Gold! Gold! Gold! The Johannesburg Gold Rush* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 12-13.

19. B.C. Hodge, “Goldrush in Australia”, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 69, part 3, December 1983, p. 161.

20. Rosenthal, pp. 12-13.

21. G. Blainey, “The Gold Rushes: The Year of Decision”, *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 10, no. 38, May 1962; and “Gold and Governors”; Cotter, pp. 113-115.

22. Cotter, p. 114.

23. T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A modern History* (3rd ed., Johannesburg, 1987), p. 93.

24. Blainey, “Gold and Governors”, pp. 345, 348.

25. Hodge, p. 162; Blainey, “Gold and Governors”, p. 348.

26. C.D.W. Goodwin, “British Economists and Australian Gold”, *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. xxx, 1970, p. 405; L. Marquard, *The Story of South Africa* (London, 1963), p. 18.

27. Hodge, p. 162.

while many had worked on the American, and in the case of South Africa, also the Australian mines.<sup>28</sup> The non-indigenous populations more than doubled within a decade:

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|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Australia 1851 =             | 437 665                 |
| 1861 =                       | 1 168 149 <sup>29</sup> |
| South African Republic 1880= | 50 000                  |
| 1890 =                       | 119 218 <sup>30</sup>   |

The gold-rush immigrants to Australia were heralded as a different sort of people from the earlier settlers – “they were neither the top nor the lower levels . . . but, in the main, middle class”,<sup>31</sup> and were welcomed as having “re-inforced the respectable section of Australian society” and produced a “workforce with a high level of skill and literacy”.<sup>32</sup> No such assessment was apparently made of the Witwatersrand immigrants.

Both the Australian and South African goldfields were to experience an influx of Chinese. In the former case, they were voluntary diggers and their entry was only regulated and restricted retrospectively, while in the latter instance, the Chinese workforce was indentured and rigidly legislated for before their arrival. However, in both cases there was extreme and adamant opposition to the “yellow peril”, and the earlier Australian experience actually fuelled sentiment in South Africa.<sup>33</sup> This racism was not only based on a threat to the immigrants’ labour situation, but was also a concomitant of imperialism and the feeling of cultural and technological superiority over people of a different skin colour.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, the Chinese issue was to play a significant role in the organized labour movement, as well as on the broader political front. In Australia it was a factor which promoted Federation, and was crystallized in the Immigration Restriction Acts (1901) and in the “White Australian” policy.<sup>35</sup> In South Africa, on the other hand, it was an important issue in the 1907 election and created common ground between the British immigrant miners and Het Volk Party.<sup>36</sup> The bitter resentment against Chinese labour in the Transvaal was echoed in Great Britain by humanitarians, trade unionists and political parties alike – anti-Chinese slogans formed the chief plank of the Liberal Party’s election platform, and the Chinese question was held to be one of the main reasons for its return to power in 1906.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from a common aversion to the threat of foreign labour, the miners also shared the standard industrial grievances experienced throughout the industrial world. Mining was generally a most arduous and dangerous occupation. Inherent dangers included death or

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28. I.L. Walker and B. Weinbren, *2000 Casualties: A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1961), pp. 293-294; R. Ward, *Australia since the Coming of Man* (Revised and illustrated edition, Sydney, 1982), p. 101.

29. M. Clark, *A short History of Australia* (Illustrated 2nd edition, Australia, 1981), pp. 118-119.

30. D.H. Houghton and J. Dagut (ed.), *Source Material on the South African Economy 1860-1970*, vol. 1 (Cape Town, 1974), pp. 289-290.

31. Turnbull, p. 74; Ward, p. 113.

32. F.K. Crowley (ed.), *A new History of Australia* (Melbourne, 1974), p. 139; Ward, p. 117.

33. Katz, pp. 17-18; R. Lacour-Gayet, *A concise History of Australia* (England, 1976).

34. Buckley and Wheelwright, pp. 85-86.

35. A.J. Koutsoukis, *Topics from Australian History* (Australia, 1975), pp. 9-10, 69-78; Turnbull, p. 84; Ward, p. 104.

36. Thorpe, pp. 80-84.

37. D. Jacobsson, *Fifty golden Years on the Rand, 1886-1936* (London, 1937), p. 84; Thorpe, pp. 76-77.

injury caused by rock fall, flooding, technical faults and carelessness, while other factors possessing slower detrimental effects on health also prevailed.<sup>38</sup>

Another similar characteristic was that both governments were administratively and psychologically unprepared for the mineral revolutions<sup>39</sup> – a factor that had a marked effect on the grievances of the first miners. In addition, both areas had recently undergone administrative alterations: the Australian Colonies Government Act of 1850 had increased local autonomy with the introduction of legislative councils;<sup>40</sup> whereas the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek was granted independence in 1852 and again in 1884, and had just established the new Volksraad system.<sup>41</sup>

As already indicated, the development of the two mining frontiers was roughly contemporaneous<sup>42</sup>. In my discussion, I will focus on the period from the gold-rushes – 1851 and 1886 respectively – to what has been termed the “turning point”<sup>43</sup> and “watershed”<sup>44</sup> in the two trade union histories – the 1890 and 1907 strikes. The Australian organized labour movement was far in advance of its South African counterpart at a much earlier stage. Towards the end of the period under discussion, both countries were moving towards Federation (1901) and Union (1910) in Australia and South Africa respectively.

### Significant differences

Besides the above-mentioned similarities between the two mining societies, there were also a number of distinct differences which accounted for the dissimilar nature and evolution of their gold-mining trade unions. At the time of the Australian gold-rush, the European inhabitants were all primarily of British stock. Despite this, the society was generally divided between the “exclusionists” or free immigrants who were mostly in government employment, and the “emancipists” or emancipated convicts, descendants and associates of such people. As the name implies, the former sought to exclude the latter from “polite society” resulting in an implacable hatred which characterized the relations between them, and an inherent tension among the inhabitants.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, a tradition of defiance and hostility towards authority can be traced back to the convict days, an attitude that was often apparent on the goldfields in the form of opposition to police brutality and a determination to obtain justice and basic rights.<sup>46</sup>

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38. D. Yudelman, *The Emergence of modern South Africa: State, Capital and the Incorporation of organized Labor on the South African Gold Fields, 1902–1939* (United States of America, 1983), p. 93; A. Hocking, *South African Mining* (Johannesburg, 1975), pp. 27–30; *Australians: A historical Library* (Australia, 1987), vol. III, pp. 170–171.
  39. Hodge, p. 164.
  40. C.D.W. Goodwin, *The Image of Australia: British Perception of the Australian Economy from the eighteenth to the twentieth Century* (United States of America, 1974), p. 34; Clark, *A short History of Australia*, p. 100.
  41. T. Cameron and S.B. Spies (eds), *An illustrated History of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), pp. 90, 183; Marquard, p. 201.
  42. Kennedy, pp. 4–5.
  43. J. Phillip, “1890 – A Turning Point in Labour History?” *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* (2nd series, Australia, 1967), p. 126.
  44. K.L. Harris, “The 1907 Strike: A Watershed in South African white Miner Trade Unionism” (Paper presented at South African Historical Society Biennial Conference, 1989).
  45. Clark, *A short History of Australia*, p. 57; Ward, p. 45.
  46. National Library of Australia, *Australia comes of age* (ydney, 1986), p. 139; Clark, *A short History of Australia*, p. 109; Ward, p. 102.

In South Africa, the Europeans were mainly British and Dutch descendants, who for decades had contested the control of the land. This situation was the cause of much conflict and culminated in the devastating Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The rich gold deposits were discovered in the Boer Republiek – a factor that was held to have contributed to the outbreak of war –<sup>47</sup> and, in turn, led to the administration of the ZAR/Transvaal Colony changing hands three times in the period under discussion.

In Australia, the first gold was located along a 1000km stretch of the Great Dividing Range on the east coast,<sup>48</sup> unlike the Witwatersrand goldfields which were concentrated in a total area of 272 km x 160 km. The first Australian discoveries were scattered throughout the three colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and later Queensland, a division which originally gave rise to local, and hence geographically divided unionism<sup>49</sup> – the latter aspect was not a feature on the Witwatersrand.

The divergent pattern of gold deposits in the two countries also points to the differences in the geological nature of the gold, a factor which underlies the intrinsic character of the two industries. Furthermore, it must be noted that while gold remained one of the most crucial elements in the South African economy, Australian gold was soon overshadowed by wool production.<sup>50</sup> The Australian gold came largely from deposits concentrated by alluvial action, whereas that on the Witwatersrand was sedimentary in origin and was contained in reefs. In Australia, most of the early alluvial gold was deposited near the surface, but there were also subterranean alluvial deposits which were mined later. On the Witwatersrand, the gold is embedded in layers of conglomerate which is both pyritic and refractory, and is found at exceedingly deep levels. In addition, the gold content of the ore is very low.<sup>51</sup> The methods of gold extraction were therefore very different, requiring not only different techniques, machinery and sums of capital, but also a markedly different labour force. The latter phenomenon is probably the prime reason for the weaker development of South African gold mining unions.

During the great days of alluvial mining in Australia, simple inexpensive tools were required for the basic methods of washing, panning and cradling. The diggers worked with “mates” in teams of four to six: one dug the ground, another wheelbarrowed it to the water and the others cradled it. The gold that was recovered was either sold to the merchants on the fields (1oz = £3) or to the government assayer in Melbourne and Sydney (1oz = £3.10).<sup>52</sup> From about the 1870s and 1880s, as the surface alluvial gold was worked out, shafts had to be sunk to obtain the alluvial leads, followed by reefing and quartz crushing – a process which required capital and expensive machinery.<sup>53</sup> The change in the method of extraction meant that the gold-mine was no longer entirely the domain of the “small man”, but rather of larger companies and monopolies. The independent digger was replaced by the wage-earner, a develop-

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47. S. Marks and S. Trapido, “Lord Milner and the South African State”, *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, Issue 8, Autumn 1979.

48. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended* p. 59.

49. Although each of the colonies and indeed each of the goldfields had their own distinctive characteristics, I will focus, as G. Blainey and R. Lacour-Gayet do, on the main developments which occurred throughout.

50. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, p. 5; Crowley, p. 228.

51. J.B. Price, *The Australian Gold Rushes* (Melbourne, 1972), p. 22; L. Callinicos, *Gold and Workers* (Johannesburg, 1980), pp. 12-14.

Clark, *A short History of Australia*, p. 106.

J.J. van Helten, “From Digger to Company Man: The Bethanga Miners’ Lock-out of 1885”, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 69, part 3, December 1983, p. 187.

ment which enraged the traditional prospector,<sup>54</sup> and was a bitter disappointment for those who had emigrated to Australia to “strike it rich”.<sup>55</sup> One digger declared that he was “. . . opposed to all capital; he had come from England, where labourers were slaves, and capital had made them so . . . he was opposed to all leases, to all hiring of labour upon the gold fields” and another declared: “. . . I would require to be reduced to starvation point before I would work for a capitalist.”<sup>56</sup>

It was generally declared that the digger would not easily abandon his dream of “freedom and independence” and revert to the “old European system of master and servant”.<sup>57</sup> In time, however, the independent digger partially had to forgo his “dream” and resign himself to large-scale enterprise, as one digger confided in his diary: “I don’t much like working for a ‘boss’, but I think constant regular wages is preferable to what I have lately been engaged at.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet on the other hand, the diggers could not claim to be entirely unaware that the small-scale alluvial production held within it considerable pressure to change its techniques. As the alluvial gold sank to deeper levels on the various fields, the work necessitated cooperation between diggers, and many teams formed parties which gradually became small companies, and eventually invited greater investment of capital by shareholders. Many of the miners speculated in the shares of the mining companies, and were in effect, “little capitalists”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, under these conditions the diggers could not have been wholly anti-capitalist.<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that until the last decade of the nineteenth century the cost of financing most of the mines on the continent was met by Australian investors and the profits of local mines. Thus, mining control did not initially have the negative connotations associated with overseas capital.<sup>61</sup>

The Australian experiences were probably much like the earlier gold-rushes in the Eastern Transvaal. However, from the outset, gold-mining on the Witwatersrand was virtually a high cost labour-intensive process, making the miners wage-labourers. In theory, this apparent “capital-labour-dichotomy” present on the Rand should immediately have led to large-scale labour mobilization and a “class war”, but owing to the most fundamental difference between South Africa and Australia, this was not so: the labour force on the Rand was divided – a minority of expensive white skilled labour and a majority of cheap black unskilled labour. It was this divided work force which largely explains the differences between the two countries’ gold-mining unions.

The Witwatersrand gold-mining process had three basic requirements: capital, skill and cheap labour. The vast amounts of capital needed for shaft sinking, timbering, stoping, lashing, hauling, crushing and chemical processing was supplied primarily by wealthy entrepreneurs from overseas (absentee mine owners<sup>62</sup>), with the overwhelming percentage coming from Great Britain. These investors amalgamated their claims, founded groups and formed a centralized organization (The Chamber of Mines) which made for highly monopolised finan-

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54. Hodges, p. 165.

55. *Australia comes of age*, p. 151.

56. G. Serle, *The golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861* (Melbourne, 1963), pp. 220-221.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

59. Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 131.

60. Van Helten, p. 179; Crowley, p. 139.

61. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended*, p. 100; Crowley, p. 169; Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, pp. 6, 97-98.

62. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, p. 91.



cial control,<sup>63</sup> and on which J.A. Hobson in 1894 commented: “. . . nowhere in the world had there existed a form of capitalism as that represented by the financial power of the mining houses in South Africa”.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, in sharp contrast, mining in South Africa was a big man’s frontier<sup>65</sup>, while in Australia – at least for a while – it was a small man’s.

In South Africa the required skilled and experienced labour was largely attracted from the coal-mines of Britain, with others coming from Australia, New Zealand, America and some European countries. The third vital component – a large supply of cheap unskilled labour without which the low grade mines would not have been viable – came from the black population of southern Africa. This element was the “single greatest difference”<sup>66</sup> between South African and Australian mining. The unskilled black labour was employed under a rigid system of control including contracts of six to nine months and compound accommodation, and were paid exceedingly low wages in 1894: White labour = £21 per month; Black labour = 61s plus a feeding cost of 10s per month.<sup>67</sup>

This financial difference was reflected in their relationships. Although the white and black miners worked side by side in the mines, the former did not include the latter in the ranks of their organization – this factor has been criticized as the “automatic limitation” of South African trade unionism.<sup>68</sup>

### British antecedents of colonial trade unionism

Given the general similarities and differences between the early South African and Australian gold industry, we can now set about tracing the actual development of their gold-mining trade unions. As already mentioned, many of the immigrants to both countries had experience in British trade unionism, and therefore neither society had to “grope in the dark in an endeavour to arrive at the best and most workable form of [trade union] organization”.<sup>69</sup> In addition, South Africa could also rely on the ideas of the movement in Australia.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, British trade unionism was well established, having undergone considerable transformation. On the eve of the Australian gold-rush, however, British worker attention had been focussed on Chartism, with its demands for universal male suffrage, a secret ballot and payment of members of parliament.<sup>70</sup> Despite the collapse of this political movement, the trade unionism that evolved was considerably temperate in outlook, and acted within the confines of law. This “new model” or old unionism, as it was called in retrospect, was a craft union intended to ensure the vested interests of members of a specific trade. It embraced relatively highly paid and skilled craftsmen and thus formed a type of labour aristocracy. It strove for a “good understanding between master and man”, stressed the “mutuality of interests” and favoured the establishment of joint registra-

63. F. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold* (London, 1976), pp. 14-16.

64. As quoted by B.M. Magubane, *The political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (London, n.d.), p. 106.

65. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, p. 91.

66. Kennedy, *A Tale of two mining Cities*, p. 8.

67. Thorpe, p. 46.

68. A. Hepple, *South Africa: Workers under Apartheid* (2nd ed., London, 1971), p. 62; A. Hepple, *South Africa: A political and economic History* (London, 1966), p. 222.

69. S.W. Johns, “Marxism-Leninism in a multi-racial Environment: The Origins and early History of the Communist Party in South Africa” (Ph.D, Harvard University, 1965), pp. 28-31; G. Serle, *The golden Age*, p. 213.

70. V. Feather, *The Essence of Trade Unionism* (London, 1963), p. 17.

tion boards for conciliation and arbitration. In line with this, it denounced strikes or any form of violence and had no interest in challenging the prevailing capitalist doctrines. It maintained a stable membership and exacted high subscriptions to strengthen its economic position, which like the Friendly Societies, provided a wide range of benefits for accidents, sickness, burial, old age, and unemployment.<sup>71</sup>

Old unionism dominated the scene until about 1889, and together with Chartism, were the developments which many Australian diggers and South African miners would have experienced.<sup>72</sup> However, because of the continuing influx of working class immigrants to the mines, the later trade union trends were also eventually apparent. During the latter part of the century, the various craft unions amalgamated and in turn their representatives formed centralized Trades Councils. The policy of these councils remained moderate as they coordinated trade union functions and adopted a reformist political stance in such matters as education, the franchise, and union rights. However, due to the increased factory demand for masses of semi-skilled and unskilled workers and the subsequent decline in demand for craftsmanship, old unionism became unsuitable for prevailing conditions, and therefore redundant.<sup>73</sup>

The 'new unionism' which emerged was coloured by the increasingly popular, but muted socialist doctrines current in Britain in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and had a markedly more aggressive agenda, which strove for both economic and political goals. Moreover, in contrast to old unionism, all the workers in a particular industry – unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled – were included, with the poorly paid unskilled workers forming the bulk of the new unions. Consequently, the new unionists could not employ the privileged methods of the old, and could not rely on the reserve strength of large benefit funds as their subscriptions were necessarily low.<sup>74</sup> They resorted to a militant approach, reinstating strikes, relying on the strength of ultra-combination and striving to make the union as inclusive as possible, mainly to prevent the employment of non-union labour. In their demand for uniformity of wages, hours and conditions, they formed centralized executive committees and held national trade union congresses to coordinate policies.<sup>75</sup> The demand for direct political representation followed and so the Independent Labour Party (1893), an alliance between socialism and trade unionism, was formed – to quote Cole: "Out of the socialist propaganda of the eighties had come the new unions and out of the new unions had come a new political movement."<sup>76</sup>

### Early unionization in Australia and South Africa

In varying degrees, this pattern of trade union development spilled over into the labour movements of Australia and South Africa. It was, however, selectively followed and gradually adapted in different ways: With Australia being settled as a penal colony, there was initially little scope for trade unionism, but with the eventual development of the economy, and the

71. S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (Revised ed., London, 1920), pp. 151, 174, 210-217; H. Pelling, *The History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1963), pp. 49-54.

72. H. Hughes, "The Eight Hour Day and the Development of the Labour Movement in Victoria in the Eighteen-fifties", *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 9, November 1959 – May 1961, p. 396.

73. Webb, p. 211-237; E.L. Wigham, *Trade Unions* (London, 1956), pp. 21-26.

74. J. Cunnison, *Labour Organization* (London, 1930), p. 22.

75. Feather, pp. 21-22.

76. G.D.H. Cole, *A short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1927*, vol. 2 (London), p. 164.

77. Turner, p. 7; Koutsoukis, p. 33; Buckley and Wheelwright, pp. 86-87.

arrival of free settlers in increasing numbers in the 1820s, the first pioneer labour organizations began to appear in the 1830s.<sup>77</sup> These organizations were founded mainly because some of the immigrant artisans believed that working men in a particular trade should band together to protect their interests. Most of these early organizations took the form of Benefit or Friendly Societies, which provided sick and funeral funds, and unemployment allowances. Another typical characteristic was the protection of the craft or skill by regulations and the maintenance of self respect and human dignity prompted by the immigrants' concern to improve their station in life in the new colony. This led to the unions being exclusive and needless to say, totally averse to semi-skilled and unskilled labour.<sup>78</sup> The most significant achievement of these early exclusive craft unions was the attainment of the 8 hour day for skilled craftsmen in the larger Australian cities.<sup>79</sup> The earliest recorded Australian union was the Shipwrights' United Friendly Society (1829), and by the middle of the century a total of some one hundred trade societies had existed at different times in the various Australian colonies. All had been small in membership, confined to the local community, and of short duration.<sup>80</sup>

In South Africa a similar pattern emerged, with some of the early artisans forming organizations to protect their specific trade interests. Although these early unions were also never very durable, they were significant in that they demonstrated how foreign skilled labour was inclined to organize even in the absence of any extreme economic exploitation. As early as 1840 some form of labour organization already existed in the Cape Town printing business,<sup>81</sup> and by the time gold was discovered on the Rand, it was claimed that there were "trade unions in connection with every known trade".<sup>82</sup>

There are numerous reasons for the absence of permanent and determined trade union activity in the earlier years of the two countries. First, "motherland" trade unionism was undergoing drastic changes and facing extreme challenges at the turn of the nineteenth century. Many of the immigrants would thus have experienced the repression of the Combination Acts, seen union leaders arrested and sentenced to gaol, or left Britain during the period of flux that followed. On the other hand, the considerable distance between Britain and the immigrants rendered communication infrequent and therefore news of trade union development was often belated.

Also, the economies of the "settler" societies were not entirely conducive to unionization, as they were still undergoing a period of relative transition before the establishment of fully fledged employment systems.<sup>83</sup> In line with this, the immigrants had not experienced any form of extreme exploitation – Australia being coined "a paradise for working men".<sup>84</sup> Wages and jobs were reasonably secure, as skilled and competent workers were in short supply<sup>85</sup> – a factor which would again be of particular significance on the early Rand mines.

Moreover, the predominantly pastoral economies were held to have initially had a dampening effect on trade union development. Rural labourers were traditionally seen as

78. Day, pp. 207-208; Buckley and Wheelwright, pp. 164-165.

79. Ward, p. 141.

80. D. Grundy, "Labour" in J. Griffin (ed.), *Essays in economic History of Australia* (2nd ed., Melbourne, 1967), p. 208; J.T. Sutcliffe, *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia* (Reissued, Australia, 1967), pp. 27-28; *Australia comes of age*, p. 142; Buckley and Wheelwright, pp. 86-87.

81. S.A. Rochlin, "Cameos of South African Workers' History", *Saamtrek*, 6 March 1953, n.p.

82. *Transvaal Critic*, 26.2.1897, as quoted by D. Ticktin, p. 81.

83. Hughes, p. 35.

84. G. Serle, *The rush to be rich: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1883-1889* (Melbourne, 1971), p. 90; Turner, p. 1.

85. *Australia comes of age*, p. 143.

conservative, and by virtue of the personal worker relations on the farm, were slow to join unions. However, as the pastoral economy in Australia expanded, with large pastoral holdings and impersonal employer-employee relationships developing, the pastoralists became one of the most formidable nineteenth century unions.<sup>86</sup> A last factor which was equally applicable to the early gold-rush days, was the pioneering spirit of the settlers who did not allow themselves to be perturbed by the hardships of the new environment.

A number of these first unions were also mere branches of the parent unions in England and resembled their overseas counterparts in terms of rules, organization and policy. Most of them were therefore not concerned with the local situation, besides the maintenance of pay and working conditions, and keeping both semi-skilled and unskilled workers out of their ranks.<sup>87</sup> This superficial attitude is epitomized in the action of a group of engineers en route to Australia: they founded a branch of the British 'Amalgamated Society of Engineers' on board the ship, prior to having any knowledge of their local working conditions.<sup>88</sup> It was not until the local economic structures had been firmly set in place, with an accentuation on the separation of capital and labour, that a more indigenized and distinctive unionism emerged, which objected to local material circumstances.

The unions were, however, of considerable significance. When the gold-rushes boosted the various economies and caused economic diversification, these first unions had laid the foundations for local labour organization.

### Gold and early labour activity

The gold-rushes of 1851 and 1886 triggered great economic growth, not only as a result of gold's international monetary value, but also because of the resultant local development of other industries and services, and the enlarged markets sponsored by increased populations. Contrary to expectation, there was not an immediate increase in trade union activity. In Australia particularly, the gold-rushes had a distinctly opposite effect, as the members of the existing unions abandoned their positions and went to the diggings. Few pre-1850 unions actually survived the gold-rushes, but in the wake of the boom in the 1860s, trade unionism revived and strengthened.<sup>89</sup> In South Africa, the Rand had no marked impact on trade union development, the gold-mines being mainly the domain of immigrant skilled artisans, and thus the mines did not disrupt the existing society. Miner unionism grew slowly in both countries.

In Australia men from all walks of life, from overseas and locally, hurried to the various goldfields that had been discovered in the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, and later Queensland. With very little capital and no need of labour, the independent, self-employed diggers acquired licences for prospecting, often with scant knowledge of the mineral they were after. The most significant impact of the diggings was the so-called "equalizing" or "levelling" effect it had on society, described as follows by a contemporary: "Nothing, indeed, can have a more levelling effect on society than the power of digging gold, for it can be done, for a time at least, without any capital but that of health and strength; and the man inured to toil, however ignorant, is on more than equal terms with the educated and refined in a pursuit involving so much personal hardship."<sup>90</sup>

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86. Ward, pp. 141-142; Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 9.

87. Grundy, p. 208; Ward, p. 120.

88. Fitzpatrick, p. 217.

89. Sutcliffe, pp. 27, 35-36; Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 165; Hughes, p. 396.

90. Clark, *Selected Documents*, p. 5.

The gold-diggings therefore had the effect of breaking down Old World social distinctions and created a cohesive force of "mateship".<sup>91</sup> In the hard life of the diggings the men learned to rely on one another, and when one of them was treated unjustly by the authorities they all reacted in a common cause.<sup>92</sup> This ideal of cooperation, of "sticking by your mate" favoured the development of unionization. As a later secretary of the AMA put it: "Unionism came to the Australian bushman as a religion . . . It had in it a feeling of mateship which he understood already, and which always characterised the action of one 'white man' to another . . ."<sup>93</sup>

But regardless of circumstance, the early diggers were primarily preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth,<sup>94</sup> and as many of them moved from one mine to the next there was not much opportunity for formal organization.

In South Africa, although the gold-miners had the advantage of being concentrated on the Witwatersrand and formed the largest homogeneous section of the European working population, their trade unionism was firstly non-existent and later erratic and weakly developed. The prime reason for this was that they were initially indispensable to the Rand gold-mining operation. Their salaries were necessarily high to attract them – rated as the highest in the world and forming the largest single running cost on the mines<sup>95</sup>. Their working conditions were reasonable, and the magnates realised that any form of exploitation would be counter-productive. The magnates were also initially responsible for fostering a superior attitude among the skilled miners as prominent Rand magnate, Lionel Phillips, explained: "... it is customary for mechanics in South Africa to be attended by one or more black men, who carry and hand them their tools . . . it would be degradation in the eyes of a white man if . . . he performed work of a similar character to the natives."<sup>96</sup>

The latter policy would eventually change, but to begin with the immigrant skilled miner was not required to do the heavy physical or "dirty" work which he had formerly had to do himself at "home". Furthermore, the pioneering spirit prevalent among the miners tended to play down discomforts and factors such as the mortality rate. One worker declared that grievances were, in comparison with those experienced in Europe, "crumpled rose leaves to thorns".<sup>97</sup>

Figures for the early 1890s indicate that the immigrant white skilled miners had mainly come to the Rand in a temporary capacity: Miners with families here = 13%; miners with families abroad = 33%; unmarried miners = 54%<sup>98</sup>. They were not inclined to become involved in local affairs. In addition, unlike their Australian counterpart, the ZAR government was regarded as sympathetic towards the miners, because it was prepared to negotiate about their grievances and uphold their rights against the capitalists.<sup>99</sup>

The impression must not however be created that the gold-miners were totally impartial and submissive during these early years, as even in the prevailing and relatively unique cir-

91. Crowley, p. 139; Turnbull, p. 108.

92. Hodge, pp. 167; *Australia comes of age*, p. 146.

93. *Australia comes of age*, pp. 154-155.

94. B. Kent, "Agitators on the Victorian Gold Fields, 1851-1854", *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Eureka Supplement, (2nd ed., Melbourne, 1965), p. 1; Clark, *Selected Documents*, p. 2.

95. *Report of the Mining Industry Commission 1907-1908*, p. 94, par. 13; W.T. Stead, *Review of Reviews*, June, 1904, p. 562; Jacobsson, p. 86.

96. T. Burt, *A Visit to the Transvaal: Labour White Black and Yellow* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1905), pp. 43-46.

97. Pseudo-Africanus, "Johannesburg", *The National Review*, vol. XL, January 1903, p. 806.

98. R.K. Cope, *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews* (Cape Town, n.d.), p. 30.

99. J.R. MacDonald, *What I saw in South Africa, September and October 1902* (London, n.d.), pp. 106-107, 115; Thorpe, pp. 234-237.

cumstances, there were signs of labour activity in the form of strikes and protest action. Yet, again during this early period strikes and protests were short-lived and narrowly focussed in both Australia and South Africa. They were usually spontaneous objections to immediate or local issues and therefore did not call for the formation of a permanent united workers' front.<sup>100</sup>

Within a month after the official implementation of the diggers licence in Ophir, New South Wales, 300 diggers met to demand a reduction of the fee from 30s a month to 7s 3d,<sup>101</sup> while a similar protest took place in Victoria, only two months after the gold regulations were issued there.<sup>102</sup> With an average monthly earning of £8<sup>103</sup>, the licence fee was a heavy burden to those who did not "strike it lucky", and thus evasion of payment followed. Although the licence caused discontent, the men were far more annoyed by the manner in which the fee was collected than by the actual amount.<sup>104</sup> The police troopers who were responsible for the collection were inexperienced convict wardens – and sometimes ex-convicts themselves – and were ruthless and often unjust in their "licence hunts".<sup>105</sup> Hostility arose on the fields between policemen and diggers, which stemmed from the early convict days and which led to numerous digger outbursts. The diggers declared that "In England the police were really a protection to the people, in Victoria their highest aim seems to be to oppress them".<sup>106</sup> At Forest Creek the diggers even went as far as establishing a Mutual Protection Association to carry out the functions that would normally have been exercised by the police.<sup>107</sup>

The settlement of mining disputes, such as the boundary between claims, were also a cause for complaint as they were often unjust and entirely irrevocable.<sup>108</sup> This oppression made many miners conscious of their lack of political rights which increased antagonism towards the distant government and its local servants.<sup>109</sup> Chartist demands such as the vote and no taxation without representation resounded on the gold-fields, but the miners were only concerned with these issues in as far as they affected solutions to their immediate problems.<sup>110</sup> In each of the digger protests some form of provocative official action played a role, while the diggers were increasingly intent on obtaining social justice. Numerous short-lived associations and societies were established for this purpose, such as the Miners' Association, Anti Gold Licence Society, Gold Diggers' Union and Gold Fields Reform League.<sup>111</sup> In 1853 a rebellion of hundreds of miners at Turon was narrowly averted; later that year, unrest increased at the Ovens, spread to Bendigo in August, and peaked in 1854 with the infamous rebellion at Ballarat: the Eureka stockade.<sup>112</sup>

The latter event has been heralded in Australian labour history as the foundation of the working man's liberty and rights, and the birthplace of democracy. Subsequently, however, historians have refuted this, pointing out that its leaders were in fact small capitalists them-

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100. Buckley and Wheelwright, pp. 164-165; Harris, p. 13.

101. Higgins, p. 294.

102. Crowley, pp. 140-141.

103. R. Cameron, *Australia: History and Horizons* (London, 1971), pp. 194-195.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

105. A.G.L. Shaw, *The Story of Australia* (5th edition, London, 1983), p. 125.

106. Kent, p. 13.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

108. Kent, p. 1; Blainey, *The Rush that never ended*, p. 51.

109. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended*, p. 41.

110. Kent, p. 13.

111. Kent, pp. 4, 13-15.

112. M. Higgins, "Near Rebellion on the Turon Goldfields in 1853", *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 68, part 4, March 1983; Hodge, p. 165; Kent, p. 6.

selves.<sup>113</sup> The Ballarat miners had formed a Gold Diggers' Association and the Ballarat Reform League to plead for fairer treatment, but to no avail. In November the riot was triggered by the unjust verdict on the murder of a digger, and the increasingly brutal methods of the new mining commissioner, Charles Hotham. Led by Peter Lalor, the miners took an oath "to stand truly by each other and to fight to defend [their] rights and liberties".<sup>114</sup> About 15% of the miners at Ballarat took up arms and constructed a primitive stockade on Eureka Hill, hoisted the blue and white flag of the southern cross and burnt their licences in defiance of the troops. In time the thousands of supporters dwindled to a mere 150, when on 3 December 400 troopers attacked and killed 30 of the protesters. Within two weeks of the event the Colonial Secretary resigned, martial law was repealed and shortly afterwards the 13 Eureka prisoners had their sentences repealed.<sup>115</sup> Eventually more democratic administration was introduced on the goldfields: the diggers' monthly licence was replaced by an annual miners' right, costing only £1, and granting the bearer the vote; an export duty was imposed on gold to raise funds for administration, and courts were established on the goldfields.<sup>116</sup> Even after the introduction of universal suffrage, only about 20% of the miners bothered to vote – Eureka was yet another attempt by the diggers to assert their individuality and protect their dignity against an inept government.<sup>117</sup>

Once the diggers' licence had been removed, the focus of protest moved to the Chinese. Since the opening of the goldfields, the Chinese had arrived in increasing numbers and comprised the largest group of foreign nationals, and the only sizeable non-European one.<sup>118</sup> By the late 1850s the Chinese made up 4% of the country's entire population, having increased from 2 000 in 1853 to 40 000 in 1857, and on some goldfields they exceeded the European population by 12:1.<sup>119</sup> On the diggings the Chinese lived in their own communities and kept to themselves. They were diligent workers and were generally content to work ground that had been abandoned by the Europeans. The latter factor therefore discredited the miners' "bread out of our wives' and childrens' mouths" protests.<sup>120</sup> The diggers accused the Chinese of immorality, crime and of exploiting the country's wealth, but the principle grievance was that at a time when the yield of gold was declining, they feared Chinese competition.<sup>121</sup>

This intense hostility to the Chinese miners was apparent in countless protests to the government for prohibition or restriction of their immigration, as well as violent attacks.<sup>122</sup> The most renowned of these were at Bendigo (1854) and Lambing Flats (1861), where the Chinese "... unarmed and defenceless were struck down in the most brutal manner by bludgeons . . . and pick handles"<sup>123</sup>, while their living quarters were destroyed. If they were apprehended their pigtails were set on fire. The result of this agitation was the introduction of anti-Chinese legislation in all the colonies, which imposed heavy fees on immigrants.<sup>124</sup>

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113. Shaw, p. 126.

114. Crowley, p. 142.

115. R.D. Walshe, "The Significance of Eureka in Australian History", *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Eureka Supplement (2nd edition, Melbourne, 1965), pp. 106–107.

116. Hodge, p. 166; *Australia comes of age*, p. 147.

117. G. Serle, "The Causes of Eureka", *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* (2nd ed., Melbourne, 1965), p. 48; Shaw, pp. 126–127; Kent, p. 23.

118. Ward, p. 104.

119. Koutsoukis, p. 70; Cameron, p. 186; Cotter, p. 128.

120. Cameron, p. 186; Cotter, pp. 128–129.

121. Clark, *A short History of Australia*, pp. 115, 163.

122. Cotter, p. 128.

123. Cotter, p. 128; Sutcliffe, pp. 52–53; Ward, p. 106.

124. Shaw, pp. 165–166; Turnbull, p. 101.

According to R. Markey the anti-Chinese campaign was the most sustained organizational experience of the working class, and the notion of "economic threat" played a vital role in working class mobilization. The Chinese issue was also to feature in the establishment of the Amalgamated Miners' Association.<sup>125</sup>

Six years after the Witwatersrand gold-mines had come into operation, the miners first encountered the policy of 'dilution of labour'. In 1892 some 2 000 miners protested against the Chamber of Mines scheme to import miners who would work at cheaper rates. They resolved to form a union, intended to represent all the Rand miners in its opposition to an overcrowded labour market, which it was believed would result in a lowering of wages. The scheme was subsequently dropped, but the Labour Union, also known as the Witwatersrand Mine Employees and Mechanics Union, remained in existence for a further three years.<sup>126</sup> Its leaders upheld a moderate policy, which clearly stated that "they did not wish to fight any battle with capital" and stressed the old unionism policy of "working in harmony with the owners". Leadership was weak and membership never exceeded 600. The reason for this according to Pseudo-Africanus was that "... in a country so new and self-created [there were] no tyrannies to fight against ... and so the pretexts for organization are as light as air."<sup>127</sup> Further evidence of their favourable situation was the attitude of the ZAR government. It submitted the draft mining regulations to the Labour Union for consideration and accepted 20 of the 24 proposals put forward by the men.<sup>128</sup>

Before the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War five minor strikes lasting between no more than a few days or a couple of weeks, occurred on individual mines in reaction to attempts by management to alter existing conditions. In all four cases, management was quick to withdraw the proposed change and work continued as usual. On the eve of the war a second feeble attempt was made at miner unionization with the formation of the Rand Mine Workers' Union. It too maintained an old unionist policy of moderation, but then disappeared with everything else in the war.<sup>129</sup>

### The miners' trade unions

As circumstances and conditions began to alter on the Australian and South African gold-mines, so did the calibre and form of miner organization. The formation of the first enduring miner unions, the Amalgamated Miners' Association (AMA) and the Transvaal Miners' Association (TMA), marked a new phase in the history of the gold-mines. In Australia the gradual transition in the method of mining had, as indicated above, led to a change from individual enterprise to collectivist endeavour. By the 1870s wage earning miners on individual mines successfully began to organize local unions for three main purposes: better wages, shorter hours and the exclusion of the Chinese from underground work. Another important reason for the establishment of these unions was the need for security and protection in view of the high level of injury and mortality, as a result of deep level accidents and diseases such as tuberculosis.

The first gold-miners to organize associations were the Bendigo miners (1871). Unions were also formed at other deep level mines in Victoria, namely Clunes and Stalwell.<sup>130</sup> These

125. R. Markey, "Populist Politics," in A. Curthoys and A. Markus (eds), *Who are our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class* (Australia, 1978), pp. 67-69.

126. *The Standard and Diggers News*, 8.10.1892, 'The Labour Union', p. 3.

127. Pseudo-Africanus, pp. 805-806.

128. E.B. Rose, *White Labour in the Transvaal* (Pamphlet, London, 1901), pp. 9-10.

129. Cope, p. 48.

130. Blainev, *The Rush that never ended*, p. 299; Sutcliffe, p. 46.



unions' demands were primarily of an immediate and local nature, and partly the result of geographical isolation and the miners' persistent individualism. There was little concern for a broader gold-mining organization at this stage.<sup>131</sup> Eventually, in 1874 a "remarkable feat"<sup>132</sup> was accomplished when twelve of these mine unions met at Bendigo to form the Amalgamated Miners' Association of Victoria. It was regarded as the first union "distinctly native to the country,"<sup>133</sup> despite the fact that it was formed on the lines of the National Miners Association of Great Britain. The amalgamation consisted of twelve branches, had just under 2 000 members and over £1 000 in funds. Its first major achievement was the acceptance of certain mining reforms and regulations made regarding ventilation, the acceptance of an 8 hour shift and inspection in the Regulation of Mines and Machinery Act of 1877.<sup>134</sup> It must be noted that although the AMA was intended to be all-inclusive (*i.e.* to recruit, according to new unionism principles, all men who worked in or around the mines) many of the more skilled artisans, such as the engine drivers, refused to relinquish allegiance to their craft unions. This sectionalism remained an obstacle in the union leaders' attempt to unionize the entire industry.<sup>135</sup>

After three years the AMA of Victoria was almost defunct, with only three branches still affiliated and 250 registered members.<sup>136</sup> In 1878 it was again revived when the miners at Creswick were threatened with a wage cut and the use of Chinese labour underground. By 1881 the AMA had exceeded its original strength and could boast of numerous successes. Of the 29 strikes it was involved in during the 16 years before 1890, it had been victorious in all but one. The issues contested were almost all of a defensive nature, including 13 to resist wage cuts; 2 against the introduction of Chinese, and 3 demands for shorter hours.<sup>137</sup> This pointed to the moderate agenda of the union. Strike action had to be agreed to by the central body as well as the allocation of strike funds, which in the 18 year period only amounted to £6 614 out of a total expenditure of £100 630.<sup>138</sup> A further index of this moderation was the predominant usage of its funds for accident, sickness and funeral relief.<sup>139</sup>

Furthermore, in 1886 at the request of the AMA a General Committee representing an equal number of mine owners and mine-employees was formed to discuss difficulties which might arise in connection with mining. The miners did not use their union as a "battering ram" against employers and the agenda was still very much of the old union type. The emphasis remained one of collaboration with rather than antagonism between labour and capital.<sup>140</sup> The mine owners however, did not always take kindly to union tactics and they often fought back using both boycotts and blacklisting.<sup>141</sup>

The next major feat in the early history of the AMA – which was an even greater reflection of new unionism principles – was the amalgamation of all the miners, of all metals, in all the Australian colonies, including New Zealand.<sup>142</sup> At the end of the 1880s the secretary, a deep alluvial miner from Creswick, William Spence, managed to unite all the different types of min-

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131. Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 131.

132. Serle, *The rush to be rich*, p. 111.

133. Hume, p. 31.

134. Sutcliffe, p. 46.

135. Turner, p. 11.

136. Serle, *The rush to be rich*, p. 111; Crowley, p. 187.

137. Clark, *Selected Documents*, p. 760.

138. Fitzpatrick, p. 208; Serle, *The rush to be rich*, p. 112.

139. Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 172; Clark, *Selected Documents*, p. 759.

140. Fitzpatrick, p. 208.

141. *Australia comes of age*, p. 152.

142. Searle, *The rush to be rich*, p. 112.

ing – gold, silver, copper and coal – into one body under the central control of an intercolonial council, renamed the AMA of Australasia.<sup>143</sup> However, this amalgamation of some 30 000 members did not attain complete solidarity, because regional differences persisted and intercolonial branches retained virtually complete autonomy.<sup>144</sup> Though in theory the miners had formed a “mass union” the new intercolonial industrial union’s programme and methods were still considerably moderate.<sup>145</sup> The new union did not condone violence and preferred negotiations to strikes. Their main object was “to maintain the privileges and customs of the industry” as the AMA rulebook put it.<sup>146</sup> And as union leader Spence stated, “the policy of the union is conciliation [as] beneath the surface of all labour disputes the interests of capital and labour are identical”.<sup>147</sup> Socialist theory had also become apparent in Australia, yet the trade unions did not adopt a doctrinaire socialist outlook, favouring a more idealist view of socialism which envisaged “a rational form of society which would come into being simply as a result of sufficient people being persuaded of its merits”.<sup>148</sup> However, trade unionism was stronger in Australia than any other country at that time.<sup>149</sup>

The change that took place in South Africa had nothing to do with the method of mining, but rather with the method of employment. Once the mines were well established and the increased proficiency of cheaper black miners became apparent, far fewer white skilled miners were required to work on the mines. This was made clear by Lionel Phillips, who after the South African War declared: “. . . the system of maintaining the aristocracy of the white man, which we have always endeavoured to pursue, is doomed. . . this unique and artificially maintained position is bound to go. . .”<sup>150</sup> In short, the magnates intended the black miner to become the “real miner” and thus save much of the money paid to white workers for work that they did not perform.<sup>151</sup>

The reason for this change in attitude was not only an attempt to increase profits, but also to recoup losses after the war. In addition, Chinese indentured labour was imported ostensibly to supplement the post-war labour shortage – yet another innovation which pointed to the gradual dilution of expensive white skilled labour. Accordingly, there were intermittent reductions in white skilled wage rates and increases in work load. The relative solidarity between employer and employee in the pre-war period had been drastically disturbed.<sup>152</sup>

Other grievances which became manifest after the war included suspicion of the new Crown Colony government and its subsequent “state-capital alliance”, the ravages of miners’ phthisis and the employers’ determination not to submit to the men’s demands. The skilled white miners’ privileged position was severely threatened, and therefore the extent of their labour activity – including union organization and strike activity – became somewhat more pronounced.

The miners’ first tentative attempt to revive union organization took place in April 1902 after a successful six-week long strike against the introduction of piecework. Under the

143. Grundy, p. 220.

144. *Ibid.*, p. 220; Serle, *The rush to be rich*, p. 112.

145. Clark, *Selected Documents*, p. 734.

146. S. Macintyre, “The Making of the Australian Working Class: An historiographical Survey”, *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 18, no. 70-73, April 1978 – October 1979, p. 250.

147. Shaw, p. 172.

148. Buckley and Wheelwright, p. 178.

149. Ward, p. 142.

150. BRA: HE 153 L. Phillips Outgoing Correspondence: L. Phillips – J. Wernher, 18.5.1907.

151. E. Gitsham and J.C. Trembath, *A first Account of Labour Organization in South Africa* (Durban, 1926), p. 28.

152. Thorpe, pp. 241-256.

leadership of an ex-Cumberland coal miner, William Mather, the Transvaal Miners' Association (TMA) was formed. It bore a marked resemblance to its pre-war predecessor: exclusive membership was confined to white miners with blasting certificates.<sup>153</sup> In sharp contrast with the exceedingly large membership of the Australian unions, the TMA's membership never exceeded 1 000 before 1907.<sup>154</sup>

Later in 1902 the TMA was called in to assist the miners on the Village Main Reef Mine in their strike against an increase of work. They were expected to supervise three instead of two drills and six instead of five labourers, and although of secondary importance, the skilled workers also displayed an aversion to the influx of unskilled white labour. Other demands that were made were the call for the 8 hour day and increased wages. The incident only served to emphasize the TMA's weakness and sectionalism – not only was there a lack of support from other mine related unions, but dissension within the ranks of the union itself was also rife. After three weeks the strike was called off.<sup>155</sup>

In the intervening years before 1907 there were only five strikes. These were of minor importance and never lasted longer than a few days, and did not require the intervention of the TMA, which had virtually ceased to exist.<sup>156</sup> The small number of strikes was a true reflection of the peculiar industrial conditions that prevailed in South Africa. Although the magnates were committed to reducing the white skilled miners' wages and their numbers in the post-war period, there were still occasions for restraint. This latter factor partly explains the lack of concerted labour activity among the skilled miners.

Donald Denoon attributes the limited number of struggles in the post-war period to restraint on the part of the magnates in their desire to create "a semblance of unanimity in the English-speaking white community" regarding support for the importation of the Chinese.<sup>157</sup> According to the proviso of the Bloemfontein Conference (1902) permission to import Asian labour would only be granted if it were demonstrated that white opinion in the Transvaal favoured the policy.

Another occasion for restraint followed in the 1907 elections. Again the capitalists did not want to alienate potential political supporters, and so the mine directors urged that nothing be done "which would incite the feelings of the white men until the elections [were] over".<sup>158</sup> There was a total lack of strike action during 1904, the year the political mouthpiece of the Chamber of Mines, the Progressive Party, was formed. These strategies strengthened the claim that the Rand magnates were the "smartest politicians in the world".<sup>159</sup>

The pro-Chinese campaign launched by the magnates did not go unopposed. Agitation amongst the white workers continued throughout the Chinese's indentured years, as experience in Australia had indicated to some of the miners that the Chinese, "unlike the raw African, were apt and willing and mentally alert" and were thus a "far more formidable competitor".<sup>160</sup> The campaign against the Chinese indicated a similarity between the attitude of labour in the two countries.<sup>161</sup> However, on the Rand men who openly declared their opposi-

153. *Forward*, 12.11.1943, "Inside Story of South African Labour", p. 5.

154. A. Crawford, "The Class War in South Africa", *International Socialist Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, August 1911, p. 77.

155. *The Star*, 26.9.1902, "Labour Dispute: Village Main Reef", p. 7.

156. Harris, pp. 16–17.

157. D.J.N. Denoon, "The Transvaal Labour Crisis", *Journal of African History*, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 489.

158. BRA HE 145 L. Phillips Incoming Correspondence: H. Eckstein – L. Phillips, 20.4.1906, p. 5.

159. TAD PM(T) 36 Correspondence Numbered 77/8/07, Note of an Interview which a Deputation of Strikers had with the PM 22.06.1907, 11 a.m., p. 5.

160. Burt, p. 66.

161. Kennedy, p. 26.

tion to the scheme were ultimately to “quarrel with their bread and butter”, particularly in the case of those who held a responsible mining position.<sup>162</sup> While others who were more materialistically minded, were paid a shift’s wages and were brought by train to anti-Chinese meetings in order to stamp their feet and shout “We want Chinese!”<sup>163</sup> In 1906 the decision was taken to discontinue Chinese importation, and so after less than a decade of rigid control the Chinese were repatriated.

The white Rand workers did not muster a strong political front in the 1907 elections. Feeble attempts at organization were made by Labour representatives, but the internally divided trade unions did not make for a strong party, nor did the miners constitute a conspicuously influential element.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the few socialist societies that emerged on the Rand never managed to obtain support from the white labour aristocracy with their exclusionist policy.<sup>165</sup>

### First major strikes: 1890 and 1907

Thus, on the eve of the first major strike in Australia and South Africa, the respective miners’ trade unions had evolved into two starkly contrasting bodies. The Australian miners’ trade union had attained a formidable membership, was confident after continued gains and its policies were still relatively moderate although they had begun to embrace the idea of a broader workers’ alliance.<sup>166</sup> The Rand Miners’ Union, on the other hand, was virtually non-existent and had maintained a thoroughly exclusive and old unionist policy. The two large-scale strikes that took place in 1890 (Australia) and 1907 (South Africa) were both dismal failures for the workers, but to a large extent they served as catalysts to launch both movements into a more determined and active mobilization of labour.

The “1890 Maritime strike” in Australia was far more than just a strike on the waterfront. Of the 50 000 who were involved, half were shearers and a third miners. The causes of this series of strikes were manifold, but the central issue was the question of the rights of unionism. Employers in the shipping industry refused to allow the Marine Officers’ Association to affiliate with other labour organizations; inland, the shearers protested against the employment of non-union labour; and back on the waterfront, the wharf labourers refused to handle wool shorn by non-union workers.<sup>167</sup> The ensuing confrontation which demonstrated the strengths of Capital and Labour, as the employers evinced a determination to fight the matter out to “the bitter end”,<sup>168</sup> verged on total civil war. Riot Acts were read, troops called in, and sabotage and violent demonstrations followed. Union leaders were arrested, charged with conspiracy and were sentenced to long terms in gaol.<sup>169</sup>

The employers refused to negotiate with the unions except on condition of complete surrender. After two months of striking the AMA, whose members had struck work in sympathy with the Maritime Unions, decided to return to work. Generally, the various unions’ funds

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162. F.H.P. Creswell, “The Chinese in South Africa”, *The Independent Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, February 1904, p. 135.

163. Walker and Weinbren, p. 16.

164. Ticktin, pp. 202-207; Katz, p. 185.

165. Thorpe, pp. 79-80.

166. H. Rimmer and P. Sheldon, “‘Union Control’ against management Power: Labourers Unions in New South Wales before the 1890 Maritime Strike”, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 92, April 1989.

167. Shaw, p. 174; Fitzpatrick, pp. 220-221.

168. Sutcliffe, p. 92.

169. Clark, pp. 152-153.

were exhausted, and in view of the unlimited supply of unorganized labour, the strike was called off. This was the first of a series of disastrous strikes to befall Australian unionism in the first half of the 1890s.<sup>170</sup>

The ultimate defeat of these strikes accelerated the labour movement into the political arena. The unionists had hitherto been content to sit on the political sidelines and support those members who appeared least unsympathetic to them, but they now realized their only hope of success was to enter politics themselves.<sup>171</sup> The employers thought the trade unionists had been taught a lesson, but all that the leaders had learnt was the necessity to turn more decidedly to political participation. Increasingly they believed that only with their own organized representatives in parliament could they survive a struggle with the employers. Out of this came the formation of the Australian Labour Party, "one of the three oldest Labor parties in the world - and, arguably, in terms of unbroken formal organization - the very oldest", which has been a most powerful factor in Australian politics ever since.<sup>172</sup>

The major strike on the Witwatersrand was on a much smaller scale than its Australian counterpart. It involved only 4 000 workers, affected some 50 mines, lasted approximately three months and cost half a million pounds. However, within the context of the South African labour movement it was quite formidable.<sup>173</sup> The conventional reason given for its outbreak was the introduction by management of a system that increased the number of rock-drilling machines which had to be supervised by each white miner, from two to three, together with a reduction in contract rates.<sup>174</sup> However, there were a multiplicity of factors which caused the strike, including grievances that had emerged as early as 1902.

As we have noted, the post-war years had witnessed a new phase in the relationship between the mine owners and skilled labourers and, a deliberate effort had been made to dilute the labour force.<sup>175</sup> The magnates' policy of restraint was now something of the past and they braced themselves for a worker offensive against the "too costly inefficient white skilled miner". The strike commenced in much the same way as the earlier disputes. The men downed tools and approached management to negotiate concessions, but to no avail. An appeal was made to the 300 "strong" TMA, whose finances at the time were nil.<sup>176</sup> Meetings were set up and within a month 50 mines had joined the strike.

From the outset, the strikers had attempted to negotiate with the Chamber of Mines, but without success. Mass meetings, organized marches, picketing and regular deputations to the government characterized the strike. In the latter and more desperate half of the strike there were outbursts of violence, but the typical trade union sectionalism hampered the strike action. The strike lost momentum and the strikers lost their jobs. At a well attended meeting at the end of July 1907 the strike was called off and the strike leaders emphasized that "... the strike had taught them one great lesson, and that was the need of being thoroughly organized and forming a compact body before embarking on a fight with Capital, and their experience of the past three months would prove invaluable to them in the future."<sup>177</sup> Ironically, the magnates expressed similar sentiments when one of their members, Louis Julius Reyersbach of the Chamber, commented "... we hope that the men have learnt a lesson and that they will

170. Rimmer and Sheldon, p. 274; *Australia comes of age*, pp. 157-158.

171. B. McKinlay, *The ALP: A short History of the Australian Labor Party* (Victoria, 1981), p. 7; Turnbull, pp. 106-107; Ward, p. 148.

172. *Australia comes of age*, p. 157; Lacour-Gayet, p. 248; Ward, p. 148; Turnbull, p. 106-107.

173. Thorpe, pp. 229-230.

174. *East Rand Express*, 11.5.1907, "The Miners' Strike", p. 1.

175. Rose, pp. 3-4.

176. Gitsham and Trembath, p. 28; Thorpe, pp. 105-107.

177. *The Transvaal Leader*, 30.7.1907, "After the Strike", p. 6.

be less foolish in future ..."<sup>178</sup> But the lesson they learnt was a far cry from what management intended.

Immediately after the strike, the TMA organizers across the Reef set about consolidating the work of the union. The main concern was the strengthening of the association in the various districts. A new executive was elected which declared itself determined to revive the union by organizing it along industrial, as opposed to the artisan lines. By the end of the decade the South African Labour Party had been firmly established due partly to the efforts of leading Transvaal mining trade unionists.<sup>179</sup>

### Conclusion

The Australian trade unionism which the Witwatersrand mining magnates so feared, was strong in numbers, but it was not as extreme or radical as they made out. During the latter part of the nineteenth century the British public had been continually told that Australia was a "hotbed of labour radicalism", both in terms of organized militancy and of legislative achievement. Conservatives in Britain viewed it with alarm, but the radicals were disappointed that the colony had not produced the socialistic trade unionism they had hoped for, nor did they consider that unionism had gone far enough.<sup>180</sup> The Australian labour movement was undoubtedly regarded internationally as one of the most advanced in the world, and was definitely more advanced than South African unionization, but its reputation rested on its "fortuitous success in raising living standards and reducing hours of work rather than on the extent of its industrial organization".<sup>181</sup>

It is therefore apparent, from this superficial overview, that although the trade unionism established in Australia and South Africa was imported from a common base (Britain), the respective local circumstances, such as the geological nature of the gold industry and the methods of extraction, the structure of the labour force and the origin of capital and hence control, as well as the political dispensation, shaped unionisms that were totally indigenized, and thus unique to each country.



178. *Annual Report of the Transvaal Chamber of Mines*, 1907, p. 33.

179. Katz, p. 190.

180. Goodwin, *The Image of Australia*, p. 162.

181. Turner, p. 7.