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Governments, Parliaments and Parties, Labour, Labour Movements and Strikes (Union of South Africa)

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In South Africa the period between 1914 and 1918 was one of intense political and industrial turmoil. It entailed two violent strikes, eventually suppressed by the South African government, a rebellion against the state by Afrikaner insurgents and the political realignment of white labour, as well as the first efforts to organise African labour. The ideological schism over the war and other issues which appeared in the white labour movement in 1915 was indeed the parting of the ways between left and right and would change the South African political landscape irreversibly.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Internationally the first two decades of the 20th century were an era of intense industrial strife, and no problem loomed as large as the [labour](#) question as the scope and gravity of [strikes](#) increased. Industrial enterprises became concentrated in huge businesses and those who ran them refused to make agreements that would allow unions to curtail their freedom. Without exception, these business enterprises were hostile to the principle of collective bargaining. Thus, action by workers tended to become political just at the time when the nature of the state was changing. As the state became more and more of an employer itself, with numerous officials and workers of its own, [governments](#) had to decide whether they should stand by while strikes spread to vital sectors of the nation's economy. A state whose railwaymen, postmen, and miners were on strike was threatened with paralysis and could therefore ill afford to stand aloof from industrial disputes.^[1]

In [South Africa](#), this period is characterised by political turmoil and trauma amongst its white citizens in two spheres. First, serious endemic industrial unrest and violence occurred when the labour movement and capital became involved in conflict over labour issues and for control of the country's industrial work force. The levels of violence in these conflicts were such that the government was repeatedly forced to intervene in the disputes and restore law and order, in some instances by imposing [martial law](#). Second, the outbreak of the First World War, and South Africa's involvement in the conflict, had a profound impact on Afrikaners and the white working class alike, entailing an [Afrikaner rebellion](#) and a realignment of Afrikaner politics, as well as an irreversible ideological split of the labour movement. In the South African scenario, therefore, the interests of government, political parties and the labour movement became intertwined in the run-up to and during the war.

2. The Strikes of 1913 and 1914

According to Elaine Katz, the worldwide trade union support of general strikes, as opposed to sectional strikes, and the constant advocacy of such strikes in trade union journals and newspapers sponsored by organised labour, had a profound impact on South Africa. Contemporary socialist and labour-sponsored newspapers and articles published in trade union journals, also made the South African white working class aware of the efficacy of strike action, which had become more prominent in [Britain](#), the [USA](#), Europe, and Australasia.^[2]

By the end of 1912, the general mood of unrest which permeated all groups of white workers in the mining industry signalled future trouble. The contributory causes of the miners' strike were the high cost of living on the Witwatersrand, the industrial hub of the South African economy with Johannesburg as its capital; the demand for the establishment of a minimum or subsistence wage for whites; white miners' fears of being replaced by cheap African labour and their insecurity of tenure; the demand for overtime payment and for night work in trades or industries; the demand for an eight-hour working day for all underground mine workers because of their susceptibility to miners' phthisis; the unhealthy mining conditions that created occupational miners' phthisis; and the refusal of the Chamber of Mines to recognise trade unions. These circumstances engendered a climate of

hostility and militancy among white workers. The immediate cause of the strike was the dismissal of five underground mechanics on the Kleinfontein gold mine near the town of Benoni who refused to comply with altered hours of work after they had lost their Saturday half-holiday. No settlement could be reached between the dismissed workers and the mine management. A strike was declared on 26 May 1913. By the beginning of July 1913, 19,000 white workers from the gold mines and power stations were on strike.^[3]

By July 1913 *The Worker*, official organ of the South African Labour Party (SALP), used war as a metaphor to describe the struggle between government and capital, on the one hand, and labour, on the other:

War having been declared in the shape of a general strike on the Rand...The War has now got to be fought, not 'to a finish'...but to a [moral] victory...We can still be 'constitutional', that is avoid common crime like murder or arson; but now it is war, the shoe has got to be made to pinch everywhere as tight as it will go, until they cry for mercy, once it is war, the things usually called murder, arson, destruction of property...become the principle occupation of armies, and there is no reason in principle, but only in tactics, why they should not be included in the various forms of acute pressure which have to be exercised in industrial war.^[4]

The strike became increasingly violent and culminated in acts of sabotage, arson, and bloodshed in Johannesburg. Gunsmiths' shops were looted by rioters and they sniped at police and security forces who were called in to clear the streets. At the climax of the strike, on 4 and 5 July 1913, a mob set fire to the goods shed at the Johannesburg station and burnt down the premises of *The Star* (the mouthpiece of the capitalist Chamber of Mines).^[5] As the new South African state's army, the Union Defence Force (UDF) was established only in July 1912 and therefore had not as yet been properly constituted to quell the industrial unrest of 1913, two former Anglo-Boer War generals, Prime Minister Louis Botha (1862-1919) and Jan Smuts (1870-1950), the Minister of Defence, were compelled to meet a deputation of strike leaders in the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg to effect a settlement.^[6] It was agreed that all the strikers would be reinstated and that a judicial committee would be appointed to investigate the workers' grievances. Altogether twenty-five people were killed during the unrest.^[7]

Although the forces of labour had apparently gained a victory, Smuts considered the settlement to be a personal humiliation and a defeat for the government forces. He was determined not to be caught unprepared again. He accelerated the organising and training of the UDF to be ready the next time a new industrial upheaval appeared.^[8]

Emboldened by the strike successes of 1913 and carried away by the new enthusiasm for trade unionism, many labour leaders became increasingly militant. The next clash between capital and labour in which the state would intervene was imminent. According to Cornelis Willem De Kiewiet (1902-1986), the general strike of 1914 was a continuation of the 1913 strike and aimed to protect the interests of white labour.^[9] Railwaymen had not come out on strike as a body in 1913. Yet their

dissatisfaction increased when it became evident by the end of that year that retrenchment of railway workshop employees had become an economic necessity. *The Worker* then declared that it was evident that the government was spoiling for a fight.^[10]

In reaction to the government announcements on railway retrenchments, the general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Railway and Harbour Servants, Hessel Poutsma (1866-1933), asked the Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions to call a general strike on the evening of 13 January 1914 involving over 20,000 strikers. Railway employees from workshops in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Durban, and Cape Town, as well as coal miners, gold miners, and typographical workers went on strike. This time, however, the government anticipated industrial action and was fully prepared to deal with the situation. 10,000 troops were mobilised and on 14 January 1914 martial law was proclaimed in certain magisterial districts of the Transvaal, the Free State, and Natal – the first time in South Africa since the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Commandos under former Anglo-Boer War Generals Koos De la Rey (1847-1914) and Christiaan Beyers (1869-1914) surrounded the Johannesburg Trades Hall where the strike leaders had entrenched themselves. A thirteen-pounder field-gun was trained on the Federation headquarters and an ultimatum was issued to the strikers to surrender. This was followed by the temporary arrest of prominent SALP leaders such as Frederic Hugh Page Creswell (1866-1948), William Henry Andrews (1870-1950), and Thomas Boydell (1882-1966) for contravening martial law regulations. By 18 January the strike had been crushed with the loss of two lives. General Smuts believed, although this was never proven, that certain foreign-born strike leaders were dangerous men who had revolutionary syndicalist ideas of fomenting [revolution](#) and of overthrowing the state by industrial action. Consequently, he had nine of these men deported to Britain. Although the government forces gained the upper hand in the industrial upheaval of 1914, Smuts over-estimated the outer limits of his powers under martial law with regard to the deported strike leaders. Therefore, Parliament had to sanction his actions with the passing of an indemnity act, despite rigorous protest from the SALP.^[11]

3. The Outbreak of the First World War and its Consequences for South African Labour

3.1. The Declaration of War and the Afrikaner Rebellion of 1914-1915

South Africa, as a British dominion, entered the First World War through Britain's declaration of hostilities against Germany in August 1914. The suppression of the 1913 and 1914 industrial strikes gave the fledgling UDF at least some operational experience. Britain requested that [South Africa invade German South West Africa](#) to seize the colony's radio stations and harbours that could be used by Germany's naval raiders who might threaten shipping in the southern hemisphere.

However, only twelve years after the Boers' defeat at the end of the Anglo-Boer War, support and assistance to their former British foe was a pill too bitter to swallow for many Afrikaner [nationalists](#). Former Anglo-Boer War General J.B.M. Hertzog (1866-1942), who broke from Botha and Smuts' party in 1912 to form the National Party in July 1914, objected to any support of British [imperialism](#)

and fondly remembered German empathy during the Boers' struggle. These feelings were shared by other former Anglo Boer War generals such as Beyers, who had been the Commandant-General of the UDF in 1914, De la Rey, Christiaan De Wet (1854-1922), Jan Kemp (1872-1946), and Manie Maritz (1876-1940).

By the end of October 1914 a total of around 11,500 armed Boer rebels had been mobilised by Beyers and Kemp (who resigned their commissions from the UDF), De Wet, and Maritz in an insurrection against the state. Hertzog's Nationalists avoided direct involvement in the rebellion but sympathised with it. Louis Botha, the South African Prime Minister, used a force of 32,000 loyalists, mostly Afrikaners, to crush the rebellion. By January 1915 most of the rebels had been rounded up. According to an official government report, around 1,000 persons were killed or wounded during the rebellion.^[12]

3.2. Splitting the SALP: The Party's Right-wingers and Leftists

The outbreak of the First World War would have fatal political consequences for the unity of the SALP.^[13] While in September 1914 the SALP's administrative council still endorsed the international socialist position of neutrality towards the war, the editor of *The Worker*, Wilfred Wybergh (1868-?), and friend of Creswell, the party leader, supported the South African government's resolve to invade German South West Africa by August 1914.^[14] Creswell also served in the successful South African military campaign in German South West Africa as a major.^[15]

Still, the outbreak of the First World War polarised the SALP. A number of anti-war radicals responded to the pro-war group within the party by forming a War on War League by September 1914 in Johannesburg. The League required its members to "pledge themselves to oppose this or any other war at all times and at all costs." Its membership was drawn from adherents to the (South African) Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which linked up with the IWW of Chicago in the USA, and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and included personalities such as Andrew Dunbar (1879-1964), a strike leader. Both the local IWW and SLP represented a strand of local anarchism and syndicalism and were noted for their principled internationalism. The groups concurred on the need for an interracial, revolutionary One Big Union, so breaking with the traditions of mainstream white labour represented by the SALP. The War on War League also drew SALP members who were radicalised by the 1913 strike such as Colin Wade (1875-1921), Philip Roux (1875-?), Sidney Bunting (1873-1936), and David Ivon Jones (1883-1924). The League also produced a four-page weekly, *The War on War Gazette*, that appeared from 19 September 1914 and was edited by Bunting.^[16]

The War on War Gazette took issue with claims that the Allied side was fighting for democracy against the militarism and autocracy of the Central Powers. According to the *Gazette*, the Allied governments were themselves guilty of murderous labour repression, anti-Semitic policies and dictatorship in Russia, and "a slave trade in Africa."^[17]

The War on War League also tried, in vain, to prevent the Afrikaner Rebellion. As a form of war, accompanied by violence and bloodshed, the League condemned the insurrection, although it had sympathy for the initial rationale of the Rebellion as a group of people who protested against the Botha government's declaration of war. The League suggested to the SALP that they should cooperate to send a deputation to De Wet and Beyers to persuade them to end the uprising but such deputation never materialised. The League even offered its services to Smuts as Minister of Defence and to Lord Sydney Charles Buxton (1853-1934), the Governor General of South Africa, to act as mediator between the government and the rebels. Furthermore, the League requested a meeting with the Governor General and to summons Parliament to discuss action against the rebels. However, both requests were refused. The League tried in vain to obtain information from Hertzog, who was in sympathy with their cause, about the rebels' demands. The War on War League was in favour of a round table conference between the fighting groups because they were strongly opposed to the violent suppression of the Rebellion.^[18] Therefore, *The War on War Gazette* took a reconciliatory tone towards the Rebellion issue:

What does this "smash" em' policy mean? Does it solve any problem or remove any grievances? Did martial law in January and the deportations wipe away any of the railwaymen's complaints? Force settles nothing. It brings in its train misery and hatred and unrest...Force is no answer.^[19]

However, the War on War League interfered too much in a sensitive issue for the government and in November 1914, after a bare three months of publication, the *Gazette* was suppressed by the censor.^[20] In June 1915, Creswell returned from the German South West Africa campaign and issued a "See-It-Through" manifesto that called for the SALP's full support of the Allied war effort. Initially, the stance towards the war was split fairly evenly between the pro- and anti-war camps among the party's branches. However, the sinking of the British ocean liner Lusitania by a German U-boat with a loss of 1,198 passengers and crew in May 1915 finally tilted the scales in favour of Creswell and the pro-war faction in the SALP. Matters came to a head at a special conference of the SALP from 22 to 24 August 1915 in Johannesburg. Creswell's "See-It-Through" resolution was put to a vote and the pro-war position carried the vote by eighty-two to twenty-six votes. Following the resounding defeat of the War on War League, sixteen prominent party members, including Andrews (chair), Gabriel Weinstock (treasurer), Jones (secretary), and Wade walked out of the conference singing the "Red Flag." Bunting left the SALP a while later.^[21]

The dissidents regrouped as the International League of the South African Labour Party and on 10 September 1915 launched their own weekly, *The International*, with David Ivon Jones as the first editor. The stated aims of the new formation showed that its concerns were far broader than the war issue. These were to "propagate the principles of International Socialism and anti-militarism, and to promote and strengthen International Socialist unity and activity." On 22 September the anti-war grouping decided to sever all connection with the SALP and reconstitute itself as an independent International Socialist League (ISL).^[22] According to Lucien Van der Walt, the ISL quickly moved

towards syndicalism, with the ideas of [Daniel de Leon \(1852-1914\)](#) and the Chicago IWW.^[23]

3.3. The “Khaki” election of 1915

The so-called “khaki” or “pro-British” general election of 20 October 1915 was one of the bitterest elections to be held in South Africa up to that point.^[24] The bloody worker casualties of the 1913 mining strike and Smuts’ severe suppression of the 1914 general strike promised political fortune for the SALP in the 1915 general election. More and more Afrikaner workers from the [urban](#) Afrikaner working class were joining the ranks of the SALP. Indeed, the party had been on the crest of a wave of success by the early months of 1914, winning four parliamentary by-elections and gaining a majority of one over all other parties in the Transvaal Provincial Council. Even its opponents conceded that the SALP could increase its parliamentary representation in the upcoming general election. However, as explained before, the outbreak of the First World War on the eve of the 1915 general election was fatal for the unity of the SALP; hence the elections would hold disastrous consequences for the party and white labour politics.^[25]

The SALP was routed by the election results. Of the forty-four candidates the party pushed in the field, only four managed to win parliamentary seats. Creswell, the party leader, who was nominated as a candidate in two constituencies was defeated in both. Louis Botha’s South African Party won fifty-four, the Unionist Party (UP) forty and the newly found National Party (NP) of General Hertzog twenty-seven seats. The defeated Labour candidates were mostly beaten by the pro-British Unionists. Due to its initial wavering to take a definite stand on the war issue, the pro-UP press effectively succeeded in making the SALP’s loyalty to Britain suspect among the voters. To top it all, the SALP’s eventual pro-war resolve drove those Afrikaners whose support it had started to win after the strikes of 1913 and 1914 into the hands of the fast-growing NP.^[26] Also the ISL, who put up two candidates in the election, fared dismally. Bill Andrews and AJ Clark got sixty-three and seventy-seven votes, respectively. Amongst the white working class of the Witwatersrand, the League’s anti-war policies and pro-African worker position were extremely unpopular and regarded as a heresy; its candidates were heckled at election meetings.^[27]

4. The ISL’s Activities during the War Years

In the period between 1916 and the end of the First World War, the ISL’s role in labour activism was to put its programme of interracial and revolutionary unionism to the test. The labour unrest of the time was shaped by both international and local factors. Internationally, the central event was the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#). Within South Africa, the sharp rise in the cost of living played an important role in local unrest. In early 1917, the ISL helped to establish the Durban Indian Workers’ Industrial Union, also a syndicalist union that brought together a number of industries, which was one of the very first unions amongst local Indians.^[28]

and classes were run by League members such as Bunting and Dunbar. At the end of September, Bunting and Jones were involved in launching the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA). Modelled on the IWW, the IWA was the first union for African workers in South Africa.^[29] The first African member of the ISL had already been recruited in 1916. He was Thomas Thibedi, a schoolteacher.^[30] The ISL's 1918 leaflet, "The Bolsheviks are Coming," was evidently directed at Africans in Natal province. 10,000 copies of the leaflet were distributed by the IWA, aided by the ISL, and appeared in *isiZulu* and *Sesotho*. The leaflet called for breaking down the colour bar and tribalism, organising African workers, and the seizure of the means of production by workers.^[31]

The ISL's opposition to racial discrimination and prejudice alienated many white workers, resulting in growing levels of harassment and even violence. Its 1917 May Day rally took the quite unprecedented step of having an African speaker sharing the platform. The meeting was broken up by a mob, while the League's weekly public meetings came under attack from ex-soldiers, often organised by a group called the "Comrades of the Great War."^[32]

Consequently, the ISL was less adept at recruiting members from the white working class. In the mid-1917 Transvaal provincial council elections, Andrews and Bunting, the League's candidates, lost resoundingly, forfeiting their deposits and receiving 335 and seventy-one votes respectively.^[33] The ISL was more successful in drawing support from immigrant Baltic Jews who were often strongly influenced by radical politics. Many were also influenced by anarchism, syndicalism, and the (socialist) Jewish *Bund*. A large and active "Yiddish-speaking branch" of the ISL was constituted in August 1917.^[34]

5. Conclusion

The outbreak of the First World War and the immediate run-up period prior to the war was traumatic for South African society, politics, and labour in particular. The subsequent events, including violent strikes, a rebellion, political schisms and a water-shed election, realigned South African politics and would have a profound impact especially on the white electorate for a number of decades in the post-war period. Through the sinews of industrial action, rebellion and war, the divergent lives and political actions of a number of prominent South African personalities became intertwined during the early phase of 20th century South African history.

The suppression of the strikes of 1913 and 1914, the concomitant radicalisation of white labour, as well as the austere economic conditions in the gold mine industry during the war years would have a profound and irreversible impact on the white South African labour movement. In July 1921 the Communist Party of South Africa, which would, *inter alia*, strive towards a non-racial South African proletariat was founded in Cape Town. The ISL was absorbed as a core element in the new party.^[35] In 1922 new battle lines were drawn for the biggest clash in South African industrial history – the Rand Revolt – when the white proletariat again confronted the South African state and fought for a

“white South Africa.” A post-1918 gold mine profitability crisis compelled mining capitalists to replace unionised skilled white workers with cheaper African labour which resulted in militant white resistance. Drawing on both Boer military traditions and the recent world war experience of veterans, the strike commandos fought government forces in semi-conventional pitched battles involving entrenched positions in the worker stronghold of Fordsburg. Although a futile clash, it expressed a desire for an order in which white workers would be considered of equal importance to other social classes composing the white community and guaranteed protection against the impoverishing notion of exploitative capitalism.^[36]

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36. ↑ See Krikler, Jeremy: *White Rising: The 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa*, Jeppestown 2005, pp. 50-77; Hyslop, Jonathan: *Martial Law and Military Power in the construction of the South African state: Jan Smuts and the "Solid Guarantee of Force" 1899-1924*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22/2 (June 2009), pp. 260-264.

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