

**THE HOMEBOAT STRIKE OF 1925:
BRITISH SEAMEN AND SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITY REACTIONS(1)**

by

Baruch Hirson

The Strike Across the Seas

On 1 August 1925, British seamen, on shore or on the high seas, had their monthly wages cut from £10 to £9, on the initiative of Havelock Wilson, General President of the National Sailors and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland (NSFU). Many who were about to embark in British ports stayed ashore; and those at sea, who landed in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and elsewhere, came out on strike and stayed out for periods up to three months.

A strike in the merchant marine in 1925 was a serious matter for the economies of Britain and the Dominions. Air travel was still exceptional: exporters of raw materials, agricultural produce, and manufactured goods relied on regular sailings; and mail and people went more commonly by ship. Any prolonged delay was bound to affect farmers, traders and manufacturers, but the intensity of the class struggle in the mid-twenties had reached a point where governments, and sections of the ruling class in Europe, were prepared to gamble with local economies in order to smash the working-class movement.

The seamen might have looked like a soft target for wage cuts in Britain, at a time when miners, railwaymen and others threatened to defy the government on the issue of wage cuts. There was large-scale unemployment in the merchant marine, and the NSFU, which negotiated directly with the shipowners through the National Maritime Board, made the offer of a wage cut, at a time when the trade union movement was fighting moves by the Baldwin government to secure such cuts in the coal and other industries. The seamen were split, occupationally, regionally, and politically: many belonged to the splinter Amalgamated Marine Workers Union (AMWU), which had its strongholds in Glasgow and Southampton, but also carried membership cards of the NSFU, which was required if they were to secure a berth in British ships.

Wilson relied on the fact that seamen in Britain could not sustain a strike, and in this he was correct. The seamen's action against wage cuts faltered, and seemed to collapse at an early stage. The NSFU opposed industrial action generally, and, having been party to the cuts, condemned the seamen who stayed out. The splinter union, the AMWU, was irresolute and repudiated the strike throughout August. All responsibility for the seamen's action was assumed by the National Minority Movement (NMM) (2), and it was they who set up the unofficial strike committee in London, consisting mainly of members of the NSFU, but including George Hardy, a non-sailor who led the transport section of the NMM. (3) However, despite the anger of the rank and file in Britain, the shipowners brought in scabs from the northern ports, and most ships sailed, albeit with some delays. Furthermore, the

tugboat men worked normally, and the AMWU, to which they belonged, refused to call them out throughout the seven weeks of the strike in Britain, on the grounds that they were governed by a separate agreement. (4)

The events in Britain will be discussed elsewhere, and it will be suggested there that this strike must be seen as a prelude to the general strike of 1926. That will also be the place to discuss the role of Havelock Wilson, Liberal MP, anti-socialist and Empire patriot, and the leading supporter of the Spencer union which broke away from the National Union of Miners in 1926 (5); the fact that the strike was as much against the NSFU as against the shipowners; and also the role of Emmanuel Shinwell, leader of the AMWU, whose irresolute and divisive role did not help the seamen in their struggle. (6) However, the factor which altered the course of the strike, and which no one had foreseen, was the action in overseas ports. Over and above the attempts to stop ships leaving Britain, some 10-15,000 men walked off the ships in the Dominions, and other ports, and it was their action, together with that of tens of thousands of men and women who supported them, that kept the strike going for two to three months.

The first stoppage was in Australia on 21 August, where the sailors were fortunate in obtaining the backing of the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) - themselves locked in battle with the government over local strike action. (7) There were few sailors available as scab labour in Australia, and the strike continued, with the aid of the SUA, for almost three months. Partly inspired by news of the action in Australia, and also because of their own anger at receiving reduced wages, there were strikes in other countries within the week.

South Africa: the Strike in Durban

On 24 August the Australian crew of the "Apolda", a steamer chartered by the South African government, demanded Australian wages and conditions, and the SUA demanded that this be adhered to, or all South African ships would be blacked. The event was not connected with the British seamen's strike, but in the charged atmosphere of the time this acted as a catalyst, and two days later the crews of three ships were reported to have come out on strike in Durban. The men agreed to work in port, but would not sail unless their grievances were attended to. There were reports that other crews were thinking of joining them. (8) From Durban the strike spread to Cape Town and, with stoppages in East London and in Lourenco Marques, there was only restricted sea traffic between the South African ports, or between the country and the outside world, for forty-seven days. (9)

Economically, the strike affected South Africa badly. To maintain a favourable balance of trade, it was estimated that South Africa needed a surplus of visible exports over visible imports of £15,000,000. As industrial exports were negligible, the only exports, besides gold and diamonds, were food and wool, and the optimum months for South Africa were from August to October. In 1925 plentiful rain, and control of pests and blight, had led to bumper crops after years of depression, and delays in shipping could severely affect the country and local farming communities. (10) Maize and oranges due for export were stored in the ports or the countryside - the oranges in danger of rotting, and the maize attracting rats, with the added danger of plague. (11) Imported food, including flour, was in short supply, and more general imports - some ordered for the Christmas season - were threatened. (12) Besides consumer goods, the overseas mail was delayed, and machinery required by the mines was either held up in Europe or lay in the ships' holds, in danger of rusting. (13) Gold was not exported; bunker coal, used by the shipping lines, was unsold; and ostrich feathers lay neglected in storage, while the European market for this fopery collapsed.

In the wake of the seamen's action, the government was drawn into the discussions on the strike. The Nationalist Party, under Hertzog, were initially opposed to the strike and supported the NSFU in its call for the seamen to return to their posts. However, being allied to Labour, they seem to have left all the talking to Creswell, the leader of the Labour Party, but it can be noted that the Nationalists, keen republicans as they were, would not have responded kindly to Havelock Wilson's claim that the strike was a plot by men who wished to break up the British Empire. The South African Labour Party (SALP) entered the field, both as member of the pact government and because it still had real links with the white trade unions. This threatened to tear the party apart: some, like Colonel Creswell, the Minister of Labour, wanted to end the strike, and offered to act as intermediaries between shipowners and seamen; others, like Walter Madeley and Morris Kentridge, expressed (at least initially) support for the seamen, and both factions had to balance the needs of workers with those of the farmers, who were the concern of their coalition partners. The white trade unions who contributed funds to the penniless seamen were also drawn into the conflict, and the money they donated was used in Cape Town to lever the seamen away from Communist Party (CPSA) supporters. The CPSA, which had a branch in Cape Town (but not noticeably in Durban), contacted the strikers on the initiative of one of its members, Solomon Biurski, and this alerted branches in several towns to form support groups, and conduct a campaign to back the strikers' demands.

However, that is running ahead of the story. First, we must look at the situation in Durban, and the agitation which followed the sentencing of two seamen on 28 August, the first dozens of such cases, for refusing to obey the lawful commands of the master. They received fourteen days' imprisonment with hard labour, suspended for two weeks, subject to their immediate return to duties. (14)

There was further unrest amongst the strikers when Reuters reported on 1 September that the Union Castle Line was recruiting 700 lascars in Bombay to replace existing crews. From that day, daily meetings were called at the Cape Town Gardens to put the sailor's case to the public, and this became the stamping ground of town councillor H H Kemp, and the paralysed ex-miner, Dan Simons, who more usually sold tobacco and cigarettes from his wheel chair near the Gardens. (15)

Kemp was expelled from the SALP in May 1924 when he opposed the official party nominee in the general election. He lost, and then called for the formation of a new party which would eliminate all Asiatics from South Africa. (16) There was a large crowd at the first meeting, and it was then that Simons, who "neglected his business", shouted support for the seamen, and organised a collection for the six men who were due to appear in court the next day. Henceforth, Simons presided at all meetings in the Gardens, and was later appointed President of the Durban strike committee. Kemp was the main speaker at the second meeting and the crowd that gathered was stated to be 15,000 strong. He reminded his audience that he had always stood for the expulsion of all Asiatics from South Africa, and said that if lascars arrived in Durban he would lead the citizens of the town in throwing them into the Indian Ocean.

Other speakers brought messages of solidarity from the Labour Party, and from the white trade unions, but it was Kemp who dominated the gathering, and rallied the widest support. He spoke again the next day at a meeting of (white) railwaymen. When he mentioned the lascars he was greeted by cries of "Bravo Kemp" and "Up Boys and at 'em". He spoke again of his many previous anti-Asiatic campaigns. (17)

Kemp's campaign to secure Indian repatriation was neither unique nor original. It was the policy of all administrations to secure the removal of Indians from South Africa, and in the period 1923-25 measures designed to force Indians to emigrate had been introduced in the Natal Provincial Council and Parliament. In Natal, Indians had been deprived of the municipal franchise, and of the right to buy

or lease land in the towns. Patrick Duncan introduced a Class Areas Bill in Parliament in 1924 to provide for compulsory segregation of Indians for trading and residential purposes, but the Smuts government fell in June 1924, before the Bill could be passed. Dr Malan, the Minister of the Interior in the Nationalist-Labour Pact government, reintroduced the measure as the Areas Reservation Bill in mid-1925, with even more stringent measures to restrict Indian rights. Although the Bill was shelved, it stood as a permanent threat to Indian rights to remain in South Africa. (18)

Mass meetings of Indians were held in Durban to protest against the Reservation Bill and call for the convening of a Round Table Conference to discuss their position in the country. At the same time, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) issued a statement expressing "deep regret" over the planned importation of lascars as scabs. The SAIC drew a parallel between the importation of lascars and the original use of indentured labour in the sugar estates of Natal: both events led to anti-Indian campaigns, and the introduction of lascars would "intensify the activities of the anti-Asiatics". They urged "responsible leaders of India" to denounce the shipping companies. (19)

The Cape Indian Defence Committee held a meeting at which speakers were more damning. They warned all Indians and lascars to stay away as this "was purely a white man's dispute, the more so in that both sides, in their capacities as voters when on shore, were parties to the repressive legislation passed under the British Crown against their Indian fellow-citizens". One speaker was reported as calling on all Indians not to take sides "in the dispute of the white man". (20)

As reports came in that lascars were being recruited, and were on their way, the agitated Indian organisations grew ever more apprehensive. Amod Bayat, President of the Natal Indian Congress, sent cables to "prominent persons" in India:

Community here disapproves such action as unfair to strikers, and further complicates present Indian problem. We implore you keep Indians out of this strike so preserve Indian honour. Suggest recall any lascars already left. (21)

Abdul Karim of the Natal Indian Association also cabled the Viceroy of India and Pandit Motilal Nehru on similar lines, saying that,

Arrival of lascars in South Africa when all minds are agitated over the new Asiatic Bill will be disastrous to Indian interests. Local Indians strongly resent Indian seamen being exploited as strike breakers and totally condemn action of shipowners in rushing to India unmindful of serious issues involved. Pray recall lascars. (22)

The Times of India reflected local concern when it condemned the recruitment of scabs, warning that they could be hurt, and that there could be unpleasant consequences for the whole Indian community in South Africa. (23) The General Secretary of the Indian Seamen's Union also condemned the use of lascars, and pointed out that attempts to use such crews in the shipping strike in China had failed, and the scabs had been sent packing. He concluded by asking the officials of the All India TUC to stop any lascars signing up for South Africa. (24) Whether lascars were ever recruited remains a mystery. The Times of India carried conflicting reports: that inquiries had been made about the availability of Indian crews from local agents of shipping companies; that such crews could be supplied; and then silence. (25)

If attempts were made to raise the 640 scabs the Union Castle line was said to have requested, they were never sent. But the report did not stop intense agitation throughout South Africa. The press carried copious reports (and rumours) on the matter and Die Burger was quoted as saying that "Public opinion will not permit it, and we fear it will merely give rise to undesirable emotional excitement and even to worse things". (26) It was also reported that Prime Minister Hertzog received hundreds of telegrams from all over the country protesting against the use of lascars as strike breakers, and this evoked a response from the Cabinet in which it was stated that:

Under the law, lascars, being Asiatics, are prohibited immigrants, and the Master of the ship bringing such persons to a port of the Union is ordered to retain such persons on his ship and to remove them from the Union, failing which he is subject to heavy penalties. Landing for temporary purposes or trans-shipment is not permitted without the consent of the Immigration authorities. The Government has received no information from the shipowners, who are well aware of the law if any such step is taken as that indicated by Reuters' telegram. (27)

The issue was dead, and when it was reported on 17 September that lascars who were on ships involved in the strike in Durban were fraternising with their white colleagues there was no noticeable reaction.

Seventeen British vessels were in Durban harbour in early September, and 1,235 men were ashore (including 200 engineers, officers and others who were not involved in the dispute). The men left the ships, after events in Cape Town opened the possibility of ships being taken three miles out to sea, where they might be ordered to work, or face mutiny charges. (28) The men were billeted in the houses of sympathisers, occupied corners in work sheds, or camped in open spaces. They were able to purchase food with funds collected by trade unions (including the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union - ICU) and Labour or Communist groups throughout South Africa. (29)

There were set-backs for the strikers. Men were being sent to prison, or faced charges arising from the strike. Furthermore, some ships sailed with skeleton crews, or with locally recruited scabs, and the seamen also watched helplessly when British vessels manned by lascars, or non-British ships, loaded produce and sailed for Europe. (30) None the less, the seamen remained firm, and at the end of September a ballot of all strikers showed that only thirty voted to return to work. (31) However, the strike was coming to an end in many ports, and on 12 October the AMWU declared in Britain that the action was over. The London strike committee held out for another week, and then conceded defeat. This did not affect the strikers in Australia, and it did not lead to the end on action in Durban. the strike was declared over in South Africa only on 24 October, and in November many seamen were still out in Durban (32), and many were to remain without a berth when the last ship sailed away.

Action in Cape Town

Events in Cape Town were transformed in early September by the entry of communists into the fray. For the first week the only groups that seemed to support the seamen were the white unions or the SALP. In Durban, members of the Labour Party took money and comforts to the crews, and the Transvaal Labour Party Conference, meeting on 30 August, passed a resolution supporting the seamen in their refusal to work for reduced wages, and repudiating the government's support for the shipping companies. Creswell opposed the resolution on the grounds that the seamen were duty bound to honour the agreement entered into by their union (33), but that was not the only

reason. The "Pact" government represented both farmers and white workers, and Labour Ministers (and members of the SALP) seemed more concerned about placating the farming communities than advancing the cause of labour.

The Cape Federation of Trades, to which most (white) trade unions were affiliated, spoke for the seamen until A Z Berman, the acting secretary, announced: firstly, that the Federation was approaching the Fruit Exchange (the government's co-operative marketing board) to arrange for the sailing of the "Roman Star" with a cargo of oranges (34); and, secondly, that the men were prepared to accept the restoration of the status quo pending the reopening of the whole question through conciliation or arbitration in Britain - and the postponement of the new rates pending such negotiations. (35)

That was too much for the seamen. They had not been consulted on these issues, and they repudiated Berman and the Federation. (36) It was at this stage that Solomon Biurski appears to have met the men, and either at his suggestion or independently elected a strike committee, with Biurski as their secretary (37); they used the CPSA offices in Long Street as their headquarters. Also, party facilities were used to hold daily meetings in which the committee put their case to the public, collected money, arranged billeting, and so on. (38)

Biurski claims that he led the strike action in Cape Town, and for at least three weeks that seems to have been the case. On 22 September, S P Bunting declared that at the Cape the strike

was being very largely and materially assisted, if not actually conducted, by the Communists, who were always associated with any trouble in which the workers' interests were at stake. The Communists took credit for that, and their object was to secure the unconditional surrender of the shipowners, which was the only possible condition of settlement ... The men were fighting for 8d per day, but as Communists we are supporting them for something more. (39)

The first issue confronting the committee was the fifteen million oranges loaded in the specially refrigerated hold of the "Roman Star". Berman and other leaders of the Cape Labour Party had appealed to the crew not to strike, because the ship had been chartered by the Fruit Exchange (40), and if the boat did not sail many fruit farmers would be ruined. (41) Although the reason was not made public, it was the plight of the farmers that prompted Creswell's announcement that he would mediate between shippers and seamen, to find a settlement to the dispute. (42) Indeed, the next day Walter Madeley and Morris Kentridge announced that they would go to Cape Town because of their concern about agricultural cargoes, if they felt that their presence (as supporters of the strike at the SALP conference) would help. (43)

On 4 September, Biurski announced that the seamen did not wish to be discourteous to the government, and would therefore meet Creswell, but that the dispute could only be settled in London. (44) In his memoir, Biurski describes private discussions between the Minister and the strike committee, in which he appealed to the men to let the ship sail "as a gesture to the first labour government (sic) in South Africa". The men agreed, provided that it was announced in every port that the committee had given its permission, and also that the ship return to Cape Town with the same crew if the strike was still on. But Creswell had no power to agree to the terms, and when a ballot showed that the men opposed the sailing, this part of his mission fell through. (45)

The "Roman Star" did sail, but only because the crew were offered an extra £6 for the next year, much to the annoyance of the shipowners' federation. (46) However, the journey was not without its drama: there was an explosion in the engine room when a detonator was shovelled into the ship's furnace, and three crew members were injured. (47) Sabotage was suspected, and Biurski suggested, retrospectively, that it might have been the work of a fireman who burst into a strike committee meeting and said he was volunteering for the crew, but they were not to think badly of him. (48) However, nothing was discovered.

Other consignments of oranges did not sail, and there were reports that oranges worth £35,000 would have to be dumped in Table Bay (49); it was said that in Marico alone citrus growers and packers lost over £30,000. (50) Other produce was also held up, and maize got away mainly on foreign ships, while dairy farmers were forced to keep back butter and eggs and faced considerable losses. (51)

Creswell had not succeeded in his efforts to get the "Roman Star" out to sea, and he failed in his more general attempts at mediation. The seamen put forward demands, some of which Creswell could have met - such as the release of all strikers from gaol, and a government guarantee not to tow ships out to the outer anchorage. However, other demands were beyond his ability to negotiate. The seamen wanted the wage cut restored, and also the abolition of the Maritime Board (a statutory body on which the shipowners and the NSFU were jointly represented, and at which wages were agreed), and also demanded that Havelock Wilson be denied any voice in the affairs of the British mercantile marine. (52)

In the absence of any move to end the strike, the ship's captains tried to get their ships out to sea. In one incident which was to affect all strikers, the master of the "Sophocles" locked his crew in the messroom, and with the assistance of the officers got the ship beyond the three-mile limit. The seamen were then ordered down to the boiler room, and warned that non-compliance would lead to charges of mutiny. However, the seamen retorted that they had stated when at anchor that they would not sail, and this negated the charge of mutiny. Three hours later the "Sophocles" was back at anchor (53)

The men of the "Sophocles" put out a defiant statement, and called on all ships to stand firm. (54) It was fear of other captains trying the same ruse which led to the crews walking off the ships in Durban and in Cape Town. (55) In Cape Town the men could not be billeted by sympathisers, although many families did accommodate numbers of men. Assistance was sought, and the men were taken to the Wynberg military camp, where they were bound by minor restrictions and became charges of the government. Ultimately, there were about 600 men in the camp, under canvas, and supplied with blankets, rations and cooking utensils. (56)

But ships did get away in increasing numbers as scabs were employed (at £9.10s per month), or as men drifted back to the ships. The latter were always a tiny minority, and they faced a barrage of abuse from their fellows. The scabs were mostly unemployed whites. They were defiant and generally impervious to the pleas of the men on strike. (57)

A Labour "Coup", and the End of the Strike

Except for the agitation over the lascars, the strike seemed to have involved only whites, and that mainly as sympathisers. These whites did not contemplate industrial action to support the seamen, and at most the unions passed the hat around. As early as 31 August African stevedores in Durban were said to be discussing strike action (58), but the action seems to have been stopped.

One week later, the General Secretary of the ICU in Cape Town informed Clement Kadalie, the President, that dockers were discussing strike action if their demands for better wages and conditions were not met. He was also informed that the strike committee in London sent a cable to the crew of the "Arundel Castle", via the ICU office in Cape Town, stating that the strike was "solid" in London, and calling on the strikers to stay firm. (59) The response of Kadalie was bizarre: he offered to take over negotiations on behalf of the seamen (60) and no more was heard of strike action (or the negotiations!). Members of the ICU did support the seamen at meetings in Cape Town - but seem to have forsworn strike action at the time.

Meanwhile, large numbers of seamen were charged for disobeying orders, and only managed to stay out of goal pending appeals. For this bail was required, and a large part of local activity was tied to fund raising. The trade unions provided considerable sums (61), and this was used by R Stuart, Secretary of the Federation of Trades to break the strike committee's connection with the CPSA. In late September, Stuart invited the strikers to switch their headquarters to his offices. When this was rejected, he threatened that the unions would have to reconsider the support they offered (62); a few days later the committee capitulated and moved headquarters to the offices of the Federation. (63) This did not end the matter: a strike bulletin issued by the men criticised the Federation, and there was an immediate suspension of money for the strike. The committee thought of cutting adrift from the Federation, but on second thoughts they sought a compromise. (64) Trade union solidarity had been converted into fear, and assistance had become blackmail. There was no excuse for Stuart's behaviour, but he was only following standard practice, less honestly but more effectively.

The strike was in its closing phase, and although the economy of South Africa was experiencing difficulties, with the wool producers facing disaster, the bank exchange rate moving against the local currency, and gold still stuck in the country, the shipowners in Britain and the NSFU refused to allow any concessions. (65) Consequently, moves had to come from the seamen, who were receiving reports of hardship from their families. On 10 October the Durban strikers decided by 311 votes to 230 to accept an agreement reached by their representatives and the shippers to end the strike under protest. There was agreement that there would be no victimisations, no prosecutions on return to Britain, clean discharges and the customary opportunity of selecting the next voyage. Men whose ships had already departed would be repatriated and would also get clean discharges. (66) The terms were communicated to the AMWU, who recommended acceptance, and on the 12th that body called off the strike in Britain. (67)

There were still men who refused to return, and the strike was far from over in Australia. But the ships were sailing regularly; stranded passengers had gone, produce and other goods were moved, and in December some 500-600 destitute seamen were shipped home by the South African government. (68)

The Impact on South Africa

The strike was not of South African origin, and the major impact of the event must be sought in Britain. None the less, for two months there had been strikers in the main ports, and thousands of local citizens had become involved. They were obviously affected, but in the absence of any record of their reactions, during or after the event, the historian is left to sum up with surmises rather than hard fact.

Ultimately, the strike had failed, and failures tend to lead to a loss of morale amongst those who supported the action. Consequently, there could be no rise in spirits amongst the members of the CPSA, and Biruski, who had invested so much energy in leading the men, was destitute, and without employment. But the problem

was not that of an individual: there had been little political education during the 47 days, and, despite the solidarity they had displayed in this rare case of an international strike, there could be few positive gains for the CPSA as a result of their involvement.

The white unions gained little (if anything) despite their support for this international working-class action - and even this was blemished by the pressures put on the strikers in Cape Town, with the threat of fund withdrawal. Furthermore, the party which many of them supported showed, from the beginning of the strike, that it was split. The SALP had been in the government for barely a year when it was confronted by the seamen's action, and the division in their ranks was a warning of events to come. In 1928 the party was torn apart: Creswell remaining a supporter of the Pact government, and Madely leading a minority who broke ranks. The differences in 1925 undoubtedly contributed to the dissension inside the party, but to what degree is unknown. (69)

The Labour Party stalwarts who played a part in the events in Natal, particularly Dr Minnie Alper (70), who conveyed messages of solidarity and provided money and provisions, continued for many years to work for the SALP. But Kemp and Simons did not make the headlines again, and their further activities are not known.

The Indian community was relieved of the fear that lascars might intervene and make their position more uncomfortable. They continued with their agitation for a Round Table conference, and this was convened in 1927. Neither the conference nor its outcome seems to have been affected by the strike. What might have become obvious to more radical elements in the community was the timorousness of the leadership, if indeed they needed any further evidence.

The greatest impact of the strike was on the country's economy, and, whatever the tendencies in economic planning at the time, the event must have helped concentrate minds sharply on the physical isolation of the country. This had been obvious during the First World War, and was now brought home again. In the absence of a local fleet, the need to develop manufacture must have been obvious. The historian can only guess at the impetus this lent to plans to build up the steel and other industries: a more important factor than those usually advanced, involving attempts to secure employment for "poor whites". It is not necessary to propose that the strike was the overriding factor to see that it must have played a part in speeding government intervention in the development of local industry, but it will remain a guess until we learn more of the strike's effect on local thinking.

-----oOo-----

Notes

- (1) This will appear ultimately as a chapter of a book on the strike, being researched together with Lorraine Vivian.
- (2) The rank and file movement started by the Communist Party of Great Britain, and affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions, or Porfintern.
- (3) Hardy, a one-time Wobbly, was the only non-seaman on the Committee. For his version, see G Hardy, Those Stormy Years: memories of the fight for freedom on five continents (Lawrence and Wishart, 1956). Hardy was the Comintern

representative in South Africa in the mid-30s. See also R E Bond, "The Unofficial Strike of British Seamen", International Press Correspondence (Inprecor), Vol 5, No 55 (1925), pp 164-65.

- (4) This accusation, contained in reports by members of the NMM, is partisan, and awaits confirmation.
- (5) J Havelock Wilson, The Red Hand Exploiting the Trade Union Movement: the communist offensive against the British empire (20th Century Press, 1927).
- (6) In the many versions of his autobiography, Shinwell studiously avoids any mention of the strike. A letter to him requesting an interview, received no answer.
- (7) The strike in Britain is discussed briefly in Basil Mogridge, "Militancy and Inter-Union Rivalries in British Shipping, 1911-1929", International Review of Social History, Vol 6, No 3 (1961). There are some descriptions of events in the antipodes (albeit short), and one brief account, in the biography of Col Creswell (by his wife) on the South African events.
- (8) Star, 24, 26 August 1925. Argus (Melbourne), 28 August.
- (9) There appears to have been only one boat affected in Lourenço Marques, and one in East London. The newspapers claimed that the strike lasted for 47 days, but in effect many ships were held up for 60 days or more.
- (10) Times (London), 6 November 1925.
- (11) Evening News (Glasgow), 1 September 1925.
- (12) Daily Dispatch, 10 September 1925.
- (13) Star, 3 September 1925.
- (14) Natal Mercury, 28 August 1925.
- (15) Natal Mercury, 2, 3 September 1925.
- (16) Umteteli wa Bantu, 10 May 1925.
- (17) Natal Mercury, 4 September 1925.
- (18) Eric Walker, A History of South Africa (Longmans, Green, 1947), p 610.
- (19) Natal Mercury, 2 September 1925; Times of India, 2, 3 September 1925.
- (20) Natal Mercury, 2 September 1925.
- (21) Natal Mercury, 3 September 1925.
- (22) Times of India, 4 September 1925.
- (23) Times of India, Editorial, 3 September 1925.
- (24) Times of India, 5 September 1925.
- (25) Reports appeared in Times of India between and 5 September. Similar reports appeared in the South African, British and Australian presses - some coming via Reuters, others without reference to any new agency.
- (26) Star, 2 September 1925.
- (27) Letter from General Hertzog to the Mayor of Durban, reported in Natal Mercury, 3 September 1925; Times of India, 4 September 1925.

- (28) Natal Mercury, 10 September 1925; Star, 19 September; Daily Record and Mail (Glasgow), 8 September 1925.
- (29) Star, 19 September 1925, and 24 September, in which the Johannesburg branch of the ICU was reported as forwarding £3.5s.6d to the strikers, with a pledge to continue.
- (30) Daily Record and Mail, 8 September 1925.
- (31) Natal Mercury, 1 October 1925.
- (32) International Transport workers Federation, Press Report, Nos 22 and 23, 24 October and 7 November 1925.
- (33) Evening Citizen (Glasgow), 31 August 1925; Friend, 31 August 1925.
- (34) Cape Argus, 2 September 1925. Berman, one-time editor of the Bolshevik, was a member of the SALP.
- (35) Daily Record and Mail, 4 September 1925.
- (36) Star, 4 September 1925.
- (37) S Biurski, Fleeting Memories, Typescript, n.d. It was in this biography, shown me by William Beinart that I first heard of the strike. Together with Beinart I interviewed Biurski in 1984, and we asked him for more details about this event. On checking through newspapers, I was able to confirm much of what Biurski had written, but where there were discrepancies I have used reports that appeared at the time, including statements ascribed to Biurski in the Cape press. I have quoted the typescript on events which were not reported in the press.
- (38) South African Department of Justice files, 3/1064/18, Report to Secretary for Justice, 1 February 1926, microfilm held at School of Oriental and African Studies, Reel 5. See also statement by a fireman in Cape Argus, 5 September 1925: "We are not Communists - but they are the only ones collecting money for us in order to send cables and wires, and they offered us their hall to meet in.
- (39) Cape Argus, 23 September 1925.
- (40) Evening News, 1 September 1925.
- (41) Star, 2 September 1925.
- (42) Ibid.
- (43) Star, 3 September 1925.
- (44) Cape Argus, 4 September 1925.
- (45) S Biurski, Fleeting Memoirs, p 36; Daily Dispatch, 9 September 1925.
- (46) Star, 9 September 1925; Fairplay (London), 25 September.
- (47) Daily Record and Mail, 9 October 1925.
- (48) Fleeting Memories, p 36.
- (49) Star, 17 September 1925.

- (50) Star, 22 September 1925.
- (51) Daily Record and Mail, 22 September 1925.
- (52) Star, 5 September 1925; Natal Mercury, 9 September. A dispatch from the Department of Labour suggested that the reductions be postponed for six months; and that the Unions be adequately represented on the Maritime Board, or that a top-level inquiry be held in Britain to investigate such representation: see Daily Dispatch, 9 September 1925.
- (53) Natal Mercury, 7 September 1925; Biurski, Fleeting Memories, p 35. Biurski states that the crew had signalled (by semaphore) that the officers were firing the boilers, and that he had advised them on the action they should take.
- (54) The statement is printed in Natal Mercury, 11 September 1925.
- (55) For the events in Durban, see above.
- (56) Cape Argus, 16 September 1925. There is a file at the Pretoria Archives on the strike. Unfortunately, the few papers seem to refer only to the tents at the camp. (Thanks to Helen Bradford for checking on this file.)
- (57) See, for example, the defiant response of 120 scabs employed by the "Arundel Castle", when strikers appealed to them, as reported in Natal Mercury, 22 September 1925.
- (58) Natal Mercury, 31 August 1925.
- (59) Cape Argus, 7 September 1925.
- (60) Ibid.
- (61) See, for example, Cape Argus, 17 September 1925. The Cape Town Tramway Union voted the sum of £100 per week for four weeks; the Typographical Union called for a voluntary levy of 1s per man per week; the Carpenters Union was to discuss the matter.
- (62) Cape Argus, 24 September 1925.
- (63) A Reuter message, dated 26 September, Natal Mercury, 28 September 1925.
- (64) Cape Argus, 1 October 1925.
- (65) See Daily Record and Mail, 22 September 1925, for a gloomy assessment of the economic situation in South Africa.
- (66) Cape Argus, 12 October 1925; International Transport Workers Federation, Press Report, No 22, 24 October 1925 (which stated the number of votes against as 240).
- (67) Daily Record and Mail, 13 October 1925.
- (68) Workers Weekly (London), 4 December 1925.
- (69) Articles on the strike appeared in Forward, written by Kentridge, and putting the case for higher wages. There seems to have been no reply from the Creswell "camp".
- (70) The Alper family have a record of radical activity, starting in Pretoria, when some members were involved in the activities of the International Socialist League, and then in Durban, where they were known as supporters of radical causes.