On the 6th January 1914, at a mass meeting in Pretoria Town Hall, the Amalgamated Society of Railway and Harbour Servants (ASRHS) decided to call a strike of white railway workers to begin on the 8th January. (1) On the same day the Minister of Defence, J. C. Smuts, warned army generals to prepare for Martial law, which would be declared soon. (2) The next day troops occupied the stations and railway workshops of Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Germiston. That day H. J. Poutsma, the general secretary of the ASRHS, addressed a mass meeting of white railway workers at Braamfontein, who unanimously decided to strike. (3) Within three days the citizen forces and permanent defence force units were mobilized. (4) On the 10th January Poutsma and Nield, both officials of the ASRHS, and Colin Wade of the Labour Party were arrested under the Preservation of Peace Ordinance of 1902, which permitted the authorities to arrest and hold incommunicado those suspected of sedition. (5)

The South African Industrial Federation (SAIF), to which most trade unions on the Rand were affiliated, had an agreement with the ASRHS to consult one another and provide support in the event of a strike. The SAIF executive met on the 11th January to determine what action to take. They decided to ballot the membership to ascertain their views and decided to recommend a sympathy strike. (6) Only a few thousand participated in the ballot but, of these, a large proportion favoured a strike. (7) On the 11th January the Typographical Union and the Bakers Union declared a strike. (8) Trade union and Labour Party leaders addressed meetings throughout the country, at which they called for support for the railway strike and urged the workers to avoid violent confrontation with the authorities. (9) At a mass meeting of about 15,000 people in Market Square, Johannesburg, the trade unionists accused the government of trying to provoke a general strike by arresting the leaders. (10) After the meeting a large crowd escorted two of the leaders, J. T. Bain and Geo Mason, back to the Trades Hall to prevent them being arrested. (11) On the 12th January some sections of white railway workers in the Cape and Durban struck work and those in East London and Queenstown decided to strike unless Poutsma were released. (12) By the 13th January all sections of white railway workers in Bloemfontein had joined the strike. On that date the white workers at Witbank collieries went on strike and the Transvaal Miners Association, the white gold-mine workers' trade union, declared that their ballot favoured a strike. (13) In these circumstances the SAIF felt that they could command sufficient support and called a general strike of affiliated unions, to begin on the 14th January. (14)
By the 14th January all railway lines, bridges, docks, telephone and telegraph installations, power stations and gold and coal mines were defended by armed troops. Smuts later described this as the largest scale mobilization ever to take place in South Africa. For example: 1,798 armed troops and police guarded the railway workshops and docks in Cape Town; 240 armed men guarded the railway station, bridge and power station at Vereeniging; 50 armed men guarded each mine at Witbank, etc. (15)

Martial law was proclaimed at midnight on the 13th January.

Martial Law

The conditions existing under Martial Law made the pursuit of normal strike strategies impossible and rendered any other form of protest extremely difficult.

Martial law regulations forbade picketing, any attempt to induce workers to strike, any interference, direct or indirect, with employees or relatives of employees of the railways, power stations, etc. It was forbidden to use insulting language, threats, or "objectionable epithets". It was illegal to be on railway premises or lines unless one was working there or had obtained a permit. (16) Under the regulations a curfew was imposed, public meetings were prohibited and communications and newspapers were censored. The authorities isolated the two main strike centres with a regulation that made it necessary to obtain a permit in order to travel between Johannesburg and Pretoria. (17)

The government mobilized enough force to ensure that the regulations were complied with. Apart from the commandos and the permanent force, hundreds of "reliable" citizens were enrolled as Special Constables and armed to replace police called up for strike duty. (18) Commanding officers were instructed to use all the force necessary to ensure that the regulations were not contravened:

Exercise greatest possible severity keeping all strikers off railway and running premises. Don't hesitate to shoot if they attempt enter without warning or on apparently malicious intent. The names of persons attempting to interfere with running staff to be taken and reported here. (19)

Following the declaration of martial law, the authorities engaged in wholesale arrests of strike leaders. On the 15th January the Pretoria and Johannesburg strike committees and "hundreds" of strikers in Benoni were arrested. The next day more strikers and Labour Party leaders were arrested. On the 17th January strike leaders in Volkarust and Bloemfontein and sixty-two people meeting in the Labour Party offices in Johannesburg were arrested. The Johannesburg strike committee had been arrested while they were in the Trades Hall deliberating on the strike and awaiting the outcome of a request to the government to open negotiations. Troops surrounded the building and a field gun was trained on it. The officer in charge had been instructed to arrest everyone in the Trades Hall, "using most drastic measures to do so if, after warning, the persons in that building refuse to give themselves up without violence". (20)

The Extent of the Strike

There are many reasons for supposing that the white railway workers, more than other groups of white workers, would be reluctant to strike.
The ASRHS had made no concrete preparations for a strike. (21) The leadership did not consult the branches of the ASRHS, other unions who had members on the railways, or the SAIF, before calling the strike. (22) They had made no plans for organizing the strike or for supporting the strikers. (23) Under these circumstances the extent to which the railwaymen supported the strike indicates their loyalty to the union and their sense of grievance.

White railway workers were governed by the Railways and Harbours Service Act of 1912. This prohibited strikes with penalties of up to £50 and/or six months with or without hard labour. More importantly the strikers risked forfeiting their pension rights, lost all their contributions to the sick fund and holiday rights. Railway workers who lived in houses owned by the Administration risked ejection from their homes. The railway workers were well aware that the Administration operated a blacklist which included the names of all those who had been active in previous strikes, and trade union organizers. During the 1914 strike the martial law authorities had specific instructions to draw up a blacklist of all those who were active during the strike. (24)

It seems that the strike was most fully supported by railway work-shop employees. The majority of these workers in Pretoria, Salt River (Cape), Johannesburg, Bloemfontein and Durban, struck work. (25) These were the more skilled workers. A large proportion of them belonged either to craft unions (e.g. the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Boilermakers Society, etc.) or to the railway workers general union, the ASRHS. (26) The strike was supported in some areas by other sections of railway workers. The running staff in Bloemfontein, Pretoria and other, smaller, more isolated areas also struck work. (27) Some other groups of white workers struck in sympathy, usually those belonging to trade unions which also had members working on the railways. The white building workers in Pretoria struck work on the 11th January, the white workers in the municipal workshops of Pretoria struck work on the 15th January, the white typographical workers struck work in Johannesburg on the 14th January, and, on the same day, the white workers in the Witbank collieries struck work. (28) White workers on the gold mines struck work in sympathy from the 14th January. The mines were heavily defended by troops to prevent picketing or sabotage. Altogether 9,059 workers struck work on 54 gold mines with a loss of 43,957 shifts (compare this with the figures for the 1913 strike, which were 19,000, 55, and 69,665, respectively). (29) However, the gold mines remained in operation owing to a reorganisation of work and changes in the deployment of the black and white labour available. (30) Generally there was comparatively little dislocation to the railway service because most of the running staff remained at work. By this date the majority of strikers had returned to work except in the workshops of Pretoria, Durban and Johannesburg, where a large number still remained out. The Durban workers, who were the last to return, decided to return en masse and not singly, on the 26th January. (32)

That day the Government deported nine of the strike leaders to England.

The general strike of 1914 never really got off the ground. The unions involved had not done the preparation and organization necessary for a successful strike. The government, by contrast, was well prepared. It would have been a difficult strike to organize in any circumstances, but, with the leadership imprisoned, communication between the various centres impossible, picketing and mass meetings forbidden, it proved to be a total defeat. By the end of the strike nearly seven hundred white workers had been retrenched, hundreds of strikers, including all the leaders, were blacklisted and several hundred workers had to accept lower rates of pay when they returned to work. (33)

The Issues - the Railway Workers

The issue over which the strike had been called was the decision in October 1913 of the Railway Administration to retrench labour, mainly in the railway workshops. (34) For months before the strike the ASRHS tried to get the decision changed. They sent deputations to the Minister of Railways, Burton, asking for the decision to be re-examined and they informed him that their members would be willing
to lose one hour per day rather than any workers losing their jobs. The ASRHS head office was in contact with all the branches and obtained details of the retrenchments. They claimed that the Administration had lied when it guaranteed that only new workers would be retrenched. The ASRHS discovered that many experienced workers were to lose their jobs and the union executive saw this as an indirect attack on wages. The ASRS was unsuccessful in its attempts to discuss the retrenchments with the minister and petitioned the Governor General to whom they complained about the contemptuous way in which the minister had treated them.

The railway workers were particularly aggrieved because the Administration had begun carrying out retrenchments at a time when a government commission was still hearing evidence about the grievances of white railway workers. This commission was set up as part of the "trust" agreement in the 1913 strike. It was one of a series of commissions which had investigated the grievances of white railway workers. The 1914 commission was investigating trade union demands for: a) 8 hour day; b) a minimum wage for white adult employees of eight shillings per day; c) revision of local allowance; d) abolition of "piecework"; e) extra pay for overtime; f) less severe punishments; g) decentralization of shop management.

Many of these demands had been investigated by previous commissions. But their recommendations had largely been ignored by the management. The commissions noted the extreme antipathy of the management to trade unionism and the fear of the employees that they would be victimized for giving evidence. All the commissions had recommended a big reduction of hours wherever possible. This recommendation had also been ignored. The 1914 commission noted that the running staff worked an average of seventy-three hours per week.

The Issues for Other White Workers

The 1913 strike had begun on a single gold mine over a specific issue. Six weeks later, after most of the white gold miners had joined the strike, the SAIF called a general strike and many other groups of white workers joined the strike, including building, engineering, tramway, power station and typographical workers. On the 4th July, after police and troops tried to break up a mass meeting of strikers in Johannesburg, rioting broke out. The rioters burned down the offices of the Star newspaper and Park Station but were prevented by troops from attacking the Corner House. In all, twenty-one people were shot dead by troops. In order to regain control of the town Smuts and the Prime Minister, Botha, arranged to meet the strike leaders and agree on a compromise. As part of the agreement all the trade unions submitted demands via the SAIF to the government. These included demands for laws restricting the hours of work, establishing minimum wages and paid holidays, and a law laying down the conditions of work in factories.

The white mine workers submitted their demands separately. They demanded increased wages, decreased hours, paid holiday, the abolition of the system of importing black labour and the recognition of trade unions. The most important factor behind the gold workers' strike in 1913 was the insecurity of the white workers' position. For some years the position of the skilled white worker had been steadily undermined by deskilling, the increasing employment of black labour in all the production processes and the conversion of the white miner into a supervisor. The white miners unionized in an attempt to defend their position. Management refused to recognize or negotiate with the Transvaal Miners Association, which, they felt, would encroach on their right to control and deploy labour in the most profitable way. This was also the policy of the Chamber of Mines. The question of the recognition of trade unions was one of the more important issues of the 1913 strike.

The trade union leaders called off the strike in 1913 after receiving assurances from the ministers that the white workers' grievances would be investigated. They obtained no specific commitments. The government did not introduce the legislation which the trade unions had demanded. The Chamber of Mines agreed to
recognize trade unions but only under certain conditions, which would have severely restricted their role. After the strike Lionel Phillips, a leading figure in the gold mining industry, commented:

The men will very soon realize that they have got nothing out of all this worth having, and that a great many of them have lost their jobs, which is not, I imagine, the way for the labour leaders to find favour in their eyes. So now we may have a considerable period of quiet. (45)

The white workers did not, however, desert the trade unions. On the contrary, trade union membership increased at an unprecedented rate. (46) The support of other groups of white workers for the railway strike in 1914 is an indication of the extent to which grievances, which had led to the strike in 1913, still existed.

II

The State

How was it that the state's forces were able to act so quickly and so effectively to crush the 1914 strike? Why did the SAP Party ministers responsible deem it necessary to act so harshly and uncompromisingly?

In the months following the 1913 strike, and particularly towards the end of the year, when it became apparent that the strike had been no victory for the white workers, there were continual rumours of strikes and several trade union leaders made very militant speeches to their members. (47) Smuts was probably loath to repeat his experiences of 1913, when he had been forced to ask for the support of imperial troops to regain control of the Rand and had to sign an agreement with the trade union leaders about which he later commented:

I admit freely that it was one of the hardest things I have done in my life to put my name on a document together with that of Mr Bain and the others. (48)

The government may have been especially alarmed by the threat of a strike on the railways because of their strategic importance in the economy and defence of the Union.

In 1913 the government had been unprepared for the spread of the strike and the escalation of violence. The only local forces available were unreliable because of their sympathy with the strikers. (49) The defence force of the Union was in the midst of reorganization in line with the 1912 Defence Act. Imperial troops were being withdrawn, old volunteer organizations were being demobilized and new citizen force and permanent force units were being organized and trained. (50) The imperial government permitted the Union Government to use imperial troops presumably because of the importance of the gold mines to their own interests. But the Union Government was warned that these troops were not stationed in South Africa for this purpose. (51) It was becoming clearer that war was likely to break out in Europe soon and if this occurred the last of the imperial troops would be withdrawn. (52)

After the 1913 strike, Smuts, as Minister of Defence, and the new leaders of the Union Defence Force, drew up a scheme for maintaining control in the event of riots or rebellion. (53) The 1914 strike provided an opportunity to test the scheme and to demonstrate the power of the state to all sections of society. (A second opportunity was to follow: the nationalist rebellion of 1914.)

After the 1914 strike had been suppressed, the control officers drew up detailed reports of the strike. These concentrated almost entirely on military matters
and commented only briefly on the strike itself. The control officer for the Cape District reported:

The successful employment of the Defence Force on strike duty has not only put their organization to a practical test but has also demonstrated to the public in a forcible manner their real utility for war purposes and whatever the cost has been it has been amply repaid by the general feeling of security in the community thereby engendered. (54)

In his speech in Parliament in support of a bill to indemnify the government for actions taken during the strike, Smuts justified the measures taken by claiming that the strike was a "syndicalist conspiracy" which aimed at the overthrow of elected authority by means of a general strike. (55) During the strike the police removed all the records from the offices of the trade unions and the SAIF with the intention of gathering evidence of this "conspiracy". They found none. In support of his contention Smuts cited twenty-nine cases of attempted dynamiting and sabotage of the railways. (56) In itself, this is not proof of a conspiracy. There was no evidence that the people Smuts called "dangerous syndicalists" played any role in the dynamiting.

It would be very difficult to ascertain whether or not Smuts believed in his talk of a syndicalist conspiracy. It seems most unlikely that there was such a conspiracy. The police failed to find any evidence in 1914 and no one since then has had any more success.

In 1913 the SAIF had acted as the organizing body through which all the affiliated unions submitted their demands. After the strike, when the SAIF declared a "suspended" strike, they did so as a body with considerable authority in the trade union movement. (57) After the 1913 strike the government and the Chamber of Mines agreed to recognize trade unions, under certain conditions. But they refused to recognize the SAIF, which was seen as an "extremist" organization. (58) Despite their agreement to co-operate with the SAIF and to consult with them before declaring a strike, the ASRH's leadership called a strike unilaterally. When the strike broke out the SAIF was unprepared for it. The government was far better prepared. This led trade unionists at the time and since to cast doubt on the integrity of Poutsma, the general secretary of the ASRH, who called the strike. In May 1914 a Labour MLA suggested that the kernel of truth in the conspiracy theory was, in fact, a degree of connivance between Poutsma and the manager of the railways, Hoy, and Smuts. (59) Poutsma is certainly an enigmatic figure. He was one of the deportees in 1914, returned to South Africa in 1915 and became an organizer in Smuts's party, the South African Party.

The government intended to "drive a wedge" between the extremists in the labour movement and the moderates. (60) This was one reason for the deportation of the labour leaders. Like the present South African government, the government then seemed determined that, if it was to deal with trade unions, it would choose with what sort of unions it would be dealing. At the end of 1913 the government had introduced legislation with which it hoped to control the white labour movement. The government's actions in 1914 were intended to create the right climate for the passage of these bills.

In its actions against white workers in 1914 the government demonstrated that it would severely repress any actions it deemed to be threatening. A fear that was often expressed was that any unrest amongst the white population would have an adverse effect on the ability of the state and employers to control black workers. (61) These fears were expressed by Smuts in Parliament:

This is not a country where we can allow a state of anarchy to prevail. We are a small colony in a dark continent. Whatever divisions creep in among the
whites are sure to be reflected in the conduct of the native population, and if ever there was a country where the white population must be ever watchful and careful and highly organized and ready to put down with an iron hand all attempts such as were made on the present occasion, that country is South Africa. The government felt that and has acted accordingly. (62)

Legislation

The 1913 strike had demonstrated the inadequacy of the existing legislation, the 1909 Industrial Disputes Act of the Transvaal, in controlling strikes. In 1913 trade unions were unrecognized in legislation, and at the end of the year a bill "to provide for the registration and regulation of trade unions" was introduced. The bill laid down conditions which trade unions had to comply with in order to register, and required them to provide information of their funds, allocation of funds, membership, etc. The bill also prescribed penalties for any attempt to intimidate people to join a union and made trade union officials liable for the illegal acts of the union.

At the same time the Industrial Disputes Prevention Bill was introduced. The intention of the bill was to prevent sympathy strikes and make legal general strikes impossible as well as to provide means for the solution of disputes before any strike occurred. It forbade picketing, provided for compulsory ballots before and during a strike, and made strikes for "essential" service workers illegal. It also made it illegal to strike where this action might endanger life or expose valuable property to injury.

At the end of 1913 the Public Meetings and Disturbances Bill was introduced. This was redrafted after the 1914 strike as the Peace Preservation Bill. If the government had reason to fear serious disorders they would be able by proclamation to enforce the provisions of this bill, which would allow the authorities power to arrest without warrant, to search houses without warrant, to banish offenders, to commandeer goods and to set up special tribunals instead of juries to try cases of infringement. The bill was condemned from all quarters. Smuts was warned by a SA Party official to water down the provisions of the bill. (66)

Following the 1914 strike there were numerous indications of the extent to which the government had alienated the white workers and other sections of the public, both by its actions during the strike and the legislation which it pursued afterwards. In the Transvaal Provincial Council elections of the 18th March there was a swing to the Labour Party and twenty-three out of the twenty-five candidates which they had put up were elected, which gave them a majority of one in the Provincial Council. A leader of the SA Party was alarmed at the "extraordinary revulsion of feeling exhibited during the elections". (68) It was also apparent that a large number of Afrikaner workers were turning to the Labour Party and not to the Nationalist Party, led by Hertzog, which had been formed in 1913 after breaking from the SA Party. (69)

The four Labour members in Parliament fought the bills through each stage, contesting every clause. But with so few members they could not defeat the government in Parliament. Trade unions and the Labour Party organized demonstrations and public meetings to protest against the legislation being pushed through Parliament. The huge, enthusiastic crowds attending these meetings were another index of the swing to Labour. The most repressive measure, the Peace Preservation Bill, was withdrawn on the 30th March. The Industrial Disputes and Trades Union Bill (the two bills had been merged) passed through all its stages in the House of Assembly but failed to get through Senate. It reached the Senate towards the end of the session and they refused to consider such an important measure hastily. But this was not much of a defeat for the government. They had quickly forced through the Riotous Assemblies Act, which contained some of the most significant penal provisions relating to trade unions of the other bills. (72)
Abbreviations

DC  Records of the Department of Defence
DFA  Diamond Fields Advertiser
JUS  Records of the Department of Justice, Central Archive Pretoria
MNW  " "  " Mines and Industries
PM  " "  " Prime Minister
RDM  Rand Daily Mail
SAMR  Records of the South African Mounted Rifles

Notes

(1)  JUS 192  3/35/14, Police Report.  RDM, 7 January 1914.
(2)  DC 169  8/7164.
(3)  RDM, 7 January 1914.
(4)  RDM, 10 January 1914.
(5)  RDM, 12 January 1914.
(6)  JUS 192, Rough Minute Book of the SAIF.
(7)  Ibid.
(8)  DFA, 17 January 1914.
(9)  RDM, 10 January 1914.
(10) RDM, 12 January 1914.
(11) Ibid.
(12) RDM, 13 January 1914.
(13) DFA, 17 January 1914.
(14) JUS 192, Rough Minute Book SAIF.
(15) DC168  8/7164.
(16) DC 172  7232, "Regulations".
(17) DC 168  1/7164, Report of Control Officer.
(18) DC 169  8/7164.
(19) SAMR 1084  214/4/3.
(20) JUS 193  3/84/4.
(21) JUS 193  3/16/14, Police report on the records of ASRHS, TMA, etc.
(22) JUS 192, Rough Minute Book of SAIF.
(23) JUS 192  3/35/14, Secretary East London branch ASRHS to H. J. Poutsma, 8 January 1914.
(24) SAMR 1084  215/4/13, General Smuts to Control Officers, 13 January 1914.
(25) PM 1/1/19, Notes of Law Adviser on Railways and Harbours Strike and Service Amendment Act.
(26) RDM, 8 January 1914, 14 January 1914.
(27) JUS 191, Magistrate Report Volksrust;  DC 1/7164, "Report on Situation".
(28) DFA 17, 24, 31 January 1914.
(30) RDM, 24 January 1914.
(31) DC 1/7164, "Report on Situation".
(32) NDM, 26 January 1914.

(33) DC 8/7164, Report of Control Officers; NDM, 10, 12 January 1914.


(35) JUS 178 3/1468/13, Police report of meeting of ASHS Railways Square, 7 January 1914.

(36) Ibid.

(37) JUS 178 3/1468/13, Police report of meeting of ASHS Railways Square, 7 January 1914.


(42) Government Gazette, August 1913, p. 213.


(46) Year Book of the Union of South Africa, No. 1, 1910-16, p. 234.


(49) DC 143 5115, "Correspondence relating to the disturbances on the Witwatersrand", Governor General to Secretary of State, 4 July 1913.


(51) DC 142 5115, "Correspondence relating ... Governor General to Secretary State", 7 July 1913.

(52) Militaria, Vol. 1, 3, 1969, p. 44.

(53) DC 39 File 765, Under Secretary for Defence to Commandant General ACF; Major Collyer, DSO, to Commandant General ACF, 24 July 1913.

(54) DC 169 6/1164, Report of Control Officer Cape District.

(55) Smuts, Syndicalist ...

(56) DC 168 7/1169.

(57) Smuts, Syndicalist ..., p. 53.


(59) NDM, 12 May 1914.

(60) MNW 243 mm 1074/14, Government Mining Engineer to Minister Mines, September 1913.


(62) Smuts, Syndicalist ...

(63) MNW 543 mm 3431/20, Inspector of White Labour to Chief Inspector, 17 December 1920.

(64) MNW 421 mm 1649/18 c62(2) 1914.

(65) MNW 217 mm 4256/13, Secretary Mines and Industries to Secretary Justice, 19, 22 September 1913.

(67) *Star*, 19 March 1914.

(68) Hancock and Van der Poel, op. cit., Krause to Smuts, 23 March 1914.


(70) *RDM*, 31 March 1914.

(71) *RDM*, 8 July 1914.

(72) PM 1/1/119, Notes of the Law Adviser on the Riotous Assemblies Act.