

The workers' movement in Africa

International Communist Current

"Africa" in the media is generally synonymous with catastrophes, wars and permanent massacres, famine, incurable sicknesses, corrupt governments; in brief, endless absolute misery. The workers' movement is assumed either not to have existed at all, or to have been a mere appendage of the "anti-colonial" struggle for "national liberation". This series of articles, concentrating particularly on Senegal and South Africa, aims to set the record straight.

1. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 1):
Pre-1914
2. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 2):
1914-28
3. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 3):
The 1920s & 30s
4. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 4):
Second World War to 1968
5. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 5):
May 1968 in Senegal
6. A history of class struggle in South Africa
7. South Africa from World War II to the mid-1970s

1. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 1): Pre-1914

For many generations Africa has been synonymous with catastrophes, wars and permanent massacres, famine, incurable sicknesses, corrupt governments; in brief, endless absolute misery. At best, when its history is talked about (outside of folklore or “exotic” aspects), it is to point out its “worthy” Senegalese or Maghrebi sharpshooters, the celebrated auxiliaries of the French colonial army during the two world wars and the time of the maintenance of order in the old colonies. But never are the words “working class” used and still less are questions raised concerning its struggle, quite simply because it has never really entered the heads of the masses at the world or African level.

However, the world proletariat is very much present in Africa and has already shown by its struggles that it is part of a working class that bears a historic mission. However its history has been deliberately obscured by the old colonial bourgeoisie and then smothered by the new African bourgeoisie after “decolonisation”.

Consequently, the main aim of this contribution is to provide some elements to attest to the very real living history of the workers’ movement in Africa through its combats against the exploiting class. Admittedly, this is the history of a working class contained within a historically underdeveloped continent.

But how and why has the history of the proletariat in Africa been concealed?

“Has Africa a history? Not so long ago, this question would have been answered in the negative. In a now famous passage written in 1965, the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper compared the history of Europe to that of Africa and basically concluded that the latter didn’t exist. The African past, he wrote, presented no interest outside ‘the tribulations of barbaric tribes in a certainly picturesque part of the globe, but without the least importance’. To be sure Trevor-Roper could be termed as a conservative, but at the same time the Hungarian Marxist, Endre Sik, more or less defended the same point of view. In 1966 he wrote: ‘Before making contact with Europeans, the majority of Africans still led a barbaric and primitive existence and a number among them hadn’t even gone beyond the most primitive stage of barbarity.[...] Is it also pointless to talk of their “history” – in the scientific meaning of the word – before the arrival of the European invaders?’

“These are particularly blunt remarks but they were shared up to a point by a majority of historians.” [\[1\]](#)

This is how, through their racist contempt, the thinkers of the colonial European bourgeoisie decreed the non-existence of the history of the black continent and, consequently, why the working class here had no history in the eyes of the world.

But above all, what is still striking reading these remarks, is to see the unity in the a-historical prejudices regarding Africa from these “renowned thinkers” of the two ex-imperialist blocs; the “democratic” bloc of the west and the “socialist” bloc of the east. In fact the one described as a “marxist”, Endre Sik, is nothing other than a dyed-in-the-wool stalinist whose arguments are no less fallacious than those of his

rival (or colleague), the Englishman Trevor-Roper. Through their denial of the history of Africa (and of its class struggle), these gentlemen, representatives of the dominant class, express a yet more barbaric vision than that of the “barbarity of the tribulations of the African tribes”. In reality, these authors are part and parcel of the group of “scholars” who gave their “scientific benediction” to the overtly racist theses of the colonising countries. This isn’t the case with the author Henri Wesseling who criticises their words and distinguishes himself from his “historian” colleagues in these terms:

“[...] The truth is quite different. A certain number of Africans, such as the Khedive of Egypt, the Sultan of Morocco, the Zulu King Cetshwayo, the King of the Matabeles, the Almami Samori and King Makoko of the Batekes, had considerable influence over the course of things.”

Certainly by his reaction, Henri Wesseling gains some distinction in re-establishing the real history faced with well-intentioned falsification. Nevertheless,, other “scientists” who, having admitted to the reality of the history of Africa and that of the working class, persist with a very ideological vision of history and in particular of the class struggle. In fact they exclude any possibility of a proletarian revolution on the continent with arguments no less dubious than those used by the racist historians. [2]

“[...] Obstinate, the African workers are the same with proletarianisation: the fact of their permanent resistance to full wage labour [...] expresses the fragility of the imported theory of a working class bearing a historic mission. Africa is not a terrain for proletarian revolutions and the somewhat catastrophic copies of this model have all been, more or less, a violent affront to the living, social dimension of the ‘proletariat,’”

Let’s say immediately that the authors of this quote are university sociologists comprising Anglophone and Francophone researchers. Moreover, the title of their work, *The working classes of black Africa*, says a lot about their fundamental preoccupations. On the other hand, if it’s clear that they don’t deny the history of the African continent as do their historian colleagues, their approach comes from the same ideology which takes its point of view from “scientific proof” without it confronting real history. Already, by talking about “catastrophic copies of this model”, they (involuntarily?) confuse the proletarian revolution of 1917 in Russia with coup d’états of the stalinist type or with the “national liberation” struggles that appeared throughout the world following the second imperialist world butchery under the labels “socialist” or “progressive”. It’s these same models that violently confronted the working class which put up a resistance to them; whether in China, Cuba, in the old countries of the Soviet bloc or in the “Third World” in general and Africa in particular. But above all, these sociologists squarely turn to the counter-revolution when they warn against an “imported theory of a working class bearing a historic mission”, their logical conclusion from which is that Africa is not a terrain for proletarian revolutions. Thereby, these groups of “scholars”, in denying any possibility of revolutionary struggle on the African continent, seem to exclude the extension of any other revolution (“exported”) in Africa. Straightaway they close the door to any perspective of emerging from the capitalist barbarity of which the exploited classes and the African populations in general are victims. Finally, they shed no light on the real history of the working class.

What concerns us, with all due deference to “our” sociologists, is that the working class remains the only class bearing a historic mission faced with the bankruptcy of capitalism which worsens every day,

including in Africa as the historian Iba Der Thiam [3] attests when he gives an account of workers' struggles from the beginning of the 19th century to the start of the 1930s:

"In the union domain, the period 1790-1929 was, as we've seen, a decisive stage. A period of rousing and awakening, and then affirmation, it was a new occasion for the working class to demonstrate its determination and its spirit of struggle and self-sacrifice.

"From the appearance of a pre-union consciousness, up to the eve of the world economic crisis, we've followed all the phases, from a development of consciousness whose speed of progress compared to the long road of the French working class in the same domain, appears quite exceptional.

"The idea of the strike, that's to say a means of struggle, a form of expression consistent with refusing to work and provisionally interrupting the normal run of economic life in order to assert one's rights, forcing the bosses to be concerned over wage claims for example, or to accept negotiations with the strikers or their representatives, made, over some fifteen years, considerable progress, even acquiring rights of freedom, notwithstanding the dispositions of a restrictive legislation and was recognised, if not as a legal practice, then at least a legitimate one.

"[...] The bosses' resistance, apart from some exceptions, only rarely showed an extreme intransigence. From the base of a lucid realism, the owners of the means of production did not, in general, show any reticence in advocating and seeking dialogue with the strikers, but even managed to push the Governor to speed up the procedures for mediation, and were quite ready, when their interests were seriously threatened, to make common cause with the workers, in the conflicts which opposed them to the railways for example, where it is true, the role of the state in the capital was considerable."

Not only is this exposé sufficiently full enough to characterise a working class bearing hope, but it has a history in Africa that it shares moreover with the bourgeoisie through the historic confrontations of classes, just as happened throughout the world since the proletariat was constituted as a class under the capitalist regime.

Before pursuing the history of the African workers' movement, we draw the attention of readers to the fact that we are going to come up against difficulties linked to the denial of the history of Africa by historians and other scholars of the old colonial powers. In fact, this was shown, for example, by the colonial administrators with their policy of systematic censure of the most important events and movements of the working class. Due to this, we are reduced to basing ourselves on rare sources of more or less famous authors whose rigour of work seems to us globally proven and convincing. On the other hand, if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events.

Some elements of context

Senegal was the oldest of the French colonies in Africa, France having been established there from 1659 to 1960.

A historian has located the beginning of the African workers' movement at the end of the 18th century, hence the title of his work *History of the African union movement 1790-1929*.

The first professional workers (artisans, carpenters, joiners, masons, etc.) were Europeans settling in Saint-Louis Senegal (the old capital of the African colonies).

Before the Second World War, the working population of the Francophone colony of French Western Africa (FWA) was essentially based in Senegal, between Saint-Louis and Dakar which were respectively the capital of FWA and the capital of the federation which brought together FWA, French Equatorial Africa (FEA), Cameroon and Togo. Dakar was the "economic lungs" of the FWA colony, with the port, the railway and the greatest number of state workers and service employees.

At the numerical level, the working class has always been historically weak in Africa generally, evidently due to the weak economic development of the continent, which is explained in its turn through the weak investment made by the colonising countries. In 1927, the Governor of the colony estimated the number of workers to be 60,000. Certainly, some say that half the numbers of workers were excluded from this figure, not least the day-workers and other apprentices.

Since the first struggles up to the 1960s, the proletariat has always systematically confronted the French bourgeoisie which holds the means of production alongside the colonial administration. That means that the Senegalese bourgeoisie was born and evolved in the shadow of its "big French sister" (at least up to the 1960s).

Class struggle in Senegal

"The history of the African union movement has yet to be totally written [...] The fundamental reason for this failure seems to us to lie, on one hand, in the lack of research into the different segments of the African working class in a perspective which is both synchronic and diachronic; and on the other hand, in the absence of a systematic study of the different social conflicts which have been recorded, social conflicts each one of which shows the layers of information on the preoccupations of the workers, their forms of expression, the reactions of the colonial administration and the bosses, those of the political class, all the consequences that these events have had on the domestic history of the colonies at the four levels of the economic, social, political and cultural [...]" [4]

As Iba Der Thiam emphasises, several factors explain the difficulties of writing a history of the workers' movement in Africa. Otherwise, the major obstacle which researchers have come up against is undoubtedly linked to the fact that the real holders of the information on the working class, that is the French colonial authorities, have for a long time been cautious of opening up the state archives. And for good reason: they have an interest in hiding things.

In fact, with the partial release of the colonial archives of FWA (following the fall of the Berlin Wall), we learnt that not only had the working class existed in Africa since the 19th century but, quite naturally, it had undertaken often victorious combats against its class enemy. 1855 marked the first expression of a workers' organisation where, at Saint-Louis Senegal, a group of 140 African workers (carpenters and

asons) decided to fight against the demands of their European masters who were imposing unacceptable working conditions on them. Similarly, one can read in the archives of the existence of a (clandestine) union of “Carpenters of the Haut-Fleuve” in 1885. Above all a number of important strikes and tough confrontations took place between the working class and the colonial French bourgeoisie, like the general strike accompanied by riots in 1914 at Dakar where, for 5 days, economic and social life was totally paralysed and the Federal Governor of FWA , William Ponti, recognised (in his secret notes) that *“The strike was perfectly organised and was a total success”*. There were also numerous other successful strikes, notably that of April 1919 and 1938 by railworkers (European and African united) but also where the state had recourse to police repression before being forced to meet the demands of the strikers. And we can add the example of the six month-long general strike (October 1947 to March 1948) by the railworkers of the whole of FWA, where the strikers were fired on by the PS (SFIO) government before ending up winning the fight.

Finally, there is also the famous world-wide “May ‘68” which spread in Africa and to Senegal, abruptly breaking the patriotic or “national consensus” which had reigned since the “independence” of the 60s. And where, through their struggles on a proletarian terrain, workers and young schoolchildren violently confronted the pro-French regime of Senghor demanding an amelioration of their conditions of life and study. After this the workers’ movement again took the road of struggle that it had known since the beginning of the 20th century but which had been blocked by the triumphant perspective of “national independence”.

These are some examples to illustrate the real existence of a combative working class that is often conscious of its own class interests, while certainly meeting immense difficulties of all sorts since its birth.

Birth of the African proletariat

We should straightaway make clear that this is a proletariat emerging under a colonial capitalist regime and that, without having accomplished its own revolution against feudalism, the African bourgeoisie also owes its existence to the presence of European colonialism on its soil.

In other words, what we are seeing is the birth of the proletariat, the motor of the development of the productive forces under the reign of capitalism triumphant over the feudal regime, the old, dominant system, the residues of which are still quite visible today in many areas of the black continent.

“During the course of the centuries preceding the arrival of the colonisers onto their continent, African societies, as all the other human societies, used labour and manpower in conditions that were peculiar to them [...]

“The economy was essentially agricultural; predominately made up of provisions and supply, because in using rudimentary techniques there was only rarely any great surplus to be made. Equally an economy based on hunting, fishing and gathering, to which we could add in some cases exchange activities of a

relative breadth unfolded, because of the weakness and want of the means of communications, inside the group, the region, and more rarely the kingdom, in the markets at regular intervals.

“In such a context, the methods of production were often handed down and rarely secreted sufficiently vigorous and conflictual antagonisms in order to determine the existence of real social classes in the marxist sense of the term.

“[...] As much as possessions in pre-colonial Senegalese-Gambian societies were different from the European notion, so that of work was even more so. In fact, if in modern societies based on industrial development and wage labour, labour is negotiated as economic wealth, and as such, greatly submits to the ineluctable laws of the market where the relations between supply and demand determine the price of services, in pre-colonial negro-African societies, work appears to us not to have an autonomous function, independent of the person. It is a sort of community activity logically unfolding from the laws of collective life, an activity imposed by social regulation and economic necessities [...].

“The colonial conquest, essentially based on the spirit of power, the quest for the accumulation of profit through the exploitation of human, material and mineral resources, largely had recourse to indigenous labour and did not hesitate to call on the means put at its disposition of the exercise of state power in order to use the work of local populations, first of all free before introducing wages and thus creating the conditions and new relations as much for work as for the worker.” [5]

On the whole, the author’s account is sufficiently clear and relevant in its theoretical approach and in describing the historic context of the birth of the proletariat in Africa. Indeed, it is convincing in its argument to demonstrate that labour in pre-colonial negro-African or Senegalese-Gambian societies did not have the same meaning as in modern western societies. Similarly, in relation to wage labour, we can actually say that the notion of wage labour was without doubt introduced into Senegal by the French colonial system the day it decided to “wage” the men it exploited in order to assure its profits and spread its domination over the conquered territory. Thus it started up the first agricultural and industrial depots, mines, railways, waterways, roads, factories, print works, etc. In other words, this is how French colonial capitalism introduced new relations of production in its first African colony creating accordingly the conditions for the birth of the working class. But it was first of all under the regime of obligatory work (the monstrous “corvée system”) that the workers were exploited. That is to say at this time they were not able to negotiate the sale of their labour, as this quote shows:

“Regarding civil works, Blanchot for example required the Mayor of the corvée of the workers to be responsible for assuring the construction of the quays from January 1st 1790, then the landing-stage at Saint-Louis. The numbers needed were originally composed of ‘20 persons with food and a resident who will be responsible for mustering them, taking them to work and making sure that they stay there.’ First of all it was an obligatory requisition which no-one could escape from, once designated, under pain of sanction. Then the work was almost free. The workers were chosen, summoned, used and supervised without any condition of price, wage or any sort of discussion on the modalities of their utilisation, even of challenging the circumstances of the choice of which they’d been the object. This dependence of the worker on his employer was attested to by Order number 1 of December 18 1789 instituting the corvée assigned to the construction of the quays and the landing-stage, which set no time limit and could,

consequently, last as long as necessary. Further, allusion was made to a 'gratuity' of two bottles of spirits and, to clearly show that there was no question of a wage attached to the remuneration or simply compensation for the work furnished, the text makes it clear that it is a simple favour due to the good will of the authorities to the exclusion of any obligation moral or otherwise and which could be denied when the work was late through negligence." [6]

Obligatory requisition with no negotiation, on price or on conditions of work, in brief a total dependence of the employee on the employer who, mostly, offered his exploited, as "food", a gratuity in the form of bottles of spirits. Such were the rules and conditions in which the proletariat, future wage labour, emerged under French colonial capitalism in Senegal.

Four years later, in 1794, the same Blanchot (now the commanding officer of Senegal) decided on a new "gratuity" by giving the order to furnish the requisitioned workers with "couscous and the lash". Certainly we can see "some amelioration" of the gratuity going from two bottles of spirits to couscous, but it still wasn't a question of "compensation" and still less a proper wage to speak of. It was necessary to wait until 1804 for remuneration as compensation for work done to officially exist. That was the year when the economy underwent a serious crisis due to the war effort then sustained by the colonial system for the conquest of the empire of Fouta (the neighbouring region of Saint-Louis). In effect, the war meant the provisional halt of river commerce, which led to shortages of products and price speculation on basic necessities, which in turn caused a rise in the cost of living, and with it, strong social tensions.

1804: the establishment of the proletariat and the first expression of class antagonisms

To deal with the deterioration of the social climate, the commanding officer of the town of Saint-Louis issued the following order:

"[...] as a consequence of the decree of the Council of the Colony on complaints regarding the high price of the workers who have successively provided their days of work at exorbitant and intolerable prices for a long time [...]. The foremen, workers, carpenters or masons must henceforth be paid a salary of one bar of iron per day or 4 francs 16 sols; the mates, three-quarters of a bar or 3 francs 12 sols, the labourers, a quarter of a bar or 1 franc 4 sols."

"In this document, which is one of the oldest written that we possess on wage labour, we learn that the town of Saint-Louis had at this time, that's to say in 1804, 'workers, carpenters, caulkers and masons' employed by private individuals, according to the norms and in circumstances which are unfortunately not indicated, aside from the growth of salaries paid to these personnel." [7]

To avoid arbitrating conflict between employers and employees, the state decided to regulate their relations by fixing the total amount of wages according to categories and level of qualification. Let's note moreover that this act of the colonial state was first of all directed against the employees because it responded to the grievances lodged with the Chief of the colony by the employers who complained about the "exorbitant price" of a day's work by the workers.

In fact, to cope with the effects of the crisis, the workers had decided to raise the price of their work to preserve their reduced purchasing power resulting from the increased cost of living. And before this time, the establishment of working conditions was still a purely private affair, exclusively in the hands of socio-economic negotiators, that's to say, without any formal state legislation.

Still, this open intervention of state authority was the first of its kind in a conflict between employers and employees. More generally, this time (1804) attests to the reality of the first open expression in the colony of an antagonism between the two principal historic social classes that confront one another under capitalism: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This date also marks the history of labour in Senegal, which was formally recognised by the establishment of wages, finally allowing the workers to sell their labour "normally" and be paid as such.

Concerning the "ethnic composition" of the (qualified) workers, they were overwhelmingly of European origin, and similarly, the employers were almost exclusively from the metropole. Among the latter figured Potin, Valantin, Pellegrin, Morel, D'Erneville, Dubois, Prevost, etc., who were the "cream of the commercial bourgeoisie" of the colony. Finally, let's note in passing the extreme numerical weakness of the working class (some thousands) as a consequence of the low level of economic development of the country; and this a century-and-a-half after the first arrival of colonists in this zone. Furthermore, this was essentially a colonial trading post based on trade in raw materials and ebony. [8]

The manpower crisis of the colonial trading post

"The principal activity of Senegal was the slave trade and the exploitation of products such as gum, ivory, gold, yellow wax, hides drawn by the Saint-Louisian and other merchants on the river or along the west coast of Africa but as long as its economic importance remained secondary the availability of manpower was never a concern. In order to carry out the rare works of fitting out equipment or summary infrastructures, the Governor, at his own discretion, could call on extra assistance from the military or civilian sectors and, in work that didn't need specialised workers could often, if not always, call on the workers in the most servile conditions.

"But the suppression of slavery had profoundly changed the givens of the situation. The principal economic resource of the colony was henceforth threatened with drying up. France had further lost some of its agricultural colonies with the attempted European colonisation of Cape Verde having failed and the Government of the Restoration then thought it necessary to initiate the development of agriculture in Senegal by growing a certain number of local products likely to feed French industry, turning around the commercial activities of the colony and giving work to the indigenous free labour force." [9]

It is necessary to underline straightaway that the suppression of slavery responded first and foremost to an economic need rather than any humanitarian consideration. In fact, the colonial bourgeoisie lacked a workforce due to the fact that a large proportion of the men and women of working age were slaves in the hands of their local masters. The suppression of slavery took place in two stages.

In the first stage, a law dating from April 1818 forbade only the maritime commerce of slaves and their transportation to America, but not inside the territories which remained free for the colonial merchants. However, it was quickly realised that this was still insufficient to remedy the shortage of workers. So the Chief of the colony personally asked the head of the First Battalion to provide *“men of the corvée on request who would be used for diverse purposes”*. Thanks to these measures, the colonial authorities and merchants could temporarily overcome the labour shortage. For their part, the available labourers became aware of the benefits they could derive from the scarcity of labour by becoming more demanding towards the employers. And this provoked a new confrontation over the price of labour between the workers and their bosses, resulting in a new intervention by the colonial authorities who proceeded with the “regulation” of the market in favour of the merchants.

In the second stage, in February 1821, the Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, while considering a policy of active immigration by people of European origin, ordered the end of slavery in “all its forms”.

In fact, once again for the colonial authorities it was a matter of finding the necessary hands for the development of the agricultural economy:

“For the Governor, it was a question of the redemption of individuals kept in slavery in the regions close to the west African possessions; of their emancipation by a certifiable act on the condition that they worked for the contractor for a certain period of time. This would be [...] a sort of liberty apprenticeship, familiarising the native with European civilisation, giving him a taste of new industrial cultures while reducing the number of captives. One thus obtained [...] labour while keeping in with the plans of the abolitionists.” [\[10\]](#)

In other words, it was above all a question of “civilising” to better exploit the “emancipated” and it was in no way liberation in the name of a humanitarian vision. Moreover, as if that wasn’t enough, two years later in 1823, the colonial administration set up a “regime of time-serving”, that’s to say a sort of contract linking the employee to the employer for a long period.

“The time-servers were used for a period which could go up to 14 years in the public workshops, in the administration, the agricultural plantations (there were 300 out of 1500 used by Baron Roger), in hospitals where they worked as messengers, nurses or domestics, in local security, and in the army; in the regiment of Marine Infantry they numbered 72 in 1828, 115 four years later, 180 in 1842, while the numbers of those redeemed counted 1629 in 1835, 1768 in 1828, 2545 in 1839. At this time the village of Saint-Louis alone counted about 1600 time-servers among its inhabitants.” [\[11\]](#)

In this regard, let’s underline the beginning of the formal existence of long-term contracts (14 years) similar to a CDI (contract of indeterminate length) of today. We see here the permanent need for workers that corresponds to the rhythm of the economic development of the colony. Similarly, the regime of time-servers had been conceived with the aim of the accelerating agricultural colonisation and this policy is shown in the consequent start of the development of the productive forces and more generally of the local economy. But the balance-sheet was very contradictory because, if it allowed a real increase in commercial traffic (import/export), which went from 2 million francs in 1818 to 14 million in 1844, the policy of agricultural industrialisation on the other hand hit a brick wall. In fact the

plan initiated by Baron Roger for the development of agriculture was abandoned by his successors (three years after it was launched) because of differing economic orientations within the state. Another factor weighing on the decision to cancel the plan for the development of agriculture was the refusal of a great number of the previous farmers, who had become paid employees, to return to the land. However, the two aspects of this policy, i.e. the redemption of slaves and the “regime of time-servers”, were maintained up to 1848, the time of the decree for their total suppression.

“Such was the situation towards the middle of the 19th century, a situation characterised by the now established wage labour, the attribute of a defenceless proletariat with almost no rights, which, if it was aware of any unity or combination, if it thus had a pre-union consciousness, had never yet dared to assert itself in a conflict with its employers who were backed up by an authoritarian government.” [12]

Thus was constituted the basis of a waged proletariat, evolving under the regime of modern capitalism, the precursor of the African working class and which, henceforth, would make its apprenticeship in the class struggle at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century.

Embryonic forms of class struggle in 1855

The emergence of the working class

According to available sources [13], 1855 saw the appearance of the first professional organisation aiming to defend the specific interests of the proletariat. Its constitution followed a movement launched by a native carpenter (a habitant of Saint-Louis) who led 140 workers to draw up a petition against the European master craftsmen who were imposing unacceptable conditions of work. In fact:

“The first artisans who undertook the great colonial works were European or military engineers who were assisted by auxiliaries and indigenous workers. These were carpenters, joiners, masons, blacksmiths and shoemakers. These were the technically more qualified personnel benefitting, in a certain number of cases, from a more or less elementary training. They prevailed in the existing corporations of which they made up the leading elite; it was without doubt these who decided the markets, fixed the prices, allocated the tasks, chose the workers that they hired and paid a tariff largely inferior to that they claimed back from the employers.” [14]

In this clash we see that the first expression of the “class struggle” in the colony opposed two fractions of the same (working) class and not the bourgeoisie and proletariat directly; in other words, a so-called base fraction of workers (dominated), in struggle against another so-called “ruling elite” (dominant) fraction of workers. Another feature of this context is the fact that the exploiting class was derived exclusively from the colonial bourgeoisie, due to the absence of a “native bourgeoisie”. In brief, we have a working class constituting itself under a developing colonial capitalism. Therefore it is understandable why the first expression of working class struggle could not avoid being marked by a triple connotation, “corporatist”, “ethnic” and “hierarchical”. This is illustrated in the case of the leader of this group of indigenous workers, himself a master carpenter, and as such a trainer of numerous young apprentice

workers under him, while at the same time working under the European master joiners who decided everything (cf. the preceding quote).

In this context, the decision of the native leader to join with the rank and file African workers (less qualified than him) in order to face up to the arrogant attitude of the western master artisans is understandable and can be interpreted as a healthy reaction in defence of proletarian interests.

Moreover, according to archive sources, this same indigenous master craftsman was later involved in the constitution in 1885 of the first African union, even though the 1884 law of Jules Ferry authorising the creation of unions had excluded their establishment in the colonies. For this reason the union of native workers had to exist and function in clandestinity, leading to a lack of information on its history, as the following passage shows:

“The K30 series of the Archives of the Republic of Senegal include an unpublished manuscript which hasn’t previously been quoted by any source and which was filed in a folder on which someone had written: union of the carpenters of the Haut-Fleuve. Unfortunately, this extremely important piece of the archives on the history of the union movement in Senegal is unaccompanied by any other document likely to throw some light or understanding on the question.” [15]

So, despite the ban on any form of proletarian expression and despite the systematic censure of the real history of the workers’ movement in the colonies, this record could show the existence of the first embryonic organisations of class struggle of a union type. Admittedly, this was a “corporatist union”, of carpenters, but in any case the capitalist state at this time forbade any sort of inter-professional association.

This is what investigations into the writings related to this theme and period allow us to understand today about the expressions of working class struggle in this period from 1855 to 1885.

Immigrant Senegalese struggles in the Belgian Congo in 1890/1892

“Let’s recall first of all that when the suppression of the regime of time-servers was enacted in 1848, this system, which was far from having completely disappeared, tried to adapt to the new situation by progressively transforming itself. But this solution in no way resolved the thorny issue of labour.

“The colonial economic milieu could thus not buy slaves that they could work into the ground and the plantations risked being abandoned because of the lack of hands, pushing the administrative leadership and the political authorities to authorise the immigration of recently liberated African workers towards regions where their services would be appreciated, on a salary and with conditions discussed in agreement with the bosses. In order to effect this request, the Governor published the decree of March 27 1852, reorganising the emigration of workers in the colonies; thus on July 3 1854, a ship named ‘Le cinq freres’ chartered to ensure the transport of 3000 workers destined for the plantations of Guyana, cast anchor at Dakar and made contacts with the aim of hiring 300 Senegalese. The conditions stated were the following: “an expatriation of six years against a gift to the value of 30 to 50 francs, a wage of

15 francs per month, lodgings, food, medical care, the pleasure of a small garden and free repatriation at the end of their stay in the Americas.” [16]

We see here, with the case of the 300 Senegalese destined for the plantations of Guyana, that the working class really existed, to the point of constituting “a reserve of labour”, a part of which the bourgeoisie could export.

Indeed, having demonstrated their competence and efficiency, for example in undertaking (in 1885) the hard work of constructing the Dakar/Saint-Louis railway, the workers of this French colony aroused a particular interest among the colonial economic milieu, either as exploitable labour on site, or as a labour force to be exported to foreign competitors.

In this same context and in similar conditions, a great number of Senegalese workers were recruited and sent to the Belgian Congo to work in various sites and depots, notably on the Congolese railway of Matadi.

But, from their arrival, the immigrant workers came up against harsh conditions of work and existence and immediately saw that the Belgian colonial authorities had no intention of honouring their contracts. In fact, as they noted themselves in a letter of protest addressed to the Governor of Senegal, they were “*badly fed, inadequately lodged, underpaid, sick and badly looked after*”, they died like flies and they thought that cholera was striking them because “*we are burying 4 or 5 people a day*”. A petition of February 1892, addressed to the French and Belgian colonial authorities, firmly demanded their collective repatriation to Senegal, concluding: “*Now none amongst us wants to stay in Matadi*”.

The workers were thus victims of a particularly odious form of exploitation by colonial capitalism which imposed such barbarous conditions upon them that, during this time, the two colonial states passed the buck, or shut their eyes firmly to the fate of the immigrant workers:

“Encouraged by impunity, the Belgian authorities did nothing to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate protesters. The distance between the Belgian Congo and Senegal, arguments over precedence which prevented the representative of the French government in the region interceding on their behalf, the complicities which benefitted the railway company of the Lower Congo at the rue Oudinot (cf. Ministry of the Colonies), the cynicism of some of the colonial milieu that found the bad luck of the poor Senegalese amusing, exposed the Senegalese workers to almost total abandonment and more or less disarmed without any means of defence, taxable and forced, they were at their mercy.” [17]

Through their combativity, by refusing to work in the conditions imposed on them and by firmly demanding their evacuation from the Congo, the immigrants from the French colony obtained some satisfaction. Also, on their return to the country, they were able to count on the support of the population and their comrade workers by thus obliging the Governor to engage in new reforms aiming to protect the workers, beginning with the establishment of new emigration rules. In fact, the drama the immigrants suffered in the Congo gave rise to debates and developments of consciousness in relation to workers’ conditions. It was in this context, between 1892 and 1912, that a whole series of measures was taken on behalf of employees, for example a weekly break, workers’ pensions, medical assistance, in short real reforms.

Furthermore, based on their “Congolese experience”, the old immigrants were particularly conspicuous during a new recruitment drive for new railway yards in Senegal by being very demanding over working conditions. In this sense, in 1907 they decided to create a professional association called the “Workers’ Association of Kayes” with the aim of better defending their working and living conditions faced with the appetites of the capitalist vultures. And the colonial authority, taking account of the balance of power at that time which was about to escape their control, agreed to legalise the railworkers’ association.

In fact, the birth of this association among the railworkers is hardly surprising when one considers that, since the opening of the network in 1885, this sector had become one of the most important industrial complexes of the colony, both in its turnover and the number of employees. Similarly, we shall see later that the railworkers are in all the battles of the working class in French Western Africa.

More generally, the period following the return of immigrants to the country (between 1892 and 1913) was marked by strong social unrest, notably in the public sector where clerks and workers of the post and telephone service protested against deteriorating working conditions and low wages. In this context, civil servants and those close to them decided to create their own associations to defend themselves by “all means at their disposal”, soon followed by commercial employees who took the opportunity to demand that the law on a weekly rest period apply to their sector. In short, there was a seething combativity among workers in both the private and public sectors, which increasingly worried the colonial authorities. Indeed, not only could these burning social problems not be settled by the end of 1913, but they reached their climax in the context of the crisis resulting from the First World War.

[1]. Henri Wesseling, *The division of Africa*, 1991, Denoel Editions, 1996 for the French translation.

[2]. M. Agier, J. Copans and A. Morice, *Working Classes of Black Africa*, Karthala-ORSTOM, 1987.

[3]. *History of the African union movement 1790-1929*, Editions L’Harmattan, 1991.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Ibid.

[6]. Ibid

[7] .Ibid.

[8]. “Ebony” was a euphemism coined by the Negroes to describe the black slaves deported to the Americas (Wikipedia).

[9]. Thiam, op. cit.

[10]. Ibid.

[11]. Ibid

[12]. Ibid

[13]. Mar Fall, *The State and the Union Question in Senegal* L’Harmattan, Paris, 1989.

[14]. Thiam, op. cit.

[15]. Ibid

[16]. Ibid

[17]. Ibid.

2. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 2): 1914-28

1914 - 1928: the first real confrontations between the two classes

Between 1855 and 1914, the proletariat that emerged in the colony of French West Africa (FWA) underwent its class struggle apprenticeship by trying to come together and organise with the aim of defending itself against its capitalist exploiters. Despite its extreme numerical weakness, it demonstrated its will to struggle and a consciousness of its strength as an exploited class. We can also note that, on the eve of World War One, the development of the productive forces in the colony was sufficient to give rise to a frontal collision between the bourgeoisie and working class.

General strike and uprising, Dakar 1914

At the beginning of 1914, the discontent and anxiety of the population, which had been building up since the preceding year, didn't immediately express itself in the form of a strike or demonstration. But by May the anger exploded and the working class unleashed an insurrectionary general strike.

This strike was first of all a response to the crass provocations of the colonial power towards the population of Dakar during the legislative elections of May, when big business [1] and the Mayor threatened to cut credits, water and electricity to all those who wanted to vote for the local candidate (a certain Blaise Diagne, of whom more below). At the same time an epidemic of plague broke out in the town and, under the pretext of preventing its spread to the residential quarters (of Europeans), Mayor Masson of Dakar (a colonist) quite simply ordered the burning down of all the dwellings (of the local population) suspected being infected.

This fanned the flames, resulting in a general strike and a riot against the criminal procedures of the colonial authorities. In order to respond, a group of youths called the "Young Senegalese" called for an economic boycott and filled the streets, putting up posters throughout Dakar with the slogan: "Let's starve those that starve us", taking up the slogan of the candidate and future black deputy.

Barely concealing its own disquiet, big business launched a violent campaign through the newspaper *L'AOF* (in its pocket) against the strikers: "*Here our stevedores, carters and other workers are deprived of their wages... How are they going to eat? ...your strikes which have affected the life of the port will only make the problem much more cruel to the unfortunate than it will to those well off: they will paralyse the development of Dakar by discouraging those that want to come here from doing so.*" [2]

But it didn't work and the strike couldn't be prevented. On the contrary, it spread, affecting all sectors, notably the port and the railway, the lungs of the colony's economy, as well as trade and services, both private and public. The following is related in the secret memoirs of the Governor of the colony, William Ponty: "*The strike (added the Governor General), by the abstention fomented from below, was perfectly organised and a complete success. It was...the first event of its kind that I had seen so unanimous in these regions.*" [3]

The strike lasted 5 days (between the 20th and 25th of May) and the workers ended up by forcing the colonial authorities to put out the fire that they themselves had lit. In fact the strike was exemplary! The struggle marked a major turning point in the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the working class of FWA. It was the first time that a strike spread beyond occupational categories and brought together workers with the population of Dakar and the region in the same combat against the dominant power.

This was clearly a struggle that abruptly changed the balance of forces in favour of the oppressed, compelling the Governor (with the approval of Paris) to cede to the claims of the striking population, expressed in these terms: *“The cessation of the incineration of dwellings, the restitution of bodies, reconstruction of the buildings and dwellings destroyed using solid materials, the complete removal from the entire town of all the dwellings built in sub-standard wood or straw and their replacement by buildings in cement for low-priced habitation.”* [4]

However, this same Governor said nothing about the number of victims burnt inside their dwellings or cut down under a hail of bullets from the forces of order. At best, the local authorities of the colony only raised the question of “the restitution of the bodies” and said not a word about the killings and their extent.

But, despite the censorship of the words and actions of the working class at that time, one can imagine that the workers who saw their homes burnt down and those of their families, did not remain inert and put up a fierce fight. Clearly, although few in number, the working class was without doubt a decisive element in the confrontations that made the forces of colonial capital give ground. But above all the strike had a very political character:

“Certainly it was an economic strike, but it was also political, a strike of protest, a strike of sanction, a strike of reprisals, decided upon and put into effect by all the population of Cape Verde... The strike thus had a very clear political character and the reaction of the authorities was something quite different... The administration was both surprised and disarmed. Surprised because it had never had to face up to a manifestation of this nature, disarmed because there was no presence at all of a classical union organisation with offices, rules, but a general movement taken in hand by the whole population and whose leadership was invisible.” [5]

In accord with the author above, one must conclude that it was indeed an eminently political strike expressing a high degree of proletarian consciousness. An even more remarkable phenomenon given the unfavourable context for the class struggle: one dominated from the outside by the sound of marching boots and, from the inside, by struggles for power and the settling of accounts within the bourgeoisie through the legislative elections, whose main issue, for the first time, was the election of a deputy from the black continent. This was a mortal trap that the working class turned against the dominant class by unleashing, along with the rest of the oppressed population, a victorious strike.

1917-1918: strike movements seriously concern the bourgeoisie

As we know, the period 1914 to 1916 was marked, in the world in general and Africa in particular, by a feeling of terror and dejection following the outbreak of the first global butchery. Certainly, just before the conflagration, we saw a formidable class combat in Dakar in 1914; similarly there was a tough strike in Guinea in 1916. [6] But on the whole a general state of impotence dominated the working class even though its living conditions deteriorated on every level. In fact, it wasn't until 1917 (by chance?) that we saw new expressions of struggle in the colony:

"The accumulated effects of galloping inflation, the screwing down of wages, all types of worries, at the same time as they threw light on the tight links of dependence between the colony and the Metropole and the increasing integration of Senegal into the capitalist world system, all provoked a rupture of social equilibrium in which the consciousness of the workers and their will to struggle was clearly affirmed. From 1917, political relations were signalling that in a situation of crisis, stagnation of business, crushing taxation, the growing pauperisation of the masses, more and more workers were incapable of making ends meet and were demanding increases in wages." [7]

Strikes broke out between December 1917 and February 1918 against the misery and degradation of the conditions of life of the working class, and this despite the installation of a state of siege throughout the colony, accompanied by an implacable censorship. Nevertheless, even with little detail on the strikes and their outcomes at this time, we can see here, through some confidential notes, the existence of real class confrontations. Thus, in regard to the strike movement of coal miners working for the Italian company *Le Senegal*, one can read this in a note sent from the Governor William Ponty to his minister: "...Satisfaction having been given to them immediately, work was resumed the following day..." Or again: "A small strike of two days occurred during the quarter on the sites of the firms Bouquereau and Leblanc. Most of the strikers have been replaced by Portuguese." [8]

But without knowing what the reaction of the workers replaced by the "blacklegs" was, the Governor General indicated that: "*The workers of all occupations are due to strike on the 1st of January*". Further, he informed his minister that the builders, spread out over a dozen worksites, struck on February 20th claiming an increase in wages of 6 to 8 francs per day, and that "*satisfaction [of the claim] put an end to the strike*".

As we can clearly see, between 1917 and 1918, workers' militancy was such that confrontations between the bourgeoisie and proletariat often ended up with victories for the latter, as is attested in quotes from diverse secret reports or observations from the colonial authorities. Similarly, workers' struggles of this time couldn't be separated from the historic context of the revolution in Russia in particular and in Europe in general:

"The concentration of wage-earners in the ports, on the railways, created the conditions for the first manifestations of the workers' movement... Finally, the suffering of the war – the war effort, the hardships suffered by the combatants – created the need for a respite and hope for a change. The echoes of the October revolution in Russia had reached Africa; there were Senegalese troops stationed in Romania who refused to march against the Soviets: there were black marines in the naval units who

mutinied in the Mediterranean; some of those who took part in the mutinies of 1917 experienced the revolutionary strides of the years at the end of the war and of the period immediately after the war in France.” [9]

So the Russian revolution of 1917 did have echoes in Africa, particularly amongst the youth, a great part of who were enlisted and sent to Europe by French imperialism as cannon fodder for the war of 1914-18. In this context, we can understand the well-founded concerns of the French bourgeoisie at that time; they were to become even more worried as the wave of struggle continued.

1919: a year of struggles and attempts to build up workers’ organisations

1919, a year of intense workers’ struggles, was also the year of the emergence of many associations of an occupational character, despite the fact that the colonial authority continued to ban any union organisation or any coalition of more than twenty workers within FWA. However, there were many workers who took the initiative to create occupational associations (“friendly societies”) that had the potential for taking up the defence of their interests. But as the prohibition was particularly aimed at native workers, it fell to their European comrades – as it happened the rail workers – to take the initiative of creating the first “occupational friendly society” in 1918; in fact the rail workers had already been the origin of the first (public) attempt in this area in 1907.

These occupational friendly societies were the first union organisations recognised in the colony: *“Little by little, coming out of the narrow framework of the company, the coalition of the workers was growing, going first of all through a Union at the level of a town like Saint-Louis or Dakar, then a regroupment at the level of the colony, of all those whose occupational obligations subjected them to the same servitude. We find examples of them among teachers, postal workers, women typists, trade employees. [...] Through these means, the nascent union movement strengthened its class position. It enlarged the field of its framework and action and it disposed of a powerful striking force, which showed itself to be particularly effective faced with the boss. Thus, the spirit of solidarity between workers little by little gained flesh. Convincing indications even show that the most advanced elements were engaged in becoming conscious of the limits of corporatism and laid the basis of an inter-occupational union of workers from the same sector, covering a wider geographical space.” [10]*

In fact, in this context we learn later, in a police report taken from the archives, of the existence of a federation of associations of colonial state workers of FWA.

But, becoming aware of the size of the danger from the appearance of federated workers’ groups, the Governor ordered an enquiry into the activities of the emerging unions. Subsequently, he instructed his Secretary General to break the organisations and their responsible leaders in the following terms: *“1) see if it’s possible to get rid of all the natives reported; 2) look into the conditions under which they were taken on; 3) don’t let the joint note go into circulation and keep it in your drawer; I’ll personally put my memo with it.” [11]*

What vocabulary, and what a cynic is this Monsieur le Governor! With total logic he carried out his dirty “mission” through massive dismissals and by hunting down any worker who might belong to one union organisation or another. Clearly the attitude of the Governor was that of a state police chief in his most criminal works and, in this sense, he also carried out the segregation between European and “native” workers, as this archive document shows:

“That the metropolitan civil laws extend to citizens living in the colonies is understandable, since they are members of an evolved society or else natives who have been habituated for a long time to our customs and our civic life; but to extend these to races still in a state bordering on barbarity, who are almost completely foreign to our civilisation, is often an impossibility, if not a regrettable error.” [12]

We have here a Governor who is contemptuously about to carry out his policy of apartheid. In fact, not content with deciding to “liquidate” the indigenous workers, he goes one better in justifying his actions through overtly racist theories.

Despite this anti-proletarian political criminality, the working class of this time (European and African) refused to capitulate and pursued the best possible struggle for the defence of its class interests.

Railworkers’ strike in April 1919

1919 was a year of strong social agitation. Several sectors came into struggle around diverse demands, whether wages or concerning the right to set up organisations for the defence of workers’ interests. But it was the rail workers who were the first to strike this year, between April 13th and 15th, first of all sending a warning to their employer: *“April 8th 1919, or hardly seven months after the end of hostilities, a movement of demands broke out in the rail services of Dakar-Saint-Louis (DSL) on the initiative of European and local workers in the form of an anonymous telegram drawn up and addressed to the Inspector General of Public Works: ‘rail workers of Dakar-Saint Louis, are unanimously agreed in presenting the following demands: raising of pay for European and indigenous personnel, regular increases and maintenance allowances, improved sick pay and allowances ... we will stop all work for one hundred and twenty hours, from this day, 12th April if there’s no favourable response on all points: signed, Rail workers of Dakar-Saint Louis.’” [13]*

This is the particularly strong and combative tone with which rail workers announced their intention to strike if their demands weren’t met by the employers. Similarly, we should note the unitary character of the strike. For the first time, in a conscious fashion, European and African workers decided to draw up their list of demands together. Here we are dealing with a gesture of the internationalism which only the working class is the bearer of. This is the giant step taken by the rail workers – knowingly striving to overcome the ethnic barriers that the class enemy regularly sets up in order to divide the proletariat and lead it to defeat.

Reaction of the authorities faced with the rail workers' demands

On receiving the telegram from the workers, the Governor General summoned the members of his administration and army chiefs to decide at once on the total requisitioning of personnel and administration of the Dakar-Saint Louis line, placing it under military authority. The decree of the Governor even states: *"Troops will first of all use their rifle butts. An attack by small weapons will be met with the use of bayonets [...] It will be indispensable for troops to shoot in order to assure the security of personnel of the administration is not put in danger..."* And the French authorities concluded that the laws and rules governing the army became immediately applicable.

However, neither this terrible decision for a decidedly repressive response, nor the arrogant uproar accompanying its implementation, succeeded in preventing the strike from taking place: *"At 18h 30, Lachere (civil chief of the network) cabled the boss of the Federation that, 'odd number trains not leaving today; trains four and six have left, the second stopped at Rufisque...' and urgently insisted on advisability of giving in to the demand of the workers. Rail traffic was almost completely paralysed. It was the same thing at Dakar, Saint Louis, Rufisque. The entire network was on strike, Europeans and Africans... ; arrests were made here and there, attempts to oppose the workers on racial grounds came to nothing. Otherwise, some personnel went to the stations without working, others purely and simply defected. In the morning of April 15th, there was a total strike in Rufisque. No European or African worker was present. Consequently the order was given to close the station. The centre of the strike was found here. Never has Senegal known a movement of such breadth. For the first time a strike has been undertaken by Europeans and Africans and has succeeded so vividly, and at the level of the territory. Members of the ruling elite were going mad. Giraud, President of the Chamber of Commerce, has made contact with the rail workers and tried to conciliate. Maison Maurel and Prom warned its management in Bordeaux. Maison Vielles sent its Marseille headquarters this alarmist telegram: 'Situation untenable, act!' Giraud went on the offensive, going directly to the President of the Syndicate for the Defence of Senegalese Interests (i.e. the bosses) in Bordeaux, criticising the nonchalance of the authorities."* [14]

Panic gripped the leadership of the colonial administration faced with the flames of the workers' struggle. Following pressure from the economic leadership of the colony, both on the bosses in France and on central government, the authorities in Paris had to give the green light to negotiations with the strikers. Following this, the Governor General convened a meeting with representatives of the latter (on the second day of the strike) with proposals favouring the demands of the strikers. And when the Governor expressed his wish to meet railway worker delegates made up solely of Europeans, the workers replied by refusing to agree to the plan without the presence of African workers on the same equitable footing as their white comrades. In fact, the workers on strike distrusted their interlocutors and not without reason, because after giving satisfaction to the rail workers on the main points of their demands, the authorities continued their manoeuvres and hesitations regarding some demands of the native workers. But that only increased the combativity of the railway workers, who quickly decided to go back on strike, giving rise to new pressures from the representatives of the French bourgeoisie in Dakar on the central government in Paris. This is what's shown in the following telegrams:

"It is urgent that satisfaction is given immediately to the personnel of DSL and the decision is notified without delay otherwise we risk a new strike" (the representative of big business);

"I ask you straightaway... to give approval to arbitration by the Governor General transmitted in my cable of the 16th... very urgent before May 1st, if (as seems probable) we are going to have a new work stoppage on this date" (Director of the Railways);

"Despite my counsels, the strike will resume if the company doesn't give satisfaction" (the Governor General). [15]

Visibly, there was general panic among the colonial authorities at all levels. In brief, in the end, the French government gave its approval to the arbitration of its Governor by validating the agreement negotiated with the strikers. Work restarted on April 16th. Once again, the working class pulled off a great victory over the forces of capital thanks notably to its class unity and above all to the development of its class consciousness.

But in addition to the satisfaction of the demands of the rail workers, this movement had positive consequences for other workers; in fact the 8-hour day was extended throughout the colony following the strike. What's more, faced with the bosses' resistance in accepting it and faced with the dynamic of struggle created by the rail workers, workers from other branches also went into struggle to make themselves heard.

The postal strike

After this, in order to obtain increases in wages and better conditions of work, workers of the PTT (postal service) of Saint-Louis went on strike May 1st 1919. It lasted for 12 hours and ended up with the postal services almost paralysed. Faced with the breadth of the movement, the colonial authority requisitioned the army to provide a specialised force for ensuring the continuity of public services. But this military body was far from being able to effectively play the role of blackleg. The administrative authority thus had to agree to negotiate with the postal strike committee, which was offered a wage increase of 100%. In fact: *"The duplicity of the colonial authorities soon restarted the strike movement which took off with renewed vigour, braced without doubt by the enticing perspectives that it had glimpsed for a moment. It lasted up to May 12th and ended in total success."* [16]

Once again, here was a victory gained by the PTT workers thanks to their militant stance. Decidedly, the workers showed themselves more and more conscious of their strength and their class affiliation.

In fact all public services were more and more affected by the movement. Numerous occupational categories were able to benefit from the fall-out of the struggle unleashed by the workers of the PTT: after they had obtained substantial wage increases, it was the turn of workers in the public sector, farm workers, teachers, health workers, etc. But the success of the movement didn't stop there: again the representatives of capital refused to surrender.

Threat of a new railworkers strike and the political manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie

Following the movement of the postal workers and six months after the victorious end of their movement, the indigenous rail workers decided to strike without their European comrades by addressing the authorities with new demands: *“In this letter, we ask for an improvement of pay and modifications of the rules regarding indigenous personnel... We take the liberty of saying to you that we can no longer lead the life of the galley and we hope that you will avoid it by taking measures of which you alone will be responsible... and we would like, just like the fixed personnel (formed almost exclusively of Europeans), to be recompensed. Act on our regard as you would act on their regard and everything will be for the best.”* [17]

The indigenous workers wanted to benefit from the material advantages that some workers had acquired following the strike of PTT workers. But above all they wanted to be treated the same as the European workers, the key being the threat of a new strike.

“The initiative of the indigenous workers of the DSL had, quite naturally, aroused the lively interest of the bosses. Given that the 13th to 15th April movement had been a crowning success because of the unity of the action, it was necessary to do everything to ensure that this new trench opening up between European and African workers would be reinforced. The best way to weaken the movement of workers would be to let them exhaust themselves in fratricidal rivalries, which would undermine any future coalition.

“The network’s administration thus worked to accentuate the disparities in order to increase the frustration of the indigenous workers’ milieu in the hope of rendering definitive the rupture that was opening up.” [18]

Consequently the colonial authorities moved cynically into action, deciding not to adjust the income of the natives in relation to those of the Europeans, but, on the contrary to noisily increase the earnings of the latter while holding back on the demands of the local rail workers. The evident aim was to deepen the gap between the two groups, setting one against the other to neutralise both.

But fortunately, sensing the trap being laid by the colonial authorities, the indigenous rail workers avoided a strike in these conditions, deciding to wait for better days. We can also note that while they gave the impression of having forgotten the importance of the class unity they had previously shown in allying with their European comrades, the indigenous rail workers were still able to decide to widen their movement to other categories of workers (public and private services, European as well as African). In any case, they were able to recognise the uneven character of class unity, to see that class consciousness develops slowly in ups and downs. Let’s also remember that the colonial power institutionalised racial and ethnic divisions from the first contacts between Europeans and Africans. This did not mean there would be no other attempts at unity between African and European workers.

The revolt of Senegalese sailors at Santos (Brazil) in 1920: strike and repression

We learn from the recollections of a French consul of the existence of a struggle undertaken by some sailors on the *Vapeur Provence* (enlisted in Marseille) at Santos around May 1920. This was an example of workers' solidarity followed by fierce police repression. Here's how this diplomat relates the event: *"Undisciplined acts occurred on board the Vapeur Provence... I went to Santos and, after enquiries, I punished the main guilty parties... 4 days in prison and I led them to the town's prison in the interest of the security of the navy... All the Senegalese stokers showing solidarity with their comrades took a threatening attitude despite my formal defence... And the Senegalese tried to release their comrades, following the police agents and making threats and insults, and the local authority finally had to proceed with their arrest."* [19]

In fact, these were worker-sailors (stokers, greasers, seamen) some of whom were registered in Dakar, others at Marseille, employed by big business to ensure the transport of goods between the three continents. The problem is that the diplomat's notes say nothing about the cause of the revolt. It seems however that this movement had links with another that happened in 1919 when Senegalese sailors, following a struggle, were disembarked and replaced by some Europeans (according to police sources). Following that, after the strike, many of the Senegalese union members decided to quit the CGT, which had approved this decision, and join the CGTU (the latter being a split from the former).

In any case, this event seems to have seriously concerned the colonial authorities as is shown in the following account:

"The consul, fulminating more than ever, vehemently demanded that when they arrived at Dakar, the guilty were handed over to the competent tribunal, and showed his surprise and indignation in these terms: 'The attitude of these individuals is such that it constitutes a real danger for the ships on which they will sail in the future and for the general security of the general staff and crew. They are animated by the worst spirit, have lost, or never had, the least respect for discipline and believe they have the right to give orders to the commandant'.

"They discovered, without a doubt and for the first time, the state of spirit of the Senegalese after the First World War and were evidently scandalised by the mood of contestation and their determination not to accept without reacting what they considered as an attempt on their rights and liberties. The working class was developing politically and on the trade union level." [20]

This was a magnificent class combat by the maritime workers who, despite an unfavourable balance of forces, were able to show the enemy their determination, achieving self-respect by showing solidarity in the struggle.

1920: the re-launch of the rail workers' action ends in victory

We've already seen that, following the victorious movement of workers of the PTT (in 1919), the indigenous rail workers wanted to rush into this breach by going on strike, before finally deciding to cancel their action due to the lack of favourable conditions.

Six months after this episode, they decided to re-launch their protest action in earnest. The movement of the rail workers was first of all motivated by the general degradation of living conditions due to the disastrous conditions of the Great War, which accentuated the discontent of the workers and of the population in general. The cost of living in the main towns underwent dizzying increases. Thus, the price of a kilo of millet, which in December 1919 was 0.75F, tripled in the space of four months. And a kilo of meat went from 5F to 7F, chicken 6F to 10F, etc.

A note from the Inspector General of Public Works of April 13th, in which he asked his superiors not to apply the law on the 8-hour day in the colony, was the last straw. It immediately revived the latent discontent smouldering among the rail workers since their protest movement of December 1919. The workers on the railway went into action on June 1st 1920: *"It was the first strike movement undertaken at the ethnic level by the workers on the railways, which explains the rapidity and unanimity with which the business community received the event and decided to remedy it... From the first of June, they called on the States General of Colonial Trade in Senegal, addressing their concerns to the Federation Chief, and inviting him not to stand by during the deterioration in the social climate."* [21]

The indigenous rail workers thus decided to launch a new showdown with the colonial authorities in order to achieve the same demands. But this time the African rail workers seemed to have drawn the lessons of the aborted action by enlarging the social base of the movement with several delegates representing each trade, fully entrusting them to negotiate collectively with the political and economic authorities. As a matter of fact, from the second day of the strike, unease grew among the main colonial authorities. Thus alerted by the Dakar economic decision-makers, the Minister of the Colonies sent a cable to the Governor in the following terms: *"It has been pointed out to me that following the strike 35,000 tonnes of uncovered grain awaiting delivery is held up in different stations of Dakar-Saint Louis"*. From here, pressure mounted on the Director of the Rail Network, pushing him to respond to the demands of the wage earners. And this "station master" responded to his superiors in the following way: *"We fear that if a new increase in wages, so high and so little justified, was granted, it could have a general impact on the demands of all personnel and encourage them to present us with new demands."*

Straightaway, the network's management tried hard to break the strike by playing black against white (which had previously succeeded). Thus, on the third day of the movement, it managed to get together a train of goods and passengers, thanks to the co-operation of a European engine driver and stokers from the navy under escort from the forces of order. But when the management tried to play this card again, it couldn't find any worker ready to play its game because this time, following strong pressure exerted on them by the indigenous strikers, the European rail workers decided to remain "neutral". Afterwards, we find in a report of the Deputy Governor of Senegal: [22] *"The workers of Dakar-Saint Louis have declared that if they have no satisfaction at the end of the month, they will leave Dakar to work on farming in the lougans [23] in the colony's interior."*

At this point (the sixth day of the strike), the Governor of Senegal convened a meeting of all his social partners to notify them of a series of measures, elaborated by his own services, to meet the strikers' demands; at the end of the day, the strikers got what they were asking for. Clearly the workers gained a new victory thanks to their combativity and a better organisation of the strike, and it is this that enabled

them to impose a balance of force over the representatives of the bourgeoisie: *“What appears certain however is that the workers’ mentality, grew stronger through these tests and more refined about the stakes involved, with more widespread forms of struggle and attempts at union co-ordination in a sort of broad class front faced with combative bosses.”* [24]

But even more significant in this development of a class front was June 1st 1920, the day the rail workers started their strike: *“the tugboat crews stopped work a few hours later, despite the promise they had given, noted the Deputy Governor, to await the outcome of the talks that Martin, Chief of the Maritime Inspection Service, had been responsible for leading. We have here the first deliberate attempt to co-ordinate strike movements simultaneously unleashed by... rail workers and port workers, that is, personnel of the two sectors that constituted the lungs of the colony whose concerted paralysis blocked all economic and commercial activity, in and out... The situation appeared even more worrying (for the Administration), since the bakers of Dakar had also threatened to strike on the same day, and would certainly have done so if immediate increases in their wages had not been granted.”* [25]

Similarly, at the same time, other strike movements broke out at the Han/Thiaroye yards and yards on the Dakar-Rufisque route. Police sources reporting this event say nothing about the origin of the simultaneous explosion of these different movements. However, by putting together several pieces of information from this same colonial police source, we can conclude that the extension of this struggle movement was not unconnected with the Governor’s attempt to break the maritime transport strike. Without saying so openly, the colonial state representative first of all called in the navy with some European civilian teams to provide transport services between Dakar and Goree [26] and this seems to have provoked solidarity action by workers in other sectors: *“Did this intervention of the state on the side of the bosses arouse the solidarity of other occupational branches? Without being able to decisively confirm it we can note that the strike broke out almost simultaneously with the attempts to break the movement of the crews in public works.”* [27]

In fact, we know that after five days the movement was crumbling under the double impact of state repression and rumours of the bosses’ decision to replace the strikers with blacklegs.

“The workers, feeling that the length of their action and the intervention of the military could change the balance of forces and jeopardise the successful conclusion of their action, had, on the seventh day of their strike softened their initial demands by formulating their platform based on the following... The Administration and the bosses were united in rejecting these new proposals, forcing the strikers to continue their movement in desperation or else end it on the local authorities’ conditions. They opted for the latter solution.” [28]

Clearly, the strikers had to return to work effectively on their old salary plus the “ration”, with the balance of forces squarely in the bourgeoisie’s favour and recognising the dangers of pursuing their movement in isolation. We can say here that the working class suffered a defeat but the fact of having retreated in good order meant that it wasn’t so profound, nor did it wipe out the workers’ understanding of the more numerous and important victories that it had gained.

To sum up, the period from 1914 to 1920 was strongly marked by intense class confrontations between the colonial bourgeoisie and the working class emerging in the colony of French West Africa; and this in a revolutionary context at the world level. French capital was fully conscious of this because it felt the full force of the proletarian struggle.

“The activities of the world communist movement, during the same period, underwent an uninterrupted development, marked notably by the entry onto the scene of the first expression of African marxism; [29] breaking with the utopian approach that his brothers had adopted towards colonial problems, he developed the first native explanation of this question we know, the first serious and profound critique of colonialism as a system of exploitation and domination.” [30]

Among the workers who were at the front of the strike movements in Senegal in the period from 1914 to 1920, some were close to the former “young infantrymen” demobilised or survivors from the First World War. For example, the same sources tell us of the existence at that time of a handful of Senegalese unionists, one of whom, a certain Louis Ndiaye (a young sailor of 13) was a militant of the CGT from 1905 and the representative of this organisation in the colonies between 1914 and 1930. In this respect, like many other “young infantrymen”, he was mobilised in 1914-18 into the navy where he managed to survive. Both he and another young Senegalese, Lamine Senghor, who was close to the PCF in the 1920s, were clearly influenced by the ideas of the Communist International. In this sense, and along with other figures of the 1920s, we can consider that they played a major and dynamic role in the process of politicisation and the development of class-consciousness in the ranks of the workers of the first colony of French West Africa.

[1]. This term designates trade other than local at the time, essentially the import/export business controlled by a few families.

[2]. Quoted in Iba Der Thiam, *Histoire du mouvement syndical africain 1790-1929*, Editions L’Harmattan, 1991.

[3] - [5]. Ibid.

[6]. See *Afrique noire, l’Ere coloniale 1900-1945*, Jean Suret-Canale, Editions Sociales, Paris 1961.

[7]. Thiam, op.cit.

[8]. Ibid.

[9]. Suret-Canale, op. cit.

[10]. Ibid. It’s worth recalling here what we said at the time of the publication of the first part of this article in *International Review* n° 145: “...if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events. It’s the same for certain ideas, for example when they talk about ‘union consciousness’ instead of ‘class consciousness’ (of workers), or again ‘union movement’ (instead of workers’ movement). Otherwise, up to another order, we have confidence in their scientific rigour as long as their theses don’t come up against historical facts and don’t prevent other interpretations.” In a more general way we want to underline again that during a period of the life of capitalism, the unions effectively constituted real organs of struggle of the working class in defence of its immediate interests within capitalism. They were then integrated into the capitalist state and with that lost any possibility of being used by the working class in its combat against exploitation. [NB. Part of the section quoted above was omitted from the version of the article published in the English language edition of *International Review* n° 145.]

[11] - [21]. Ibid.

[22]. The Governor of Senegal was subordinate to the Governor General of FWA.

[23]. Cultivation areas created by burning down forests.

[24]. Thiam, op. cit.

[25]. Ibid.

[26]. A Senegalese island situated in the Bay of Dakar.

[27]. Thiam, op. cit.

[28]. Ibid.

[29]. This reference is to Lamine Senghor, see below.

[30]. Thiam, op.cit.

3. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 3): The 1920s & 30s

1923: “The Bordeaux Agreement” or “class collaboration” pact

It was in this year that that “the Bordeaux Agreement” was signed; a “treaty of friendship” between the colonial economic interests [\[1\]](#) and Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy to sit in the French National Assembly. Having drawn lessons from the magnificent insurrectionary strike in Dakar in May 1914 and its repercussions in subsequent years, [\[2\]](#) the French bourgeoisie had to reorganise its political apparatus to deal with the inexorable rise of the young proletariat in its African colony. It was in this context that it decided to use Blaise Diagne, making him “mediator/peacemaker” in conflicts between the classes, in fact a counter-revolutionary role. Indeed, the day after his election as deputy and having been a major witness to the insurrectionary movement against the colonial power, in which he himself had been involved at the beginning, Diagne was now faced with three options to play a historic role in future events: 1) to profit from the political weakening of the colonial bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the general strike, in which it suffered a defeat, by triggering a “national liberation struggle”; 2) to fight for the communist program by raising the banner of proletarian struggle inside the colony, profiting in particular from the success of the strike; 3) to bolster his own personal political interests by allying himself with the French bourgeoisie which at this time was holding out its hand to him.

Diagne eventually chose the last course, namely an alliance with the colonial power. In reality, the “Bordeaux Agreement” showed that the French bourgeoisie was not only afraid of working class militancy in its African colony, but was equally concerned by the international revolutionary situation.

“...Given the turn of events, the colonial government set about winning the black deputy’s support so that his powers of persuasion and his foolhardy courage could be used to serve the colonial power and

its commercial interests. This way it would be able to pull the rug from under the feet of the African elite whose minds were running away with them when, at the time, the October Revolution (1917), the Pan-black movements and the threat of world communism were having a dangerously seductive affect in the colonies on the thinking of the colonised.

"[...] Such was the real meaning of the agreement signed in Bordeaux on June 12th, 1923. It marked the end of the combative and headstrong Diagnism and opened up a new era of collaboration between the colonisers and colonised, and left the deputy stripped of all his charisma that up to this point was his major political asset. A great impetus had been lost." [3]

The first black member of the African colony remains faithful to French capital until death

To better understand the meaning of this agreement between the colonial bourgeoisie and the young deputy, let's retrace the path of the latter. Blaise Diagne was noticed very early on by the representatives of French capital, who saw him playing a future role in their political strategy and steered him in this direction. Indeed, Diagne had a strong influence on urban youth through the Young Senegalese Party that supported his campaign. With the support of youth, especially educated and intellectual youth, he entered the electoral arena in April 1914 and secured the single post of deputy with responsibility for the whole of French West Africa (FWA). Let's recall that we were on the eve of massive imperialist slaughter and it was in these circumstances that the famous general strike broke out in May 1914 when, after mobilising the youth of Dakar with the prospect of mounting a formidable revolt, Diagne tried unsuccessfully to stop it, not wanting to jeopardise his interests as a young petit-bourgeois deputy.

In fact, once elected, he was responsible for ensuring the interests of big business on the one hand and enforcing the "laws of the Republic" on the other. Even before the Bordeaux Agreement was signed, Diagne had distinguished himself by successfully recruiting 72,000 "Senegalese Sharpshooters" for the global butchery of 1914-1918. It was for this reason that, in January 1918, he was appointed Commissioner of the Republic by the then French prime minister Georges Clemenceau. Given the reluctance of young people and their parents to be enrolled, he toured the African villages of FWA to persuade reluctant individuals and, by the use of propaganda and intimidation, managed to recruit tens of thousands of African young men to be sent off to their deaths.

He was also a strong advocate of that abominable "forced labour" in the French colonies, as indicated by his speech at the fourteenth session of the International Labour Office in Geneva [4].

All in all, the first black member of the African colony was never a real supporter of the workers' cause; on the contrary, ultimately he was just a counter-revolutionary opportunist. Furthermore the working class would soon come to realise it: "*...as if the Bordeaux Agreement had convinced the workers that the working class was now able to lead the march itself in the fight against economic injustice and for social and political equality, the trade union struggles were given, like a pendulum swing, an exceptional boost.*" [5] Clearly, Diagne could not long keep the trust of the working class, and he remained faithful to his colonial sponsors until his death in 1934.

1925: a year of heightened militancy and solidarity faced with police repression

“The year of 1925 was shaken by three great social conflicts all of which had important consequences and all of which were indeed on the railways. First there was a strike of indigenous and European railwaymen in Dakar - Saint-Louis, from January 23rd to 27th, for economic demands; next, shortly afterwards, there was the threat of a general strike in Thies-Kayes, planned around specific demands including trade union rights; and finally, there was the workers' revolt in Bambara, on the railway construction site at Ginguinéo, a revolt where soldiers were called in to suppress it and refused to do so.” [6]

And yet the time was not particularly favourable for entering into struggle because to discourage working class militancy the colonial authorities had adopted a series of extremely repressive measures.

“During 1925, on the recommendations of the Governors General, particularly the one of FWA, some draconian measures were imposed by the Department for the Colonies specifically making revolutionary propaganda illegal.

“In Senegal, new instructions from the Federation (the two French colonies, FWA, FEA) had led to increased surveillance across the whole territory. And in each of the colonies of the group, a special service was established in conjunction with the General Security Service, to centralise in Dakar, and examine, all the evidence from the listening posts.

“[...] A new emigration regime with new arrangements for identifying natives was drawn up in the Ministry in December 1925. Every foreigner and every suspect had a file thereafter; the foreign press was under strict control, and it was commonplace for newspapers to be shut down [...] The mail was systematically violated, shipments of papers opened and often destroyed.” [7]

Once again, the colonial power trembled at the announcement of a new outbreak of working class struggle, hence its decision to establish a police state to take tight control of civil life and contain any social unrest arising in the colony, but also, and above all, to avoid contact between the workers in struggle in the colonies and their class brothers around the world; hence the draconian measures against “revolutionary propaganda”. And yet, in this context, important workers' struggles could violently erupt, despite all the repressive arsenal wielded by the colonial state.

A highly political railway strike

On January 24th 1925, European and African railway workers came out on strike together, establishing a strike committee and raising the following demands: *“The employees of the Dakar - Saint-Louis railway unanimously agreed to halt the traffic on January 24th. They only took this action after much consideration and after feeling genuinely aggrieved. They had had no wage increase since 1921, despite the steady increase in the cost of living in the colony. Most of the Europeans were getting less than 1,000 francs in their monthly salary and a native got a daily wage of 5 francs. They were after higher wages to be able to live decent lives.”* [8]

Indeed, the very next day, all employees in the various sectors of the railway left their machines, their workshops and offices, paralysing the railway for a short time. But this movement was above all highly political in nature in that it came right in the middle of a legislative campaign, forcing the parties and their candidates to take a clear position on the demands of the strikers. As a result, from that moment, the various politicians and commercial lobbies called on the colonial administration to get them back to work immediately by meeting the employees' demands. And right away, on the second day of the strike, the railway workers' demands were met in full. In fact, the members of the jubilant strike committee delayed their response until after consulting the rank and file. Similarly, the strikers insisted on having the order to return to work from their delegates in writing and sent by special train to all the stations.

"The workers had once again won an important victory in the struggle, showing great maturity and determination, along with adaptability and realism. [...] This success is all the more significant from the fact that all workers of the network, European and native, who had been at loggerheads over issues of colour and had problems working together, had wisely set aside their differences as soon as the threat of the draconian labour laws was on the horizon. [...] The governor himself could not help but notice the maturity and the unity and the timing of the strike's organisation. The preparation, he wrote, had been very cleverly carried out. The mayor of Dakar himself, experienced and loved by the indigenous people, had not been notified of their participation. The timing of the deal was chosen so that commerce, to safeguard its own interests, supported the claims. The reasons given, with some justification, put the campaign in big trouble. In short, he concluded, everything came together for it to have its maximum effect and to give it the support of public opinion." [9]

This is a vivid illustration of the high level of militancy and class-consciousness shown by the working class of the French colony, where European and African workers collectively took charge of organising their victorious struggle. Here we have a brilliant lesson in class solidarity consolidating gains from all previous experiences of confrontation with the bourgeoisie. And this makes even clearer the international character of the workers' struggles at that time, despite the continual efforts of the bourgeoisie to "divide and rule".

In February 1925, the strike of telegraph office workers forces the authorities to back down after 24h

The movement of railwaymen had hardly finished when the telegraph office workers ('câblistes') went on strike, also raising many demands including a big wage increase and an improvement to their status. This movement came to an end after 24 hours for a good reason: *"With the collaboration of the local and metropolitan powers, thanks to the successful intervention from members of the elected bodies, complete order returned within 24 hours, because satisfaction was given in a partial settlement to the câblistes, as conceded in the granting of an standby allowance to all staff." [10]*

So, buoyed by this success, the telegraph workers (European and indigenous together) put the rest of their demands on the table, threatening to go out on strike immediately. They took advantage of the strategic position they occupied as highly skilled technicians in the administrative and economic machinery who were clearly able to shut down communication networks across the territory. For their

part, faced with the demands of the telegraph employees threatening a new strike, the bourgeoisie's representatives decided to retaliate with a campaign of intimidation and accusation against the strikers: *"How is it that the few functionaries who are agitating for an increase in pay can't see they are digging their own grave?"* [11]

In fact, political power and big business piled a great deal of pressure on the strikers, going as far as accusing them of trying to "deliberately destroy the economy" while also trying to undermine their unity. With the pressure intensifying, the workers decided to resume work on the basis of demands met at the end of the previous strike.

This episode was also one of the high points in the struggle when the unity between the European and African workers was fully achieved.

Rebellion in the Thies-Kayes railway yards, December 11th 1925

A rebellion broke out on this line when a group of about a hundred workers decided to cross swords with their boss, a captain of the colonial army. A cynical and authoritarian figure, he was accustomed to being obeyed without question and inflicted physical harm on workers he deemed "lazy".

"According to the investigation that had been carried out by the Administrator Aujas, commander of the Kaolack area, it appeared that a rebellion had broken out on December 11th because of "ill treatment" inflicted on these workers. The area commander added that, without admitting these statements entirely, captain Heurtematte acknowledged that he sometimes happened to hit a lazy and uncooperative labourer with a whip. [The incident] escalated after the captain had tied three Bambaras [an ethnic term], whom he took to be the main culprits, to stakes with ropes." [12]

And things went wrong for the captain when he began to whip the three workers because their comrades in the yard decided to put an end to their torturer for good. He was only saved in the nick of time by the arrival on site of soldiers called to his aid. *"The soldiers in question were French subjects from eastern Senegal and from Thies; having arrived there and heard what had happened, they unanimously refused the order to fire on the black workers. The poor captain said he had issued it as he feared for his life, assailed on all sides by a ferocious and menacing crowd."* [13]

This is quite remarkable because until now we were quite used to seeing the "sharpshooters" as submissive individuals, obediently accepting roles as "blacklegs" or outright "liquidators" of strikers. This gesture of fraternisation reminds us of other historical episodes where conscripts refused to use force against strikes or revolutions. The most famous example is of course the episode in the Russian Revolution where a large number of soldiers refused to fire on their revolutionary brothers, disobeying the orders from above despite the high risks involved.

The attitude of the "sharpshooters" against their captain was all the more heart-warming since the conditions of the time were dominated by a strong tendency towards the militarisation of social and economic life in the colony. Moreover, the affair took a highly political turn because the civil and military administration found itself very embarrassed by having to choose between punishing the soldiers'

insubordination and risk strengthening their solidarity with the workers, or playing the incident down. Eventually the Colonial authority chose the latter.

“But the affair strongly hit the headlines and threatened to create complications in interracial relations that were already a concern in a service like the railways, so the federal authorities, and local too, finally agreed on the need to smooth over the incident and to play it down, having already come to realise the disastrous consequences of the policy favouring racial collaboration introduced by Diagne in signing the Bordeaux Agreement which was already costing them dear.” [14]

Indeed, like its predecessors, this phase of struggle clearly exposed the limitations of the “Bordeaux Agreement” by which the deputy Blaise Diagne thought he had secured “collaboration” between the exploiters and exploited. But unfortunately for the colonial bourgeoisie, class-consciousness had been there.

The militant sailors’ strike in 1926

Like the previous year, 1926 was marked by an episode of struggle that was both very militant and very rich in terms of combativeness and class solidarity. This was all the more remarkable as the movement was launched in the same conditions of repression of social struggles, which in the previous year had seen a number of shipyards and other sectors continuously occupied by the forces of the police and gendarmerie in the name of “safeguarding” the economy.

“While the attacks on the railways continued inexorably [15] and the agitation spread to the sectors more attached to order and discipline of the ex-servicemen, the workers of the African Freight Co. of Saint-Louis launched a strike action, which would hold the record for the longest duration of all the social movements studied in this locality.

“It all started on September 29th when a telegram from the Lieutenant Governor informed the Head of the Maritime Federation that sailors of the African Freight Company in St. Louis had gone on strike for improved wages. In a real spirit of almost spontaneous solidarity, their colleagues in the Maison Peyrissac employed on the Steamship Cadenelle, then anchored in Saint- Louis, although not directly involved in the demands being pursued, also stopped work on October 1st.” [16]

Driven by frighteningly high rises in living costs, many sectors put forward wage demands with the threat of going on strike, and a large number of companies had agreed to give their employees wage increases. This was not the case for workers of the Freight Company, however, and this led them to take action with the support of their comrades on the steamship. Despite this, the bosses remained unmoved and refused any negotiations with the strikers until the fifth day of the strike, letting the action continue in the hope that it would quickly exhaust itself.

“But the movement retained the cohesion and solidarity of the first few days and on October 6th the management of the Freight Co., beset on all sides by commercial interests and secretly encouraged by the Administration to be more flexible, saw the danger in the situation and gave in suddenly. It made the following offer to the crews: ‘a monthly increase of 50 francs (regardless of category) and food for

sustenance (around 41 francs per month)'. [...] But the workers involved, wanting to show active solidarity with their colleagues at Maison Peyrissac, asked for and won the same benefits to be given to them. The management at this company gave in. On October 6th, the strike ended. The movement had lasted eight full days, during which time the unity of workers stayed solid throughout. This had been an event of great importance." [17]

Once again we are witnessing a formidable movement, providing clear insights into the vitality of the struggles of this time. In other words, the unfolding of the struggle provided the opportunity for a real expression of "active solidarity" (as Thiam says) between workers from different companies. What better example of solidarity than one crew demanding and obtaining the same benefits it had won through its strike for its comrades of another company in "gratitude" for the support received from them!

What to say too about the combativeness and cohesion that the workers of the freight company showed with their solid show of force against the might of capital!

The long and bitter strike of seamen from Saint-Louis in July-August 1928

The announcement of this strike was of great concern to the colonial authorities because it seemed to echo the demands of seamen in France who were preparing to enter the struggle at the same time as their African comrades.

At the Congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions (in the pay of Stalin) held in Paris in August 1927, an appeal was made in defence of the proletariat of the colonies, as related:

"An English delegate to the Congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)) in Paris, seizing the occasion... had particularly insisted on the existence in the colonies of millions of men subjected to unbridled exploitation, proletarians in the fullest sense, who now needed to become organised and engaged in trade union type actions, pressing for their demands in particular by using the weapon of protests and strikes. Echoing this, Koyaté (an African syndicalist) said himself that 'the right to organise has the power to resist in French Black Africa through mass strikes, in illegality'". [18]

In France unrest had been growing since June 1928 among seamen who were demanding a wage increase and were thus expected to strike on July 14th. But on the set date, it was the native seamen of the shipping companies in Saint-Louis who went on strike en masse, with the same demands as their comrades back in the home country. The reaction of the colonial authorities was to cry "international conspiracy" and point, among others, to two native union leaders as the "ring leaders" of the movement. And to deal with it, the Administration of the colony made a common front with the employers by combining political manoeuvres and repressive measures to break the strike.

"...Then the hard bargaining began. While the sailors were prepared to see their wage claim reduced by up to 25 francs, the bosses said it was impossible to award them more than 100 francs per month. As the workers (seeking 250 francs more), considered the offer inadequate, the strike continued unabated. "
[19]

The strikers of the St. Louis region found immediate support from other seamen:

“(State Archives) The head of the maritime Register tells us, in effect, that in the afternoon of the 19th, the ‘Cayor’ tugboat came from Dakar and arrived with the barge ‘Forez’. The boat had hardly anchored when the crew made common cause with the strikers with the exception of an old boatswain and another sailor. But he tells us that the next morning on July 20th, the strikers stormed aboard the ‘Cayor’ and forcibly dragged the two sailors who remained at their posts ashore. A brief demonstration outside the town hall was dispersed by police.” [20]

The strike lasted more than a month before being broken militarily by the colonial Governor who used force to remove the native crews and replaced them with troops. Exhausted by the long weeks of struggle, deprived of the necessary financial resources to support their families, in short to avoid starving, the sailors had to return to work; hence the smug satisfaction of the local representative of the colonial power who offered his own account of events: “[At the end of the strike] *the seamen asked to go back onto the ships of the African Freight Co. They returned to their old conditions, and the strike resulted in the sailors losing one month's salary, whereas, if they had listened to the proposals of the Head of the Maritime Register they would have benefited with an increase in their pay from 50 to 100 francs a month.*” [21]

This retreat of the strikers, realistic in the circumstances, was regarded by the bourgeoisie as a “victory” that announced the crisis of 1929, whose effects began to be felt locally. From then on, the colonial power was not slow to profit from its “victory” over the striking seamen and from the opportunity to strengthen its repressive forces.

“Confronted with this situation, the colonial Governor, aware of the political tensions already brewing from the declarations of Ameth Sow Télémaquem [22] talking about the coming revolution in Senegal, about the succession of social movements and the deteriorating financial situation and popular discontent, adopted two measures to maintain order.

“Firstly he had accelerated the process, begun in 1927, aimed at placing control of the Senegal security services in Dakar from where, he said, the surveillance of the colony would be increased. [...] The second measure was to more quickly put in place training for the gendarmerie responsible for policing Thies-Niger.” [23]

This meant: the presence of police assigned to escort duty on trains to “accompany” train crews with “intervention brigades” on all lines, measures aimed at individuals or groups who would be arrested and imprisoned if they defied police orders, while anyone stirring up “social unrest” (strikes and demonstrations) would be severely punished. Let us note that all these means of repression, increasing the militarisation of labour, were targeted principally at the two sectors that were the lungs of the colonial economy, namely the waterways and railways.

But despite all this military control, the working class did not cease to pose a threat to the colonial authorities.

“Yet when social unrest continued on sections of the railway in Thies, where strike action was threatened after the non-payment of back pay they were due, with the submission of claims for wage increases and a denunciation of the negligence of an administration that was completely disinterested in their fate, the Governor took these threats very seriously, working to establish, in 1929, a new private police force, this time composed of former military, mostly officers who, under the direction of the Commissioner of the special police, would ensure a permanent peace in the depot at Thies.” [24]

So in this period of acute social tensions related to the terrible world economic crisis, the colonial regime had no alternative but to rely more than ever on its armed forces to put an end to working class combativeness.

The Great Depression and the militarisation of labour weaken workers' combativeness

As we saw previously, the colonial power did not wait for the arrival of the 1929 crisis to militarise the world of work, because it began to resort to the army in 1925 faced with the pugnacity of the working class. But this situation, with both the deepening global economic crisis and the militarisation of labour, must have weighed heavily on the working class of the colony because, between 1930 and 1935, there were few struggles. In fact the only important class movement that we know of was that of the workers in the port of Kaolack:

“A short and violent strike in Kaolack on May 1st 1930: between 1500 and 2000 workers from peanut farms and from the port stopped work while loading the boats. They asked for the doubling of their wages of 7.50 francs. The police intervened and a striker was slightly injured. Work resumed at 1400 hours: the workers had won a wage of 10 francs a day.” [25]

This short yet vigorous strike brought to a close the series of dazzling struggles since 1914. In other words, 15 years of class confrontations after which the proletariat of the colony of French West Africa was able to stand up to its enemy and to build its identity as an autonomous class.

For its part, in the same period, the bourgeoisie showed its real nature as a bloodthirsty class by using every means at its disposal, including the most ferocious, to attempt to put an end to working class combativeness. But in the end it still had to regularly back down faced with the onslaughts of the working class, often giving in completely to the strikers' demands.

1936/1938: important workers' struggles under the Popular Front government

In the wake of the arrival of the Popular Front government of Leon Blum, there was a fresh explosion of working class combativeness with the outbreak of numerous strikes. Hence, there were no fewer than 42 “wildcat strikes” in Senegal between 1936 and 1938, including that of September 1938, which we will deal with below. This fact is especially significant as the unions had just been legalised, given “new rights”, by the Popular Front government, and therefore benefited from its legitimacy.

These struggles were often victorious. For example the one in 1937 when seamen of European origin on a French ship stopping over in the Ivory Coast, having become concerned by the miserable living conditions of the indigenous sailors (the Kroumen), encouraged the latter to demand better working conditions. But the native workers were evicted using military force by the colonial administrator, which straight away led to the French crew going out on strike in support of their African comrades to force the authorities to meet the full demands of the strikers.

Here yet again is an act of workers' solidarity that can be added to the many episodes cited above where unity and solidarity between Europeans and Africans was the source of many of the victorious struggles, despite their "racial differences".

1938: the railway strike arouses the hatred of the whole bourgeoisie against the workers

Another highly significant movement in terms of class confrontation was the strike of the railworkers in 1938, carried out by workers on short-term contracts whose demands had been "neglected" by the unions. In the case of the day labourers or auxiliaries, the more numerous and impoverished of railwaymen, they were paid daily, worked Sundays and public holidays, covered sick days, and worked a 54 hour week without any of the entitlements of the tenured staff, all of this with no guaranteed work on the next day.

It was these railwaymen who carried out the famous strike of 1938.

"The strike movement had moreover broken out spontaneously and outside the unions. On September 27th, the auxiliary railworkers (not the tenured staff) of Dakar-Niger went on strike in Thies and Dakar to protest against the arbitrary removal of one of their comrades.

"The next day, in the depot at Thies, the strikers organised a blockade to prevent the 'blacklegs' coming to work. The Dakar-Niger police tried to intervene, but were quickly overwhelmed, and the management of the railway appealed to the administrator who sent in the troops: the strikers defended themselves throwing stones, the army returned fire. There were six dead and thirty wounded. The next day (29th) there was a general strike across the network. On Thursday, 30th, an agreement was signed between the workers' delegates and the whole government on the following basis:

"1) No sanctions, 2) No interference with the right of association, 3) Compensation for the victims' families, 4) An investigation into the demands.

"On October 1st, the union gave the order to return to work." [26]

Here we see again a dramatic and heroic struggle waged by the railwaymen, outside the union's instructions, which made the colonial power back down, and this despite its resort to a blood-letting, using the army, as indicated by the number of deaths and injuries, not to mention the dozens of workers thrown in jail. To better gauge the barbaric nature of the repression, here is the testimony of a workman painter, one of the survivors of this carnage:

“When we learned of the assignment to Gossas of Cheikh Diack, a violent unease spread among the workers’ circles, especially the auxiliaries for whom he was the spokesman. We decided to oppose it by striking the next day when our boss was back at his post. I woke up that day, a Tuesday - I will always remember - I heard gunshots. I lived near the city Ballabey. A few moments later I saw my brother Domingo rush off to the Depot. I rushed after him, aware of the danger he faced. Soon I saw him crossing the railway line and then falling down a few yards further on. When I got near him, I thought he must have been struck by an illness because there was no obvious injury; when I raised him up, he was groaning. Blood flowed from a wound near his left shoulder. He died moments later in my arms. Drunk with rage, I rushed at the soldier in front of me. He fired at me. I advanced not realising I was hurt. I think it was the anger brewing inside me that gave me the strength to reach out and snatch his gun, his belt, his cap, then I knocked him out before falling unconscious.” [27]

This story illustrates the ferocity of the Senegalese sharpshooters towards the 'native' workers, ignoring the example shown by their colleagues who refused to fire on workers during the rebellion at the workshop at Thies in 1925. The striking workers showed a tremendous fighting spirit and admirable courage in defending their own interests and their dignity as members of the exploited class.

It’s important to point out here that before going out on strike, the workers were harassed by all the forces of the bourgeoisie, parties and various leaders, employers and trade unions. All of these representatives of capitalist order hurled insults at and intimidated the workers who dared to go on strike without the “blessing” of anyone but themselves, and indeed wild and hysterical Muslim religious leaders were unleashed on the strikers, at the request of the Governor, as recalled by Nicole Bernard-Duquet:

“He (the governor) also appealed to religious leaders and community elders; Nourou Seydou Tall, who had often acted as an emissary of the Governor-General, spoke in Thies (before the striking workers), Cheikh Amadou Moustapha Mbacke went round the network explaining that a good Muslim should not go on strike because it is a form of rebellion.” [28]

For once we can quite agree with this cynical cleric and say that a strike really is an act of rebellion not only against exploitation and oppression, but also against religious obscurantism.

As for the unions, which didn’t lead the struggle of the railwaymen, they still had to join the “bandwagon” so as not lose complete control of the movement. And here their state of mind is described by the strikers’ delegate: *“We asked for an increase of 1.50 francs per day for the most recent starters with up to 5 years service, 2.50 francs for those with 5 to 10 years, and 3.50 francs over 10 years, along with a travel allowance for the conductors, escorts, mechanics etc. [...] Incredible as it may seem, such claims were favourably received by the management of the network, but by contrast were undermined by the Union of Indigenous Workers of Dakar-Niger, which represented the more senior staff. Indeed, it couldn’t resign itself to seeing us win this first round. Its leaders were eager to have exclusive rights to the negotiations with the authorities of the network. The union situation at the time led to rivalries, obscure internecine struggles and competition for loyalty to the employers, which largely explains this position. As a result I was transferred to Dakar. Those in high places were naïve to believe that this action could stifle the protest movement that had arisen amongst the ‘lowest paid’” . [29]*

Again we see a clear demonstration of the betrayal of the workers' interests and the role played by the unions as "social peacemakers" on behalf of capital and the bourgeois state. Nicole Bernard-Duquenot sums it up:

"It is therefore almost certain that the secretaries of the unions have done everything to stop the threat of a strike that could cause trouble for the authorities.

"But in addition to the military and police forces, trade unions, employers and religious organisations, it was above all the press (of both right and left) that preyed like a hungry vulture on the strikers:

"The 'Courrier colonial' (employers' paper): 'In the home country we have long condemned the disastrous consequences of strikes, constantly provoked by the slogans of agitators, mostly foreigners or in the pay of foreigners, so that the colonial governments rush to combat energetically every vague impulse to transform our colonies into spheres of strike activity';

"'L'Action française' (right wing paper): 'Thus, while those marxists responsible for the rioting are clearly left alone, the Minister of Colonies is considering using sanctions against the Senegalese soldiers (and not against the strikers). And all this to please the socialists and save their creature, Governor General De Coppet, who is acting in a scandalous manner.'" [30]

Here we have an insight into the attitude of the media vultures of the right. Yet the approach of the left wing press was hardly less scathing:

"Newspapers supporting the Popular Front are very bitter. The FWA blames the strike on agents provocateurs, a 'pointless strike' [...] The 'Periscope Africain' speaks of a strike 'bordering on rebellion' where no striker was a member of the indigenous union. The Bulletin of the Federation of civil servants condemns the use of bullets to disperse the strikers, interprets the strike as a riot, and says the auxiliaries are neither in the CGT or communists. They are not even union supporters. 'It's all the Fascists' fault.'

"Le Populaire (SFIO) blames the incidents on a 'local right-wing party violently opposed to the CGT and to fascist intrigues of certain unionists (a reference to the strikers' spokesman)'." [31]

And to characterize all these vile anti-working class reactions, let's listen to the conclusions of the historian Iba Der Thiam when he says this:

"As we see it, the events that occurred in Thies were seen on the left and on the right, as the extension of French internal politics, that is to say, a struggle between democrats and fascists in the absence of any concrete and plausible social motivation.

"It is this erroneous assessment, which would explain in large measure why the railway strike in Thies has never been adequately taken up by French unions, even the most advanced.

"[...] The recriminations of FWA and Periscope Africain, against the strikers, are similar in many respects to the articles of Le Populaire and L'Humanite". [32]

In other words, the press of the right and left has a similar attitude to the strike movement of the railwaymen. We see it all in that last paragraph; we see there the unanimity of the forces of the bourgeoisie, national and colonial, against the working class in its struggle against poverty and for dignity. These heinous reactions of the left press against striking workers confirm more than anything the final enrolling of the “Communist Party” into the ranks French capital, knowing that this was already the case with the “Socialist Party” since 1914. In addition, we should recall that this anti-working class conduct was taking place in the context of the military preparations of the Second World War, during which the French left played a key role in enlisting the proletariat in the French homeland as in the African colonies.

[1]. This refers to the big businesses dominated by Bordeaux merchants like Maurel & Prom, Peyrissac, Chavanel, Vezia, Deves, etc., a group with the monopoly of credit from the sole Bank of West Africa.

[2]. A general strike and a riot over five days spread throughout the Dakar region, totally paralysing economic and political life and forcing the colonial bourgeoisie to give in to strikers' demands (see *International Review* n° 146).

[3]. Iba Der Thiam, *History of the African Trade Union Movement 1790-1929*, Editions L'Harmattan, 1991.

[4]. See *Black Africa, the Colonial Era 1900-1945*, Jean Suret-Canale, Editions Sociales, Paris 1961.

[5]. Thiam, *ibid.* It's worth recalling here what we said at the time of the publication of the first part of this article in *International Review* n° 145: “...if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events. It's the same for certain ideas, for example when they talk about ‘union consciousness’ instead of ‘class consciousness’ (of workers), or again ‘union movement’ (instead of workers’ movement). Otherwise, up to another order, we have confidence in their scientific rigour as long as their theses don't come up against historical facts and don't prevent other interpretations.” [NB. Part of the section quoted above was omitted from the version of the article published in the English language edition of *International Review* n° 145.]

[6] - [14]. *Ibid.*

[15]. The information we have does not give any indication who perpetrated these attacks.

[16]. Thiam, *ibid.*

[17] - [21]. *Ibid.*

[22]. African trade union member of the IFTU social democratic tendency.

[23]. Thiam, *ibid.*

[24]. Thiam, *ibid.*

[25]. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, *Le Sénégal et le Front populaire*, L'Harmattan, 1985

[26]. Jean Suret-Canale, *op. cit.*

[27]. Antoine Mendy, quoted by the publication *Senegal d'Aujourd'hui*, n° 6, March 1964.

[28]. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, *op. cit.*

[29]. Cheikh Diack, cited by the same newspaper, *Senegal d'Aujourd'hui*

[30]. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, *op. cit.*

[31]. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, *op. cit.*

[32]. Iba Der Thiam, *The railway strike of Senegal in September 1938*, Masters Thesis, Dakar 1972.

4. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 4): Second World War to 1968

It is well known that French imperialism liberally drew its cannon fodder from among the youth of its African colonies, as was demanded by its high level involvement in the Second World War. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of foot soldiers, the overwhelming majority of them young workers and unemployed, were enrolled and sacrificed in the bloody imperialist slaughter. With the conflict over, a period of reconstruction opened up for the French economy whose repercussions were felt in the colony in an unbearable exploitation that the workers began to courageously struggle against.

Bloody suppression of the soldiers' revolt and strike action

It began with the revolt of the soldiers who had survived the great world butchery, who rebelled against the non-payment of money owed to them. Having returned home to a demob camp in Thiaroye (a Dakar suburb) in December 1944, hundreds of soldiers demanded a pension from the "provisional government" headed by General de Gaulle. The blunt response they received from their commanders was a hail of bullets. Officially 35 were killed in the attack, 33 injured and 50 arrested. This is how the workers and veteran fighters who had supported the "liberators" of France were thanked by the latter, who included in their ranks the "communist" and "socialist" members of de Gaulle's government. The famous "French Resistance" gave a great lesson in "humanism" and "brotherhood" to its "native foot soldiers" in rebellion against the non-payment of their meagre pensions.

However, this bloody response of the French bourgeoisie to the demands of the rebels could not prevent the outbreak of sustained struggles. In fact a general unrest was about to unfold:

"The teachers' strike action broke out first, from December 1st to 7th 1945, and then it was the industrial workers from December 3rd to 10th. The strike broke out again in January, with the steelworkers again involved, but also employees in the commercial sector and the ancillary staff of the Governor General. The requisition measures taken by the Governor on January 14th 1946 provoked a general strike supported by 27 unions. The civil servants only resumed work on January 24th, those in the commercial sector on February 4th, and the steelworkers on February 8th." [1]

Despite suffering terribly during the war, the working class was beginning to raise its head again in rebellion against poverty and exploitation.

But the resumption of combativity was taking place in a new environment that wasn't conducive to working class autonomous action. In fact, the proletariat of French West Africa (FWA) in the post-war period could not avoid being caught between the advocates of Pan-African ideology (independence) and the colonial forces of the left of capital (SFIO, PCF and the trade unions). But despite this, the working class continued its struggle against the attacks of capitalism with great pugnacity.

The heroic and victorious strike of the railway workers between October 1947 and March 1948

During this period the railway workers across the whole of FWA went on strike to satisfy a number of demands, including that both Africans and Europeans should be employed on the same basis and in opposition to 3,000 employees being made redundant.

“Railway workers were originally organised within the CGT. Some 17,500 of these workers left in 1948 following a very hard strike. During this strike, a number of the French employees had expressed violent opposition to any improvement in the situation of the African staff.” [2]

The railway strike ended victoriously through the active solidarity of workers in other sectors (dockworkers and others employed in the industrial sector) who went on strike for 10 days, forcing the colonial authorities to satisfy most of the strikers’ demands. Everything was decided during a big meeting in Dakar called by the Governor General. In the hope of putting a brake on the movement, the floor was given over to political notables and religious leaders whose mission was to beguile and to intimidate the strikers. And customarily, the most zealous were the religious leaders.

“A campaign was undertaken by the ‘spiritual leaders’, the imams and the priests from different sects, to demoralise the strikers and especially their wives ... The imams, furious at the resistance of the workers to their injunctions, railed against the delegates, accusing them of every possible sin: atheism, alcoholism, prostitution, infant mortality, even going so far as to predict that these sinners would bring about the end of the world.” [3]

But nothing was achieved. Despite being accused of all these “sins”, the railway workers were determined and their combativity stayed intact. It was strengthened even further when their appeal for solidarity in a general assembly found increasing support from workers in other sectors who chanted: *“We, the builders, are for the strike! We, the port workers, are for the strike! We, the steelworkers... We, the...”*. [4]

And indeed, the very next day, there was a general strike in almost every sector. However, before this could happen, the railway workers not only had to suffer pressure from the political and religious leaders, but were also subjected to terrible repression from the military. Some sources [5] indicate that people died, and the colonial authority used its “sharpshooters” to suppress a “march of women” (the wives and relatives of the rail workers) to Dakar that was in support of the strikers.

The working class can only rely on itself. It’s symbolic that the CGT collected financial contributions from Paris, and back in FWA it criticised “those who wanted their independence” and who launched a “political strike”. In fact, the CGT took cover behind “the opinions” of the European citizens of the colony who rejected the demands of the “natives”. In addition, this behaviour of the CGT pushed the native railway workers to abandon the Stalinist union *en masse* following this magnificent class combat.

SFIO, PCF, unions and African nationalists divert the struggle of the working class

The railway workers' strike that ended in March 1948 took place in an atmosphere of great political turmoil following the referendum giving birth to the "Union Francaise". [6] Hence the actions of the railway workers acquired a highly political dimension, obliging all the political colonial forces and those in favour of independence to tactically position themselves either in favour or against the strikers' demands. So the PCF was seen hiding behind the CGT to sabotage the strike movement, while the SFIO in power attempted to suppress the movement using every possible means. For their part, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Sekou Toure, two rival Pan-Africanists who would become presidents of Senegal and Guinea respectively, openly declared themselves in support of the demands of the railway workers.

But the day after the strikers' victory, the left forces and African nationalists clashed, each claiming to be for the working class. By exploiting the struggles of the working class to serve their own interests, they managed to divert the autonomous struggle of the proletariat from its real class objectives.

Thus, the unions took up the question of the Labour Code to poison relations between workers. Indeed, through this "code", the French social legislation had established a real geographic and ethnic discrimination in the colonies: firstly, between workers of European origin and workers of African origin and secondly, between those hailing from different colonies, even between citizens of the same country. [7] It turned out that the SFIO (forerunner to today's French Socialist Party), which had promised the abolition of the iniquitous Labour Code in 1947, prevaricated until 1952, providing the unions, particularly those in favour of African independence, to focus the workers' demands exclusively on this question by systematically raising the slogan of "equal rights for white and black". This idea of equal rights and negotiating with Africans was openly opposed by the most backward European union, the CGT, and we should say that in this situation the CGT played a particularly despicable role insofar as it justified its position by the support it gained from its opposition.

Moreover, in response, the CGT militants of African origin [8] decided to create their own union to defend the "specific rights" of African workers. All this gave rise to the formulation of increasingly nationalist and interclassist demands as this passage from the organisation's rulebook illustrates:

"The concepts adopted [those of French metropolitan unionism] insufficiently illuminate the evolution and the tasks of economic and social progress in Africa, especially since, despite the contradictions existing between the various local social strata, colonial rule makes inappropriate any references to class struggle and avoids the dispersal of forces into doctrinal competition."[9]

Thus the unions were able to pass the act effectively because, despite the persistence of a ceaseless militancy of the working class between 1947 and 1958, all the movements struggling for wage claims and in order to improve working conditions, were diverted into fighting colonial rule and winning "independence". Clearly, during the movement of the railway workers in 1947-48, the working class of the colony of FWA still had the strength to successfully take the struggle onto the class terrain, on the other hand, subsequently the strikes were controlled and directed towards the objectives of the bourgeois forces, the unions and political parties. It was precisely this situation that was the springboard for Leopold Sedar Senghor and Sekou Toure to draw the people and the working class behind their own

struggle for the succession to colonial rule. And after the countries of the FWA proclaimed their “independence”, the African leaders decided immediately to integrate the unions into the bosom of the state by assigning them the job of policing the workers; in short, they were watchdog for the interests of the new black bourgeoisie that was now in charge. This is clear from the words of President Senghor:

“Despite its service, because of its service, trade unionism must today change itself to have a more specific understanding of its precise role and its tasks. Because there are now well-organised political parties that represent the whole nation at the general political level, unionism must return to its natural role, which is primarily that of defending the purchasing power of its members... The conclusion to this analysis is that unions will broadly support the political programme of the majority party and its government.” [10]

In short, the unions and political parties must share the same programme in order to defend the interests of the new ruling class. Union leader, David Soumah, echoed the words of Senghor:

“Our slogan during this (anti-colonial) struggle was that the unions didn’t take any responsibility for production, that they did not have to worry about the repercussions their demands would have on an economy’s development when it was managed in the sole interest of the colonial power and organised by it for the expansion of its own national economy. This position has become irrelevant following the accession of the African countries to national independence and a change of role has become necessary for the unions.” [11]

Consequently, during the first decade of “independence”, the proletariat of the former FWA was left without an effective class response, completely shackled by the new ruling class assisted by the unions in its anti-worker policy. It would be 1968 before we would see it re-emerge on the proletarian class terrain against its own bourgeoisie.

[1]. El hadj Ibrahima Ndao, *Senegal, a history of democracy’s conquests*, Les Nouvelles Edit. Africaines, 2003.

[2]. Mar Fall, *The state and the union question in Senegal*, L’Harmattan, 1989.

[3]. Ousmane Sembene, *God’s wooden sticks*, Pocket, 1960.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Ibid.

[6]. A “federation” between France and its colonies whose goal was to supervise the coming “independence”.

[7]. For example, the Senegalese residents of the districts of Goree, Rufisque, Dakar and Saint-Louis were considered to be “French citizens”, which was not the case for other Senegalese in the country.

[8]. It led to the creation of UGTAN (General Union for Black African Workers), a union that was moreover dominated by the railway corporation.

[9]. Quoted in Fall Op. Cit.

[10]. Ibid.

[11]. Ibid.

5. Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (part 5): May 1968 in Senegal

May 1968 in Africa, an expression of the recovery of the international class struggle

A “May 68” actually took place in Africa, more precisely in Senegal, with characteristics very similar to those of the “French May” (student unrest forming a prelude to the emergence of the workers’ struggles) – which is not surprising given the historical ties between the working class of France and that of its former African colony.

If the global nature of “May 68” is generally acknowledged, its expression in certain corners of the world is nonetheless little known, or simply ignored: *“This is largely explained by the fact that these events occurred at the same time as others of a similar nature around the world. This has made it easier for analysts and propagandists who followed the events to blur the significance of the Senegalese May 68, by opting for a selective reading emphasising the university and high school student side in the crisis at the expense of its other dimensions.”* [1]

In fact the “Senegalese May” was better known among students: students sent messages of protest from around the world to the government of Senghor which was suppressing their fellow African comrades. We should also note that the University of Dakar was the only university in the colonies of French West Africa (FWA) until after “independence”, which explains the presence within it of a significant number of foreign African students.

The organs of the bourgeois press had different interpretations of what caused the outbreak of the May movement in Dakar. For some, like *Afrique Nouvelle* (Catholic), it was the crisis in education that was the root cause of the movement. *Marches Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* (for the business community) considered it an extension of the movement in France. *Jeune Afrique* pointed out the connection between the student political unrest and the social unrest of wage earners.

There was another point of view that made a connection between this movement and the economic crisis: it came from Abdoulaye Bathily, one of the oldest participants in the famous revolt when he was then a student; later, in his role of researcher, he would make a general appraisal of the events of “May in Dakar.” We will quote him a lot in this article for his testimonies from inside the events.

The Sequence of Events

“May 1968 has gone down in history characterised across the world by the massive social upheaval in which students and high school pupils were the spearhead. In Africa, Senegal was very clearly the theatre for the university and high school protests. Many contemporary observers concluded that the events in Dakar were nothing more than an extension to May 68 in France [...] Having participated directly, and at the highest level in the students’ struggle in Dakar, in May 68, this thesis has always appeared to me to be wrong. [...] The explosion of May 68 was undoubtedly fostered by a particularly tense social climate. It was the culmination of an unprecedented agitation by employees in the towns,

the unsatisfactory national economic indicators from the continued French rule, and members of the bureaucracy disgruntled that the technical advisers were in control of the state. The agricultural crisis also contributed to the growing tension in the towns and in Dakar, notably from the influx from the rural areas [...]. The memorandum of the Union Nationale des Travailleurs de Senegal [UNTS] on May 8th calculated that purchasing power had declined by 92.4% since 1961.” [2]

So, this was the context in which Dakar, between May 18th and June 12th, also experienced a “May 68” which almost definitely undermined the pro-French regime of Senghor with wildcat general strikes by the students and then by the workers, before the government stepped in to end the movement, with the police and military imposing a brutal clampdown and with French imperialism providing critical support.

The “Senegalese May” had been preceded by several clashes with the Senghor government, especially between 1966 and 1968, when students organised demonstrations in support of “national liberation” struggles and against “neo-colonialism” and “imperialism”.

Similarly, there were “warning strikes” in high schools. Students at the high school in Rufisque (a suburb of Dakar) walked out of lectures on 26th March 1968 following disciplinary measures taken against a student. The movement lasted three weeks and the agitation and protests against the government spread to schools across the region.

The trigger for the movement

The movement of May 1968 was initially sparked off by the decision by the government of President Senghor to cut the number of monthly instalments of student grants from 12 to 10 per year, and by so doing to greatly reduce the spending on these, citing “the difficult economic situation facing the country”.

“The news of the government decision spread like wildfire on the campus, causing widespread anxiety and provoking a general feeling of revolt. It was the only topic of conversation on the campus. Upon election, the new executive committee of the Democratic Union of Senegalese students [UDES] started to campaign over student grants, amongst students in the high schools and also with the trade unions.” [3]

Indeed, after this government announcement there were constant protests and the opposition to the government grew, especially on the eve of the elections that were denounced by the students, as the heading of one of their leaflets demonstrates: “*From the economic and social situation in Senegal to the eve of the election farce on February 25th...*” The agitation continued and on May 18th students decided to announce a “general strike” following the failure of negotiations with the government about their conditions, and there was a massive strike in all the faculties.

Galvanised by the clear success of the strike, and angered by the government’s refusal to meet their demands, the students called an unlimited general strike and a boycott of exams from May 27th. Already, before this, meetings were taking place on campus and in high schools generally; in brief, this was a showdown with the government. For its part, the government seized control of all the official

media and announced a series of repressive measures against the strikers, hoping to stir some opposition from the workers and peasants to the students, who it labelled “privileged”. And the Senegalese Progressive Union (Senghor's party) tried to denounce the “anti-nationalist position” of the students’ movement, but without any real echo; quite the contrary, the government campaigns only increased the anger of the students and gave rise to workers’ solidarity and won sympathy from the public.

“The meetings of the Student Union of Dakar (UED) were the focal point of the agitation on the campus. They attracted a considerable number of students, pupils, teachers, unemployed youths, political activists and, of course, many government spies. Over time, they were the barometer indicating the size of the political and social protest movement. Each meeting was a sort of gathering of the Senegalese opposition and of those on campus from other countries. The interventions were punctuated by pieces of revolutionary music from around the world.” [4]

Indeed, a real showdown was on the cards. In fact, at midnight on May 27th, students awoke to hear the sound of boots and to see the arrival en masse of police who cordoned off the campus. Then a crowd of students and pupils gathered and converged on the residential quarters to mount picket lines.

By encircling the university campus with police, the government hoped to prevent any movement onto or out of the campus.

“So, some of their colleagues were deprived of meals and others of their beds because as the UED repeatedly said, the social conditions were such that many of their colleagues (those without grants) ate in the town or slept there from the lack of housing on campus. Even medical students who treated patients in the hospital would be stuck in the town along with the other students in a medical emergency. It was a typical example of where academic freedoms were violated.” [5]

On May 28th, during an interview with the rector and the deans of the university, the UED demanded the lifting of the police cordon, while university authorities required students to make a declaration within 24 hours “to declare that the strike is not aimed at overthrowing the Senghor government”. Student organisations responded that they were not allied with any specific regime and that within the time granted to them, they wouldn’t be able to consult their members. After this, the President of the Government ordered the closure of all the academic institutions.

“The anti-riot squad, reinforced by the police, went on the offensive and entered the living quarters one after the other. They had orders to remove the students by all means possible. So with truncheons, rifle butts, bayonets, tear gas grenades, sometimes crazed, smashing doors and windows, these henchmen entered the students’ rooms looking for them. The riot squads and the police behaved just like looters. They stole what they could and smashed up things blocking their path, tore up clothes, books and notebooks. Pregnant women were abused and workers mistreated. Married women and children were beaten in their homes. There was one death and many wounded (around one hundred) according to official figures.” [6]

The explosion

The brutality of the government's reaction led to an outburst of solidarity and sympathy for the student movement. There was strong disapproval throughout the capital of the regime's brutal behaviour and against police cruelty and the confinement of large numbers of students. On the eve of May 29th all the ingredients were present for a social conflagration because things had reached fever pitch for the students and salaried workers.

The high school students were already massively involved in the "warning strikes" of March 26th, and on May 18th were the first to start an indefinite strike. After this the university students and those in the high schools started to link up. And one after the other, all the institutions in secondary education declared a total and unlimited strike, formed struggle committees and called for demonstrations with the university students.

Alarmed by the increased numbers of young people joining the protests, on the same May 29th President Senghor made an announcement to the media of an indefinite closure of all learning establishments (high schools and colleges) in the vicinity of Dakar and St. Louis, and called on parents to keep their children at home. But with little success.

"The closure of the university and the high schools only increased social tension. University students who had escaped the police cordons, high school students and other young people began erecting barricades in neighbourhoods like Medina, Grand Dakar, Nimzat, Baay Gainde, Kip Koko, Usine Ben Talli, Usine Nyari Talli, etc.. On the 29th and 30th particularly, young demonstrators occupied the main streets of Dakar. Vehicles belonging to government officials and the leading personalities of the regime were tracked down. It was rumoured that many ministers were forced to abandon their official cars, famous cars like the Citroen DS 21. In people's eyes, and those of the university and high school students in particular, this type of official vehicle symbolised 'the lavish lifestyles of the comprador and political-bureaucratic bourgeoisie.'" [7]

Faced with growing combativity and the escalation of the movement, the government reacted by tightening its repressive measures, extending them to the whole population. So, the government issued a decree that from May 30th all public buildings (cinemas, theatres, cabarets, restaurants, bars) would close day and night until further notice; and also, that meetings, demonstrations and gatherings of more than 5 persons would be prohibited.

A workers' general strike

Faced with these martial measures and with continued police brutality against young people in struggle, the whole country stirred and the revolt intensified, this time with more of the salaried working class becoming involved. It was at this point that the official union apparatus, notably the National Union of Workers of Senegal, the umbrella body for several unions, decided to make its play to avoid being bypassed by the rank and file workers.

“The rank and file unions pressed for action. On May 30th, at 18.00 hours, the regional union, UNTS de Cap-Vert (a region of Dakar), following a joint meeting with the National headquarters of UNTS, announced plans for an indefinite strike from midnight on May 30th.” [8]

Given the difficult situation facing his regime, President Senghor decided to address himself to the nation and spoke threateningly to the workers urging them to disobey the call for a general strike, while accusing the students of being “under a foreign influence”. But despite the real threats of the government to requisition certain categories of workers, the strike was well supported in both the public and the private sectors.

General assemblies were planned in the labour union hall for 10am on May 31st, in which the invited strikers’ delegations would decide the next steps for the movement.

“But the police had cordoned the area off. At 10 o’clock the order to attack the workers inside the hall was given. Doors and windows were smashed, cabinets pulled apart, records destroyed. Tear gas and truncheons overwhelmed the most foolhardy workers. In response to the police brutality, the workers in amongst the students and the lumpen proletariat, attacked vehicles and shops, some of which were torched. The next day Abdoulaye Diack, Secretary of State for Information, revealed to reporters that 900 people were arrested in the labour union hall and the surrounding area. Among these, there were 36 union leaders including 5 women. In fact, during the week of crisis, no less than 3,000 people were arrested. Some union leaders were deported [...]. These actions only heightened popular indignation and readied the workers for the fight.” [9]

Indeed, directly after this press conference when the government’s spokesman gave statistics about the victims, the strikes, demonstrations and riots were intensifying and so the bourgeoisie decided to call a halt.

“The unions, allied to the government and the employers, felt it was necessary to make concessions to the workers to avoid them adopting a hard line, since in the demonstrations they had been able to sense their power.” [10]

Therefore, on June 12th, after a series of meetings between government and unions, President Senghor announced an 18 point agreement to end the strike with a 15% increase in wages. Accordingly, the movement officially ended on that date, which did not prevent further discontent and the resurgence of other social movements, because the strikers were really suspicious regarding any promises from the Senghor government. And, in fact, just weeks after signing the agreement to end the strike, social movements were spreading more than ever, with some lively episodes, right up until the early 1970s.

Ultimately, it is worth noting the state of disarray in which the Senegalese government found itself at the height of its confrontation with the “May movement in Dakar”:

“From June 1st to 3rd, it seemed that there was a power vacuum. The isolation of the government was expressed in the inertia of the ruling party. Faced with the scale of the social explosion, the party machine of the UPS (Senghor’s party) did not react. The UPS Students’ Federation was happy to covertly distribute leaflets against the UDES in the early stages. This situation was all the more striking since the

UPS had boasted three months earlier about having won a landslide victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections in Dakar on February 25th, 1968. But now it was unable to provide an acceptable response to what was happening.

“Rumour had it that ministers were holed up in the administrative building, the seat of the government, and that senior party and state officials were hiding in their homes. This was very strange behaviour from party leaders who claimed to have a majority in the country. At one moment, the rumour ran that President Senghor had taken refuge in the French military base at Ouakam. These rumours were made even more believable following the news in Dakar that De Gaulle had “fled” to Germany on May 29th.”
[11]

Indeed, the Senegalese government was truly reeling and in this context, it was quite symptomatic that de Gaulle and Senghor were seeking the protection and support of their respective armies at the same time.

Moreover, at the time, other more persistent “rumours” clearly indicated that the French army had forcibly intervened to prevent the protesters marching on the presidential palace, inflicting several deaths and injuries.

Let’s also recall that the Senegalese government did not only use its normal guard-dogs, namely the police, to bring an end to the movement but that it also had recourse to the more reactionary forces like the religious leaders and peasants from the remote countryside. At the height of the movement, on May 30th and 31st, the leaders of the religious cliques were invited to use media day and night by Senghor to condemn the strike in the strongest terms and to urge the workers to go back to work.

As for the peasants, the government tried unsuccessfully to turn them against the strikers, by making them come to town to support pro-government demonstrations.

“The recruiters had led the peasants to believe that Senegal had been invaded from Dakar by a nation called ‘Tudian’ (student) and that they were being called on to defend the country. Groups of these peasants were actually located in the alleyways of Centennial (now Boulevard General de Gaulle) with their weapons (axes, machetes, spears, bows and arrows).

“But they very quickly realised that they had been taken for a ride. [...] The young people dispersed them with stones and divided up their food amongst themselves. [...] Others were vilified on their way to Rufisque. In any event, the riot revealed the fragility of the political standing of the UPS and of the regime in the urban areas, particularly in Dakar.” [12]

Undoubtedly, the government of Senghor would utilise every means available, including the most obscure, to bring the social uprising against its regime to an end. However, to permanently extinguish the fire, the most effective weapon for the government could only be that in the hands of Doudou Ngome. He played his part at the time as the leader of the main union, the UNTS. He would “negotiate” the terms for smothering the general strike. Moreover, as a thank you, President Senghor would make him a minister a few years later. It’s another illustration of the strike-breaking role of the unions who, in cahoots with the former colonial power, definitely saved Senghor’s neck.

The high-school students' role in starting the movement

“The high schools in the Cap-Vert region, ‘aroused’ by the strike at Rufisque High School in April, were the first to spring into action. These students were especially quick to take to the streets as they saw themselves, like the university students, as victims of the education policy of the Government and were concerned in particular by the cut-backs in the grants. As future university students themselves, they were actively involved in the struggle of the UDES. The strike spread rapidly from Dakar to other secondary schools around the country from May 27th [...] The leadership of the students’ movement was very unstable, and from one meeting to the next, the delegates, and there were many, changed. [...] An important nucleus of very active strikers also drew the attention of the teacher training college for young girls at Thies. Some student leaders even moved to the old town and coordinated the strike from there. Subsequently, a national committee of the high schools and other secondary education colleges in Senegal was formed, becoming a sort of general staff of the student movement.” [13]

Here the author is describing the active role of the high-school students in the mass movement of May 68 in Senegal, in particular the way the struggle was organised with general assemblies and ‘co-ordinations’. Indeed, in every high school, there was a struggle committee and general assembly with an elected and revocable leadership.

The magnificent involvement of the high school students, both male and female, was highly significant as this was the first time in history that this part of the youth were mobilised in large numbers to protest against the new ruling bourgeoisie. If the starting point of the movement was a solidarity action with one of their comrades, victimised by the school authority, the high-school students, like the other students and workers, also saw the need to fight against the effects of the capitalist crisis that the Senghor government wanted to make them pay for.

Western imperialism comes to Senghor’s aid

At the imperialist level, France was keeping close track of the crisis that the events of 1968 had given rise to, and for good reason; it had a lot invested in Senegal. Indeed, apart from its military bases (sea, air and land) located around Dakar, Paris had appointed a “technical advisor” to each ministry and to the president’s office to steer the policies of the Senegalese government in a direction that would clearly serve its own interests.

In this respect, we can recall that before being one of the best “pupils” of the Western bloc, Senegal was for a long time the principal historic bastion of French colonialism in Africa (from 1659 to 1960) and for this reason Senegal participated with its foot soldiers in all the wars that France was involved in around the world, from the conquest of Madagascar in the 19th century, to both World Wars and the wars in Indochina and Algeria. It was therefore only natural for France to use its role as “local gendarme” of the Western imperialist bloc in Africa to protect Senghor's regime using every means at its disposal:

“In the aftermath of the events of 68, France intervened with support from its EEC partners to rescue the Senegalese regime. The State was not able to meet its debts following negotiations that took place on

June 12th. In a speech on June 13th, President Senghor said that the agreement with the unions would cost 2 thousand million francs (local currency). A week after these negotiations, the European Development Fund (EDF) agreed to the stabilisation fund for groundnut prices with an advance of 2 thousand and 150 million francs (local currency) 'intended to mitigate the effects of the fluctuations in world prices during the 1967/68 campaign'. [...] But even the U.S., which had been taken to task by the President Senghor during the events, participated with the other Western countries in restoring a peaceful social climate in Senegal. Indeed, the U.S. and Senegal signed an agreement for the construction of 800 housing units for middle income groups for a total of 5 million dollars." [14]

It is clear that in doing this the main issue for the Western bloc was avoiding the collapse of Senegal and its defection into the enemy camp (that of China and Eastern Bloc).

Thus, having regained control of the situation, President Senghor immediately set off to visit the "friendly countries", and Germany, amongst them, welcomed him to Frankfurt, just after the bloody suppression of the strikers in Senegal. This welcome in Frankfurt is also highly instructive because Senghor went there to get help and to be "decorated" by a country that was a leading member of NATO. On the other hand, this visit was an opportunity for the German students, for whom "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit was the mouthpiece, to show support in the streets for their Senegalese comrades, as the newspaper *Le Monde* reported, 25/09/1968:

"Daniel Cohn-Bendit was arrested on Sunday in Frankfurt during demonstrations against Mr Leopold Senghor, President of Senegal, and he was charged on Monday afternoon (along with 25 of his comrades) by a local German magistrate of inciting riot and illegal assembly..."

In their struggle, the Senegalese students would also receive support from their comrades overseas who often occupied the Senegalese embassies and consulates. News of the movement in Senegal reverberated throughout Africa:

"In Africa, there were further repercussions from the events in Dakar owing to the actions of the national unions (student unions). On returning to their home countries African students, expelled from the University of Dakar, continued campaigning. [...] The African governments of that time regarded the students from Dakar with suspicion. And in so far as most of them showed their irritation at the way their nationals were expelled, they also feared the contagion of their country with the 'subversion arriving from Dakar and Paris'." [15]

Actually, almost all African regimes feared "contagion" and "subversion" from May 68, starting with Senghor himself who had to resort to violent repressive measures against the educated youth. Hence, many of the strikers experienced prison or forced military service not dissimilar to deportation into military camps. And equally, large numbers of foreign African students were expelled en masse; some of whom were ill-treated on their return home.

Some lessons from the events of May 68 in Dakar

“May in Dakar” was unquestionably one of the links in the chain of a worldwide May 68. The significance of the involvement of the Western imperialist bloc in saving the Senegalese regime was an indication of the power of the movement of the workers and the university and high school students.

But over and above the radicalism of the student action, the movement of May 68 in Senegal, with its working class involvement, came about through a return to the spirit and the form of the proletarian struggle that the working class of the colony of French West Africa had achieved at the beginning of the 20th century, but which the African bourgeoisie in the government had succeeded in stifling, especially during the early years of “national independence”.

May 68 was thus more than an opening to another world breaking with the counter-revolutionary period; it was a moment of awakening for many protagonists, especially the youth. Through their involvement in the fight against the forces of the national capital, they exposed a number of myths and illusions, including the “end of the class struggle” under the pretext there was no antagonism between the (African) working class and the (African) bourgeoisie.

It should also be noted the police repression and imprisonment of thousands of strikers proved insufficient for achieving victory over the social movement; it also had to be lured into the union trap and the intervention of France and the Western bloc in support of their “favourite junior partner”. But it was also necessary to meet the demands of students and workers with a large increase in pay.

The basic thing is that the strikers did not “sleep” for long after the agreement that ended the strike because the following year, the working class took up the fight more than ever participating fully in the wave of international struggles that May 68 set in train.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this movement used truly proletarian modes of organisation, proletarian strike committees and general assemblies, strongly demonstrating self-organisation; in short, a clear taking of the struggles into their own hands by the strikers. This is one specific aspect that characterises the struggle of a fraction of the world working class, fully involved in the battle to come for the communist revolution.

[1]. Abdoulaye Bathily, *May 1968 in Dakar or the university revolt and democracy*, Edit. Chaka, Paris, 1992.

[2]. Bathily, *ibid.*

[3]. *Ibid.* It is worth recalling here what we already said in the first part of this article in *International Review* no.145: “...if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events. It’s the same for certain ideas, for example when they talk about ‘union consciousness’ instead of ‘class consciousness’ (of workers), or again ‘union movement’ (instead of workers’ movement). Otherwise, up to another order, we have confidence in their scientific rigour as long as their theses don’t come up against historical facts and don’t prevent other interpretations.” [NB. Part of this section was omitted from the version of the article published in the English language edition of *International Review* n° 145.]

[4] – [15], *Ibid.*

6. A history of class struggle in South Africa

After West Africa, [1] we begin a second series on the history of the African workers' movement with a contribution on the class struggles in South Africa. A country famous mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, its mineral wealth (gold, diamonds, etc.) due to which it is relatively well developed; and on the other, its monstrous apartheid system, the aftermath of which we still see today. At the same time, apartheid gave birth to a huge "icon", namely Nelson Mandela, considered its principal victim but above all the product of this system of another age, who with his titles of "*hero of the anti-apartheid struggle*" and *man of "peace and reconciliation of the peoples of South Africa"* was revered throughout the capitalist world. Mandela's media image veils everything else to the point where the history and struggles of the South African working class before and during apartheid are either completely ignored or distorted by being systematically categorised under the rubric of "anti-apartheid struggles" or "national liberation struggles". Of course, for bourgeois propaganda, all struggles can be incarnated in Mandela, even though it is public knowledge that since coming to power, Mandela and his party, the African National Congress (ANC), have not exactly been kind to the strikes of the working class [2].

The main purpose of this contribution is to restore the historical truth about the struggles between the two fundamental classes, namely the bourgeoisie (for whom apartheid was only one means of domination) and the proletariat of South Africa that, for most of the time, was left to struggle for its own demands as an exploited class, from the epoch of the Dutch-British colonial bourgeoisie and then under the Mandela/ANC regime. In other words, a South African proletariat whose struggle fits perfectly with that of the world proletariat.

A brief survey of the history of South Africa

According to some historical sources, this area was originally occupied by the Xhosa, Tswana and Sotho people who settled there between 500 and 1000 AD. In this regard, the historian Henri Wesseling tells us the following:

"South Africa was not a virgin land when European ships landed for the first time in 1500 at the foot of Table Mountain. It was populated by different ethnic groups, mostly nomads. Dutch settlers divided them into Hottentots and Bushmen. They regarded them as two totally distinct peoples from a physical and cultural point of view. Bushmen were smaller than the Hottentots and they spoke a different language. Moreover, they were more 'primitive', practicing hunting and gathering, while the Hottentots had reached the level of pastoral peoples. This traditional dichotomy has long dominated the historiography. Today, we no longer use these terms, but those of Khoikhoi or Khoi for Hottentots and San for the Bushmen, the term Khoisan serving to designate the ethnic group they form together. In fact, currently, one emphasizes less the distinction between these people, mainly because they are both very different from neighboring ethnic groups speaking Bantu languages and formerly known as Kaffirs, from the Arabic kafir (infidel). This term has equally fallen into disuse." [3]

It can be noted how the Dutch settlers considered themselves the first inhabitants of this region, as colonial ideology established rankings between “primitive” and “advanced”. Furthermore the author indicates that the term South Africa is a (recent) political concept and that many of its populations are historically from neighboring countries in southern Africa.

As far as European colonization is concerned, the Portuguese were the first to set foot in South Africa in 1488 followed by the Dutch who landed in the area in 1648. The latter decided to settle there permanently from 1652, marking the beginning of the permanent “white” presence in South Africa. In 1795, Cape Town was occupied by the British, who 10 years later took possession of Natal, while the Boers (Dutch) led the Transvaal and Orange Free State in winning recognition of their independence from Britain in 1854. As for the various African states or groups, through prolonged warfare they resisted the presence of European settlers on their soil before finally being defeated by the dominant powers. At the end of the wars against the Afrikaners and the Zulus, the British proceeded in 1920 to unify South Africa under the name “Union of South Africa”, which it remained until 1961 when the Afrikaner regime decided to simultaneously leave the Commonwealth (the English-speaking community) and change the name of the country.

Apartheid was officially established in 1948 and abolished in 1990. We will return to this later in more detail.

Concerning imperialist rivalries, South Africa played the role of “delegated policeman” for the Western imperialist bloc in southern Africa, and it was in this role that Pretoria intervened militarily in 1975 in Angola which was supported by the Eastern imperialist bloc with Cuban troops.

South Africa is considered today as an “emerging” member of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China), and is looking to make its entry into the arena of the great powers.

Since 1994, South Africa has been governed principally by the ANC, the party of Nelson Mandela, in company with the Communist Party and the COSATU trade union federation.

The South African working class emerged at the end of the 19th century and constitutes today the largest and most experienced industrial proletariat on the African continent.

Finally, we think it useful to explain two related but nevertheless distinct terms, that we will use often in this contribution, namely the terms “Boer” and “Afrikaner”, which have Dutch roots. Those called Boers (or Boertrekkers) were originally Dutch farmers (predominantly small peasants) who in 1835-1837 undertook a vast migration in South Africa due to the abolition of slavery by the British in the Cape Colony in 1834. The term is still used today for descendants, direct or not, of these farmers (including factory workers).

Concerning the definition of the term Afrikaner, we refer to the explanation given by the historian Henri Wesseling: *“The white population that settled in the Cape was of different origins. It consisted of Dutch, but also many Germans and French Huguenots. This community gradually adopted a different way of life. One could even say that a national identity was formed, that of the Afrikaners, who considered the British government as a foreign authority.”* [4]

We can therefore say that the term refers to a kind of identity claimed by a number of European migrants of the time, a notion that is still used in recent publications.

Birth of South African capitalism

The birth of capitalism in each region of the world like South Africa has been marked by specific or local characteristics. Nevertheless it developed in general in three different phases, as by described by Rosa Luxemburg:

“(In its development) we must distinguish three phases: the struggle of capital against natural economy, the struggle against commodity economy, and the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation.

The existence and development of capitalism requires an environment of non-capitalist forms of production, but not every one of these forms will serve its ends. Capitalism needs non-capitalist social strata as a market for its surplus value, as a source of supply for its means of production and as a reservoir of labour power for its wage system.”

In South Africa, capitalism followed these three phases. In the 19th Century there was a natural economy, a market economy and a workforce sufficient to develop wage labour.

“In the Cape Colony and the Boer Republics, pure peasant economy prevailed until the sixties of the last century. For a long time the Boers had led the life of animal-tending nomads; they had killed off or driven out the Hottentots and Kaffirs with a will in order to deprive them of their most valuable pastures. In the eighteenth century they were given invaluable assistance by the plague, imported by ships of the East India Company, which frequently did away with entire Hottentot tribes whose lands then fell to the Dutch immigrants.

(...) Boer economy in general and on the whole remained patriarchal and based on natural economy until the sixties. But their patriarchal attitude did not deter the Boers from extreme brutality and harshness. It is well known that Livingstone complained much more about the Boers than about the Kaffirs.

(...) In fact, peasant economy and great capitalist colonial policy were here competing for the Hottentots and Kaffirs, that is to say for their land and their labour power. Both competitors had precisely the same aim: to subject, expel or destroy the coloured peoples, to appropriate their land and press them into service by the abolition of their social organisations. Only their methods of exploitation were fundamentally different. While the Boers stood for out-dated slavery on a petty scale, on which their patriarchal peasant economy was founded, the British bourgeoisie represented modern large-scale capitalist exploitation of the land and the natives.”^[5]

We should note the fierceness of the struggle engaged in by Boers and the British for conquest and the establishment of capitalism in this zone which emerged, as elsewhere, “mired in blood and filth”. In the end it was British imperialism that dominated the situation and concretized the advent of capitalism in South Africa, as related in her own way by the researcher Brigitte Lachartre:

“British imperialism, when it manifested itself in the south of the continent in 1875, had other aims: citizens of the leading economic power of the time, representatives of the most developed mercantile and capitalist society in Europe, the British imposed on their colony in southern Africa a much more liberal native policy than that of the Boers. Slavery was abolished in the areas they controlled, while the Dutch settlers fled into the interior of the country to escape the new social order and the administration of the British settlers. After defeating the Africans by arms (a dozen ‘Kaffir’ wars in a century), the British devoted themselves to ‘liberating’ the labour force: the defeated tribes were regrouped in tribal reserves whose limits were more and more restricted; Africans were prevented from leaving without authorisation and their pass in order. But the true face of British colonization appeared with the discovery of diamonds and gold in 1870. A new era began which brought about a profound transformation of all social and economic structures of the country: mining led to industrialization, urbanization, disruption of traditional African societies, but also of the Boer communities, immigration of new waves of Europeans (...).” [6]

Clearly, this statement can be read as a concrete continuation of the process described by Rosa Luxemburg, by which capitalism emerged in South Africa. In its struggle against the “natural economy”, British economic power had to break the old tribal societies and violently get rid of the old forms of production such as slavery, incarnated by the Boers who were forced to flee to escape the modern capitalist order. This was at the root of the wars between the proponents of the old and the new economic order by which the country passed so rapidly to modern capitalism, thanks to the discovery of diamonds (1871) and gold (1886). The “gold rush” translated itself into a lightning acceleration of industrialization of the country as a result of the exploitation and commercialisation of precious materials, which hugely attracted capitalist investors from the developed countries. It was therefore necessary to recruit engineers and skilled workers, and in this way thousands of Europeans, Americans and Australians came to settle in South Africa. And the City of Johannesburg came to symbolize this emerging dynamism by its rapid development. On 17 July 1896, a census showed that the city had had 3,000 inhabitants in 1887 and 100,000 ten years later. A little over ten years later the white population had grown from 600,000 to over a million. In the same period the gross domestic product (GDP) rose from £150,000 to nearly £4 million. This is how South Africa became the first and only African country to be relatively developed on an industrial scale – something which was not slow to whet the appetites of rival economic powers: *“The economic and political center of South Africa was no longer in the Cape, but in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Germany, Europe’s biggest economic power, was established in South West Africa and had expressed an interest in South East Africa. If the Transvaal showed itself unwilling to submit to the authority of London, the future of England would be challenged in the whole of South Africa.” [7]*

At this time you can see that behind the economic issues lurked imperialist issues between the major European powers vying for control of this region. Moreover, British power did everything to limit the presence of its German rival to the west of South Africa, which is today called Namibia (colonised in 1883), after neutralising Portugal, the other imperialist presence with far more limited means. The British Empire could therefore boast that it was the sole master in command of the booming South African economy.

But the economic development of South Africa, powered by mineral discoveries, very quickly ran into a series of problems which in the first place were social and ideological:

“Economic development, stimulated by the discovery of minerals, will soon face the white settlers with a profound contradiction (...).On the one hand the introduction of the new economic order required the creation of a waged labour force; on the other, the release of the African workforce from the reserves and out of their traditional subsistence economy put in jeopardy the racial balance of the whole territory.At the end of the last century (the 19th), the African populations were therefore subject to a multitude of laws with often contradictory effects.Some aimed to make them migrate to areas of white economic activities to submit to wage labor.Others tended to keep them partly on the reserves.Among the laws intended to make manpower available, there were some which penalized vagrancy in order to ‘tear the natives away from this idleness and laziness, teach them the dignity of work, and to contribute to the prosperity of the state.’There were others to submit Africans to taxation.(...) Among other laws,those on passes were intended to filter the migrations, to steer them according to the needs of the economy or stop them in the event of a flood.” [8]

We see here that the British colonial authorities found themselves caught up in contradictions related to the development of the productive forces. But we can say that the strongest contradiction here was ideological, when British power decided to consider the black labour force on segregationist administrative criteria, in particular with the laws on passes and the penning of Africans. In fact, this policy was in flagrant contradiction with the liberal orientation that led to the abolition of slavery.

Difficulties also related to the colonial wars. After suffering defeats and winning the wars against its Zulu and Afrikaner opponents between 1870 and 1902, the British Empire had to digest the extremely high cost of its victories, especially that of 1899-1902, both in human and economic terms. Indeed, the “Boer War” was a real butchery:

“The Boer War was the greatest colonial war of the modern imperialist era.It lasted more than two and a half years (11 October 1899 to 31 May 1902).The British engaged around half a million soldiers, 22,000 of whom were killed in South Africa.Their total losses, that is to say killed, wounded, and missing, rose to more than 100,000 men.The Boers, meanwhile, mobilized nearly 100,000 men.They lost more than 7,000 soldiers and nearly 30,000 died in the camps.An unknown number of Africans fought alongside one or the other side.The losses they suffered are also undetermined.Tens of thousands of them probably lost their lives.The British War Office also calculated that 400,346 horses, donkeys and mules died during the conflict, as well as millions of cattle belonging to the Boers.This war cost the British taxpayer £200 million, or ten times the annual budget of the army or 14% of national income in 1902.If the subjugation of the future British subjects of Africa cost on average fifteen pennies per head,the submission of the Boers however cost £1000 per man.” [9]

In other words, an open pit of warfare inaugurated the entry of British capitalism into the 20th century. Furthermore, we can see in the details of this horrible butchery that the Nazi concentration camps found a source of inspiration. British capitalism developed a total of forty four camps destined for the Boers, where about 120,000 women and children were imprisoned. At the end of the war in 1902 it was found that 28,000 white detainees had been killed, including 20,000 children under the age of 16.

Yet it was without remorse that the commander of the British Army, Lord Kitchener, justified the massacres in speaking of the Boers as *“a species of savages born from generations leading a barbarous and solitary existence.”* [10]

This is rich coming from a major war criminal. Certainly we must note that in this butchery, Afrikaner troops were not to be outdone in terms of mass killings and atrocities, and that the Afrikaner leaders were later allies of the German army during the Second World War, above all to settle accounts with British power.

“Defeated by British imperialism, submitted to the capitalist system, humiliated in their culture and traditions, the Afrikaner people (...) organized from 1925 to 1930 a strong movement to rehabilitate the Afrikaner nation. Its vengeful, anti-capitalist, anti-communist and profoundly racist ideology designated Africans, mestizos, Asians and Jews as a threat to the Western civilization they claimed to represent on the African continent. Organized at all levels, school, church, union and terrorist secret societies (the best known is the Broederbond), Afrikaners later proved fervent partisans of Hitler, Nazism and its ideology.” [11]

The fact that the Afrikaner workers were dragged into this same movement shows the immensity of the obstacle to be crossed by the working class of this country to join the struggles of workers of other ethnicities. This conflict permanently shaped relationships between the British and Afrikaner colonialisms on South African soil until the fall of apartheid. To divisions and ethnic hatred between British and Afrikaner whites, can be added those between on the one hand these two categories and on the other blacks (and other people of colour) that the bourgeoisie systematically used to destroy all attempts at unity in the workers' ranks.

Birth of the working class

The birth of capitalism led to the dislocation of many traditional African societies. From the 1870s, the British Empire began a liberal colonial policy by abolishing slavery in areas it controlled, in order to “liberate” the labour force then consisting of Boer and African farm workers. We have noted that the Boer settlers themselves continued to exploit black farmers under the old form of slavery before being defeated by the British. But ultimately it was the discovery of gold which accelerated sharply the birth of capitalism and the emergence of the working class: *“There was no shortage of capital. Exchanges in London and New York willingly supplied the necessary funds. The global economy, which was growing, demanded gold. Workers streamed in too. Mining attracted crowds in the Rand. People went there not in their thousands, but tens of thousands. No city in the world knew a development as rapid as Johannesburg.”* [12]

In the space of 20 years the European population of Johannesburg grew from a few thousand to 250,000, the majority of whom were skilled workers, engineers and other technicians. These are the ones who gave birth to the South African working class in the marxist sense of the term, that is to say, those who, under capitalism, sell their labour in exchange for a wage. Capital had a strong and urgent need for a more or less skilled labour force which it could not find on the spot without recourse to

migrants from Europe, including the British Empire. But gradually, as economic development progressed, the industrial apparatus was driven to recruit more and more unskilled African workers from the interior of the country or from outside, including Mozambique and Zimbabwe. From then the workforce of the South African economy truly “internationalized” itself.

As a result of the massive arrival in South Africa of British-born workers, the working class was immediately organized and supervised by the British trade unions and in the early 1880s there were numerous companies and corporations which were created on the “English model” (the trade union). This meant that workers of South African origin, as groups or individuals without organisational experience, could only with difficulty organize outside of the pre-established unions [13]. Certainly, there were dissensions within the unions as well as in parties claiming to defend the working class, with attempts to develop an autonomous union activity on the part of radical proletarian elements who could no longer put up with the “treachery of the leaders.” But these were in a tiny minority.

Everywhere in the world where there are conflicts between the classes under capitalism, the working class always secretes **revolutionary minorities defending, more or less clearly, proletarian internationalism**. This was also the case in South Africa. Some elements from the working class were at the origin of struggles but also initiated the formation of proletarian organizations. We propose to introduce three figures from this generation in the form of a short summary of their trajectories.

Andrew Dunbar (1879-1964). A Scottish immigrant, he was general secretary of the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) created in South Africa in 1910 [14]. He was a railway worker in Johannesburg and actively participated in the massive strike of 1909 after which he was dismissed. In 1914 he fought against the war and participated in the creation of the International Socialist League (ISL), which belonged to the revolutionary syndicalist tendency. He also fought against the repressive and discriminatory measures against Africans which earned him the sympathy of black workers. He was also responsible for creating the first “African Union” modeled on the IWW in 1917. But his sympathy for the Russian revolution became more and more enthusiastic, so he decided with other comrades to form the “Communist Party of Africa” in October 1920 on an essentially syndicalist platform and of which he was secretary. In 1921 his organization decided to merge with the official Communist Party which had been formed. But he was expelled a few years later and in the wake of this he abandoned his union activities.

TW Thibedi (1888-1960). Considered a prominent trade union member of the IWW (he joined in 1916). He was originally from the South African town of Vereeniging and had a teaching job in a school attached to a church in Johannesburg. As part of his trade union activities he advocated class unity and mass action against capitalism. He was part of the left wing of the African nationalist party, the South African Native National Congress (SANNC). Thibedi was also a member of the ISL and during a strike movement led by this group in 1918, along with his comrades, he suffered harsh police repression. A member of the South African CP from its formation, he was expelled in 1928 but due to the reaction of many of his comrades he was reinstated before finally being driven from the party. He then decided to sympathize briefly with the Trotskyist movement before entering into complete anonymity. The sources we have do not give a total strength of South African Trotskyist militants at that time. [15]

Bernard Le Sigamoney (1888-1963). Of Indian origin and from a farming family, he was an active member of the Indian IWW union and as with his above-mentioned comrades he was also a member of the ISL. He showed himself in favour of the unity of the industrial workers of South Africa, and along with his fellow ISL comrades he was at the head of important strike movements in 1920/1921. However, he did not join the Communist Party and decided to abandon his political and union activities, going to study in Britain in 1922. In 1927 he returned to South Africa (Johannesburg) as an Anglican missionary clergyman while resuming his trade union activities within an organization close to the IWW. He was then denounced as a “troublemaker” by the authorities and eventually became discouraged, simply working in the church and promoting civil rights for people of colour.

So here are three “portraits” of the trajectories of union and political militants which are quite similar despite being of different ethnic origin (European, African and Indian). Above all they share an essential common characteristic: proletarian class solidarity, an internationalist spirit and a great combativity against the capitalist enemy. It is they and their comrades in struggle who are the precursors of the current working class fighters in South Africa.

Other organizations, of different origins and nature, were active within the working class. These are the main parties and organizations [16] claiming more or less formally at their origins to be working class or to defend its “interests”, excluding the Labour Party which remained faithful to its bourgeoisie since its active participation in the first world slaughter. More precisely, we give here an overview [17] of the nature and origin of the ANC and of the South African CP as part of the forces of the ideological containment of the working class since the 1920s.

A) **The ANC.** This organization was created in 1912 by and for the indigenous petty bourgeoisie (doctors, lawyers, teachers and other functionaries, etc.), individuals who demanded democracy, racial equality and defended the British constitutional system, as illustrated in the words of Nelson Mandela: *“For 37 years, that is to say, until 1949, the African National Congress fought with scrupulous respect for the law (...) It believed that the grievances of the Africans would be considered after peaceful discussions and that we would move slowly towards full recognition of the rights of the African nation.”* [18]

In this sense, since its birth up until the 1950s, [19] far from seeking to overthrow the capitalist system, the ANC led peaceful actions respectful of the established order, and was therefore very far from seeking to overthrow the capitalist system. This same Mandela boasted of his “anti-communist” struggle, as outlined in his autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom*. But its Stalinist orientation, suggesting an alliance between the (“progressive”) bourgeoisie and the working class, allowed the ANC to rely on the CP to gain a foothold in the ranks of the workers, especially in the base of the unions that these two parties together control even today.

B) **The South African Communist Party.** The CP was created by elements claiming to defend proletarian internationalism and as such a member of the Third International (1921). In its beginnings it advocated the unity of the working class and put forward the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism. But by 1928 it became simply an executive arm of Stalinist policies in the South African colony. The Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” was accompanied by the idea that the underdeveloped countries were required to go through “*a bourgeois revolution*” and that, in

this vision, the proletariat could fight against colonial oppression but not establish any proletarian power in the colonies at this time.

The South African CP took this orientation to absurd lengths, becoming the faithful lapdog of the ANC in the 1950s, as this quote illustrates: *“The CP made offers of service to the ANC. The Secretary General of CP explained to Mandela: “Nelson, what do you have against us? We are fighting the same enemy. We are not talking about dominating the ANC; we are working in the context of African nationalism.” And in 1950 Mandela accepted that the CP would put its militant apparatus in the service of the ANC, thus giving him control over a good part of the labour movement and a significant advantage allowing the ANC to take hegemony over the whole of the anti-apartheid movement. In exchange the ANC would provide a legal front for the prohibited CP apparatus.”* [20]

Thus, both openly bourgeois parties have become inseparable and are now at the head of the South African government for the defence of the interests of national capital and against the working class which they oppress and massacre, as in the strike of the miners at Marikana in August 2012.

Apartheid against the class struggle

This barbaric word is hated today worldwide even by its former supporters as symbolizing and incarnating the most despicable form of capitalist exploitation of the layers and classes belonging to the South African proletariat. But before going further, we propose one definition among others of this term: in the “Afrikaans” language spoken by the Afrikaners, *apartheid* more precisely means “separation.” This includes all kinds of separation (racial, social, cultural, economic, etc.). But behind this formal definition of apartheid lies a doctrine promoted by the “primitive” capitalists and colonialists which combines economic and ideological objectives:

*“Apartheid is derived from both the colonial system and the capitalist system; in this dual capacity, it stamps on South African society divisions of racial characteristics in the first place and inherent divisions of class in the second. As in many other parts of the globe, there is almost perfect coincidence between the black races and the exploited class. At the other extreme, however, the situation is less clear. Indeed, the white population cannot be regarded as a dominant class without further ado. It is, certainly, constituted by a handful of owners of the means of production, but also from the mass of those who are dispossessed: agricultural and industrial workers, miners, service workers, etc. So there is no identity between the white race and the dominant class. (...) But, nothing like this has ever happened [the white workforce rubbing shoulders with the black workforce on an equal footing] or will ever happen in South Africa as long as apartheid is in effect. **Because this system is designed to avoid any possibility of the creation of a multiracial working class.** This is where the anachronistic system of South African power, its mechanisms dating from another era, come to the aid of the capitalist system which generally tends to simplify relationships within society. Apartheid - in its most comprehensive form- came to consolidate the colonial edifice, at the moment when capitalism was at risk of bringing down the entire power of the Whites. The means was an ideology and legislation aiming to annihilate class antagonisms within the*

white population, to extirpate the germs, to erase the contours and replace them with racial antagonisms.

By replacing the contradictions of a terrain difficult to control (division of society into antagonistic classes) with ones more easily manageable, the non-antagonistic division of society between races, white power has almost achieved the desired result: to constitute a homogeneous and united bloc on the basis of white ethnicity- a bloc all the more solid because it feels historically menaced by black power and communism - and on the other side, to divide the black population within itself, by different tribes or by social groups with different interests.

Dissonances, class antagonisms that are minimized, ignored or erased on the white side are encouraged, emphasized and provoked on the black side. This enterprise of division - facilitated by the presence on South African soil of populations of diverse origins- has routinely been conducted since colonization: detribalization of one part of the African population, the retention in traditional structures of another; evangelization and training of some, denial of any possibility of education of others, establishing small elites of leaders and officials, pauperisation of the great masses; and finally, the putting in place, to great fanfares, of an African, Mestizo, Indian, petty bourgeoisie - a buffer ready to interpose itself between their racial brothers and their class allies." [21]

We generally agree with this author's framework for defining and analyzing the system of apartheid. We are particularly in agreement when it states that apartheid is above all an ideological instrument in the service of capital against the unity (in struggle) of different members of the exploited class; in this case the workers of all colours. In other words, the apartheid system is primarily a weapon against the class struggle as the motor of history, the only one capable of overthrowing capitalism. Also, if apartheid was theorized and fully applied from 1948 by the most backward Afrikaner fraction of the South African colonial bourgeoisie, it was the British, bearers of the "most modern civilization", who laid the foundations of this despicable system.

"Indeed, it is from the early nineteenth century that the British invaders took legislative and military measures to group part of the African population in 'reserves', allowing or forcing the other part to leave them to be employed across the country in diverse economic sectors. The area of these tribal reserves was fixed in 1913 and slightly enlarged in 1936 to offer the (black) population only 13% of the national territory. These tribal reserves, fabricated in every way by white power (...) were named Bantustans (...), 'national homelands for the Bantus', each theoretically to regroup members of the same ethnicity." [22]

Thus, the idea of separate races and populations was initiated by the British colonialism which methodically applied its famous strategy of "divide and rule" by implementing ethnic separation, not only between blacks and whites but even more cynically between black ethnic groups. However, the proponents of the system could never prevent the breakdown of their own contradictions, inevitably generating the confrontation between the two antagonistic classes. Clearly under this barbaric system, many workers' struggles were conducted by white workers as well as black workers (or mestizo and Indian).

Certainly the South African bourgeoisie was remarkably successful in rendering workers' struggles powerless by permanently poisoning the class consciousness of the South African proletariat. This was reflected in the fact that some groups of workers often fought at the same time against their exploiters but also against their comrades of a different ethnic group, and fell into the deadly trap set by the class enemy. In sum, rare were the struggles uniting workers of different ethnic origins. We also know that many so-called "workers'" organizations, namely unions and parties, facilitated the task of capital by endorsing this policy of the "racial division" of the South African working class. For example, the unions of European origin along with the South African Labour Party, defended first (or exclusively) the "interests" of white workers. Similarly, the various black movements (parties and unions) struggled first of all against the system of exclusion of the blacks by claiming equality and independence. This orientation was incarnated principally by the ANC. We should note the particular case of the South African CP which, at first (in the early 1920s), tried to unite the working class without distinction in the fight against capitalism but was soon to abandon the terrain of internationalism by deciding to focus on "the black cause." This was the beginning of its definitive "Stalinization".

Strike movements and other social struggles between 1884/2013

First workers' struggle in Kimberley

By coincidence the diamond that symbolically gave birth to South African capitalism was also the origin of the first movement of proletarian struggle. The first workers' strike broke out in Kimberley, the "Diamond Capital", in 1884, when British-born miners decided to fight against the decision of the mining companies to impose the so-called "compound" system (ie. forced labour camps) reserved up until then for black workers. In this struggle the miners organized strike pickets to impose a balance of power enabling them to win their demands, while to break the strike the employers on the one hand engaged "scabs" and on the other troops armed to the teeth who were not slow to fire on the workers. There were 4 deaths among the strikers, who nevertheless continued the struggle with a vigour which forced the employers to meet their demands. This was the first movement of the struggle between the two historical forces in South African capitalism that ended in blood but also victory for the proletariat. Therefore we can say that it was here that the real class struggle began in capitalist South Africa, laying the foundations for future confrontations.

Strike against wage cuts in 1907

Not content with the work rates which they imposed on the workers to improve performance, the Rand employers [23] decided in 1907 to reduce salaries by 15%, in particular those of British-born miners who were considered to be "privileged." As in the Kimberley strike, employers recruited strike breakers (very poor Afrikaners) who, without being in solidarity with the strikers, nevertheless refused to do the dirty work they were ordered to. Despite this the employers were eventually able to wear the strikers down. We should note that the sources we have to hand talk about the strike's extent but do not give a total for the number of participants in the movement.

Strikes and demonstrations in 1913

Faced with massive wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions, miners entered massively into struggle. During 1913 a strike was launched by mine workers against the additional hours the company wanted to impose on them. And it did not take much to generalise the movement to all sectors, with mass demonstrations which nevertheless were violently broken up by the forces of order. In the end twenty dead and a hundred wounded were counted (officially).

Railway and coal miners' strike in 1914

At the beginning of the year a series of strikes broke out among both coal miners and railway workers against the degradation of working conditions. But this movement of struggle was in a particular context; that of the preparations for the first generalized imperialist slaughter. In this movement we can see the presence of the Afrikaner fraction, but set apart from the British fraction. Although both were well supervised by their respective unions, each defending its own "ethnic clients."

Accordingly the government hastened to impose martial law to physically break the strike and its initiators, imprisoning or deporting a large number of strikers, the exact number of whom is still unknown. In addition, we want to emphasize here the particular role of unions in this strike movement. It was in this same context of the repression of the struggles that the union and Labour Party leaders voted for "war credits" by supporting the entry of the Union of South Africa into the war against Germany.

Labour unrest against the war in 1914 and attempts to organize

If the working class was generally muzzled during the 1914-1918 war, some proletarian elements did however try to oppose it by advocating internationalism against capitalism. Thus: *"(...)In 1917, a poster appears on the walls of Johannesburg, convening a meeting for July 19: 'Come and discuss issues of common interest between white and indigenous workers.' This text is published by the International Socialist League (ISL), a revolutionary syndicalist organization influenced by the American IWW (...) and formed in 1915 in opposition to the First World War and the racist and conservative policies of the South African Labour Party and craft unions. Comprising at the beginning mostly white activists, the ISL moves very quickly towards black workers, calling in its weekly newspaper International, to build 'a new union that overcomes the limitations of trades, skin colors, races and of sex to destroy capitalism by a blockade of the capitalist class.'" [24]*

By 1917, the ISL was organizing coloured workers. In March 1917, it founded an Indian workers' union in Durban. In 1918, it founded a textile workers' union (also later formed in Johannesburg) and a horse drivers' union in Kimberley, the diamond mining town. In the Cape, a sister organization, the Industrial Socialist League, founded in the same year a sweets and confectionery workers' union.

The July 19 meeting was a success and formed the basis of weekly meetings of study groups led by members of the ISL (including Andrew Dunbar, founder of the IWW in South Africa in 1910). These meetings discussed capitalism, the class struggle and the need for African workers to unionize in order to obtain wage increases and to abolish the pass system. On 27 September, the study groups were transformed into a union, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), modelled on the IWW. Its organizing committee was composed entirely of Africans. The demands of the new unions were simple and uncompromising in a slogan: Sifuna Zonke! ("We want everything!").

Finally, here is the expression of the birth of proletarian internationalism. An internationalism taken up by a minority of workers but of great importance at the time, because it was the moment when many proletarians were bound and dragged into the first world imperialist slaughter by the traitor Labour Party in the company of the official unions. Another aspect that illustrates the strength and dynamic of these small internationalist groups is the fact that elements (including the International Socialist League and others) were able to emerge from them in order to form the South African Communist Party in 1920. It was these groups, seemingly dominated by supporters of revolutionary syndicalism, which could actively promote the emergence of radical unions especially among black and coloured workers.

A wave of strikes in 1918

Despite the harshness of the time with martial law suppressing any reaction or protest, strikes could occur: *"In 1918, an unprecedented wave of strikes against the cost of living and for salary increases, bringing together white and coloured workers, overwhelms the country. When the judge McFie imprisons 152 African municipal workers in June 1918, urging them to continue to "do the same job as before" but now from prison under the supervision of an armed escort, progressive whites and Africans are outraged. The TNT (Transvaal Native Congress, forerunner of the ANC) called for a mass rally of African workers in Johannesburg on June 10."* [25]

An important or symbolic fact should be noted here: this is the only (known) involvement of the ANC in a movement of the class struggle in the first sense of the term. This is certainly one of the reasons explaining the fact that this nationalist fraction as a result had an influence within the black working class.

Massive strikes in 1919/1920 drowned in blood

During 1919 a radical union (the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union), consisting of black and mixed race employees but without white workers, launched a massive strike especially among the dockworkers of Port Elizabeth. But once again this movement was crushed militarily by the police backed by armed white groups, causing over 20 deaths among the strikers. Here again the strikers were isolated which ensured the defeat of the working class in an unequal battle on a military terrain.

In 1920, this time it was African miners who sparked one of the biggest strikes in the country affecting some 70,000 workers. The movement lasted a week before being crushed by the forces of order who,

armed with guns, liquidated a large number of strikers. Despite its massiveness, this movement of African workers could not count on any support from the white unions, which refused to call a strike or aid the victims of the bullets of the colonial bourgeoisie. Unfortunately this lack of solidarity promoted by the unions became systematic in each struggle.

In 1922 an insurrectionary strike crushed by a well-equipped army

At the end of December 1921, the coal mine bosses announced massive wage cuts and layoffs aimed at replacing 5000 European miners with indigenous workers. In January 1922, 30,000 miners decided to fight against the attacks of the mining employers. Faced with the procrastination of the unions, a group of workers took the initiative by establishing a committee to fight and declaring a general strike. In this way the miners forced the union leaders to follow the movement, but this strike was not quite "general" because it concerned only the "whites".

Faced with the pugnacity of the workers, the united state and employers then decided to use the utmost military means to defeat the movement. In order to deal with the strike the government declared martial law and mobilised some 60,000 thousand men with machine guns, cannons, tanks and even airplanes. For their part, seeing the extent of their enemy's forces, the strikers began to arm themselves by purchasing weapons (guns, etc.) and organizing themselves into commandos. We therefore witnessed a veritable military battle as in a conventional war. At the end of the fight on the workers' side there were more than 200 dead, 500 injured, 4,750 arrests, 18 death sentences. Clearly, this was a real war, as if South African imperialism, which took active part in the first world butchery, wished to extend its activity by bombing the miners as if it was facing German troops. By this gesture the British colonial bourgeoisie was demonstrating its absolute hatred of the South African proletariat, but also its fear of it.

In terms of lessons learned from this movement, it must be said that despite its military character, the bloody confrontation was above all a real class war, of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, with, however, unequal means. This only underlines the fact that the main power of the working class is not military but resides above all in its greatest possible unity. But instead of seeking the support of all the exploited, the miners (whites) fell into the trap set by the bourgeoisie with its plan to replace the 5,000 European workers by indigenous workers. This was shown tragically by the fact that throughout the battle between the European miners and the armed forces of capital, other workers (black, coloured and Indian), some 200,000 of them, were working or idle. It is also clear that, from the outset, the bourgeoisie was clearly aware of the weakness of the workers who went into battle deeply divided. The abject recipe of "divide and rule" was applied here with success well before the formal establishment of apartheid (whose main purpose as we recall was to contain the class struggle). But above all the bourgeoisie took advantage of its military victory over the South African proletarians to reinforce its grip on the working class. It organized elections in 1924 from which emerged victorious the populist parties defending "white interests", namely the National Party (Boer) and the Labour Party, which formed a coalition government. It was this coalition government that passed the laws establishing racial divisions, as far as considering a breach of work contract by a black worker as a crime; or again imposing a system

of passes for blacks and establishing compulsory residence zones for natives. Similarly there was a “colour bar” aimed at reserving skilled jobs for whites, providing them with a much higher salary than blacks or Indians. To this were added other segregationist laws including one entitled “*The Industrial Conciliation Act*” to ban non-white organizations. It was on the basis of this ultra repressive apartheid system that the Afrikaner government legally established apartheid in 1948.

In this way the bourgeoisie succeeded in permanently paralyzing all expressions of proletarian class struggle and it was not until the eve of the Second World War that we see the working class get its head above water by taking the path of the class struggle. In fact, between late 1920 and 1937, the field of struggle was occupied by nationalism: on the one hand, by the South African CP, the ANC and their unions, and on the other, by the Afrikaner National Party and its satellites.

[1]. See the series “Contribution to a history of the workers’ movement in Africa”, on Senegal in particular, in the *International Review* nos.145, 146, 147, 148 and 149.

[2]. In August 2012, the police of the ANC government massacred 34 strikers at the Marikana mines.

[3] - [4]. See Henri Wesseling, *Le partage de l’Afrique*, Editions Denoel, 1996, for the French translation.

[5]. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Section 3, Chapter 27, “The Struggle Against Natural Economy”,

[6]. Brigitte Lachartre, *Luttes ouvrières et libération en Afrique du Sud*, Editions Syros, 1977.

[7]. Henri Wesseling, *ibid.*

[8]. Brigitte Lachartre, *ibid.*

[9]. Wesseling, *ibid.*

[10]. Cited in Wesseling, *ibid.*

[11]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[12]. Wesseling, *ibid.*

[13]. The South African government certainly contributed to this with laws against all non-white organization.

[14]. The IWW was at the time one of the few trade union movements to organize white and non-white workers, not only in the same union but in the same union branches, regardless of race. See our articles in *International Review* nos. 124, 125: *The IWW: The failure of revolutionary syndicalism in the USA, 1905-1921.*

[15]. Lucien van der Walt (Bikisha collective media), <http://www.zabalaza.net>

[16]. We will return later to the unions claiming to defend the working class.

[17]. In the next article we will we will develop on the role of the parties/unions active within the working class.

[18]. Quoted by Brigitte Lachartre, *ibid.*

[19]. It is after the formal establishment of apartheid in 1948 that the CP and the ANC enter into armed struggle.

[20]. *Circle Leon Trotsky*, Presentation 29/01/2010, website www.lutte-ouvrière.org

[21] - [22]. Lachartre, *ibid.* Our emphasis.

[23]. The Rand is the common name for the Witwatersrand (White Waters Ridge) region which saw the first discoveries of gold and the first industrialisation of the country.

[24]. *Une histoire du syndicalisme révolutionnaire en Afrique du Sud.* (See also *1816-1939: Syndicalism in South Africa*)

[25]. <http://www.pelloutier.net>, cited above.

7. South Africa from World War II to the mid-1970s

In the previous article on the workers' movement in South Africa [\[1\]](#), we addressed the history of South Africa by successively evoking the birth of capitalism, of the working class, the apartheid system and the first movements of workers' struggle. And we ended the article by showing that, following the crushing of the workers' struggles of the 1920s, the bourgeoisie (then represented by the Labour Party and the Afrikaner National Party) managed to stifle all expressions of proletarian class struggle, so that it was not until the eve of the Second World War that we see the working class awake from its deep sleep. Clearly, after the crushing of the insurrectionary strike of 1922 in a terrible bloodbath and up until the late 1930s, the South African proletariat was paralysed and essentially left the terrain of struggle to the white and black nationalist groups and parties.

This article highlights the formidable effect of the apartheid system on the class struggle, combined with the action of the trade unions and parties of the bourgeoisie, up until the end of the 1960s when, faced with the unprecedented development of the class struggle, the bourgeoisie had to "modernise" its political apparatus and revamp its system. In other words, it had to face up to the South African proletariat, which had finally resumed its massive struggles by enrolling in the global waves of struggle that marked the end of the 1960s and early 1970s.

To evoke this period of the working class struggle, we rely heavily on the work of Brigitte Lachartre, [\[2\]](#) member of the Centre for Research, Information and Action in Africa – CRIAA – the only body (to our knowledge) that is dedicated to the history of social struggles in South Africa.

Ephemeral revival of the class struggle during the second butchery of 39-45

War preparations in Europe meant for South Africa an unexpected acceleration of industrialization, the major industrial countries constituting the principal sources of support for the South African economy: *"(...) The period 1937-1945 was marked by a brutal acceleration of the industrial process. South Africa, at this time, was forced to develop its own processing industries given the economic paralysis of Europe at war and of its exports across the world."* [\[3\]](#)

This resulted in the massive recruitment of workers and increasing rates of production. Against these rates and the degradation of its living conditions, the working class had to suddenly wake up and launch itself into struggle:

"For the African masses, this phase of industrial intensification was reflected in accelerated proletarianisation, further increased by the fact that a quarter of the white labour force was then enrolled in voluntary military service with the Allies. During this period, workers' struggles and strikes led to significant wage increases (13% per year between 1941 and 1944) and a resurgence of the African trade union movement. (...) Between 1934 and 1945 there were a record 304 strikes in which 58,000 Africans, coloureds and Indians and 6,000 whites took part. In 1946, the African miners' union, an organisation not legally recognised, triggered a very important wave of strikes across the country that was repressed in blood. It nevertheless managed to mobilize some 74,000 black workers." [\[4\]](#)

So the South African regime was forced to develop its own processing industries, given that it also had to replace a large part of the workforce mobilised in the imperialist slaughter. This meant that South Africa achieved at that time a certain level of technological development that allowed it to free itself (momentarily) from its European suppliers; a unique case on the African continent.

For its part, unexpectedly, the working class was able to quite massively resume its struggle in reaction to the super-exploitation caused by the speed up of work rates. Through a heroic movement (in the context of war with martial law applying) it was able to wrest wage increases without being massacred in a bloodbath. This defensive struggle, however, was largely insufficient to positively affect the dynamics of the class struggle, which was still largely contained by the bourgeois state. Indeed, the state was not slow to take advantage of the wartime context to reinforce its repressive apparatus and finally managed to inflict a heavy defeat on the entire South African proletariat. This defeat (like those experienced previously) traumatised the working class for a long time and plunged it into inertia, allowing the South African bourgeoisie to consolidate its victory at the political level, in particular through the formalisation of the apartheid system. The South African state, which was directed by the Afrikaners after their victory in parliamentary elections in 1948, decided to reinforce all the old repressive laws and measures [5] against the proletarian masses in general. Thus, apartheid officially became a system of governance, justifying the most barbaric acts against the working class in its various ethnic groups and especially against Africans. These went from “small” vexations to the most abject practices: separate toilets, separate kitchens, separate living areas, separate public benches, separate bus/taxis, separate schools, separate hospitals, etc. And they were all accompanied by an article of law punishing by imprisonment anyone who ventured to violate these monstrous laws. And indeed each year more than 300,000 people were arrested for breaches of these despicable laws. Thus, a worker of European origin was likely to go to jail if he was caught drinking with someone who was black or of mixed race. In this context where everyone risked prison, it was impossible to envisage a political discussion between proletarians of different ethnic groups. [6]

This situation weighed terribly on the ability of the working class as a whole to struggle, to the point of plunging it back into a period of “sleep” (like the one after the 1920s), which lasted from the 1950s until the early 1970s. During this period, the class struggle was diverted mainly by supporters of the struggle for “national liberation”, namely the partisans of the ANC/CP, behind whose cause they led black South African workers up until the end of apartheid.

Parties and unions divert the struggles onto a nationalist terrain

Parties and unions played a leading role in systematically diverting workers’ struggles onto the terrain of white and black nationalism. It is not necessary to describe at length the role played by the Labour Party against the working class, this being evident from the fact that, the day after its active participation in the global butchery of 1914-1918, it used its power to openly carry out violent attacks against the South African proletariat. Moreover, from that moment, it ceased to officially claim membership of “the workers’ movement”, which did not prevent it from preserving its links with the unions it was close to like TUCSA (Trade Union Confederation of South Africa). In addition, between 1914 and the end of

apartheid, before breaking up, it passed from government to opposition, and vice versa, like any “classical” bourgeois party

For more details on the ANC, readers are referred to the previous article in this series. If we mention it here it is mainly because it is its alliance with the CP and trade unions that allowed it to play a double role as the controller and oppressor of the working class.

As for the Communist Party, we will return to the way it dealt with a certain proletarian opposition at the beginning of its black nationalist orientation, applying the instructions of Stalin and the degenerating Third International. Certainly the information we have does not indicate the numerical or political importance of this proletarian opposition to the South African Communist Party, but it was strong enough to attract the attention of Leon Trotsky who attempted to support it.

The counter-revolutionary role of the SACP under Stalin’s leadership

The South African CP, as a “Stalinised party,” played a harmful counter-revolutionary role against the workers’ struggles in the early 1930s, when this former internationalist party was already in the grip of a profound process of degeneration. Having participated in the struggle for proletarian revolution at the beginning of its formation in the 1920s, the South African CP was very quickly manipulated by the Stalinist regime and from 1928 it obediently executed its counter-revolutionary orders, including the making of alliances with the black bourgeoisie. The Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” was accompanied by the idea that underdeveloped countries must necessarily pass through a “*bourgeois revolution*” and that, in this vision, the proletariat could still fight against colonial oppression but on no account struggle for the overthrow of capitalism in order to establish proletarian power in the colonies. This policy was translated concretely, at the end of the 1920s, into a “class collaboration” where the South African CP was first the “proletarian guarantor” of the ANC’s nationalist policies before definitively becoming its active accomplice up until today. This can be illustrated by these dire words from a secretary general of the CP, addressing Mandela: “*Nelson (...) we are fighting the same enemy (...) we are working in the context of African nationalism*”. [7]

An internationalist minority opposed to the nationalist orientation of the SACP

This policy of the South African CP was contested by a minority whose efforts Trotsky himself attempted to support, unfortunately in the wrong way. Instead of resolutely fighting against the nationalist and counter-revolutionary orientation advocated by Stalin in South Africa, in 1935 Leon Trotsky summed up the attitude that the revolutionary militants should have towards the ANC:

1. *The Bolshevik-Leninists put themselves in defence of the Congress in all cases when it is being attacked by the white oppressors and their chauvinistic agents in the ranks of the workers’ organisations.*
2. *The Bolshevik-Leninists place the progressive over against the reactionary tendencies in the program of the Congress.*

3. *The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realisation of even its own demands, because of its superficial, conciliatory policy, and develop in contradistinction to the Congress a program of revolutionary class struggle.*
4. *Separate, episodic agreements with the Congress, if they are forced by circumstances, are permissible only within the framework of strictly defined practical tasks, with the retention of full and complete independence of our own organization and freedom of political criticism.” [8]*

It is disconcerting to learn that, despite the evidence of the counter-revolutionary character of the Stalinist orientation applied by the South African CP towards the ANC, Trotsky still sought to accommodate himself with its diversionary tactics. On the one hand he asserted: “*The Bolshevik-Leninists put themselves in defence of the Congress*”, and on the other: “*The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realisation of even its own demands...*”

This was nothing but an expression of a policy of accommodation and conciliation with a fraction of the bourgeoisie because, at that time, there were no grounds to foresee any possible evolution of the ANC towards a proletarian class position. But above all, Trotsky was unable to see the reversal of the course of the class struggle, the domination of the counter-revolution, which was expressed by the victory of Stalinism.

It is no longer surprising to hear the Trotskyist group *Lutte Ouvrière* (80 years later), having noted the erroneous character of Trotsky’s orientation, attempt to justify this orientation with typical Trotskyist contortions by saying, on the one hand: “*Trotsky’s policy did not have a decisive influence but we must bear it in mind...*” On the other hand, *Lutte Ouvrière* says the South African CP: “*began fully in the service of the ANC and has continually sought to hide its bourgeois character*”.

Instead of just saying that Trotsky’s policy on the matter was wrong and that the CP had become a bourgeois party just like the ANC, *LO* engages in hypocritical acrobatics aimed at masking the nature of the South African Stalinist party. In doing so *LO* tries to hide its own bourgeois character and emotional ties with Stalinism.

The unions’ role as saboteurs of struggles and the efforts of ‘revolutionary syndicalism’

It should first be said that, by their natural role as “professional negotiators” and “peacemakers” of the conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the unions cannot truly constitute organs of the struggle for proletarian revolution, especially in the period of capitalist decadence, as illustrated by the history of class struggle since 1914.

However, we should underline the fact that, with the butchery of 1914-1918, workers defending proletarian internationalism tried to create revolutionary unions such as the IWA (Industrial Workers of Africa), on the model of the American IWW, and the ICU (the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union) [9]:

“(...) In 1917, a poster appeared on the walls of Johannesburg, convening a meeting for July 19: ‘Come and discuss issues of common interest between white and indigenous workers’. This text was published by the International Socialist League (ISL), a revolutionary syndicalist organization influenced by the American IWW (...) and formed in 1915 in opposition to the First World War and the racist and conservative policies of the South African Labour Party and craft unions. Comprising at the beginning mostly white activists, the ISL moved very quickly towards black workers, calling in its weekly newspaper International, to build ‘a new union that overcomes the limitations of trade, skin colour, race and sex to destroy capitalism by a blockade of the capitalist class’” [10]

As shown in this quotation, truly revolutionary minorities did try to create “revolutionary” unions in order to destroy capitalism and its ruling class. We should note that the ICU was born in 1919 following a merger with the IWA and grew rapidly. But unfortunately this union soon abandoned the field of proletarian internationalism: *“This union grew tremendously from 1924 and reached a peak of 100,000 members in 1927, making it the largest organisation of Africans after the ANC in the 1950s. In the 1930s, the ICU even established sections in Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe before declining gradually. The ICU was not officially a revolutionary syndicalist organization. It was more influenced by nationalist and traditionalist ideologies than anti-capitalism, and developed a certain form of bureaucracy.” [11]*

As can be seen, “revolutionary” unionism did not thrive for as long in South Africa as its partisans claimed. The ICU was certainly a “radical” and combative union, which initially advocated the unity of the working class. But even before the end of the 1920s it oriented itself towards the exclusive defence of the “black cause” under the pretext that the official (white) unions did not defend the indigenous workers. Moreover, Clements Kadalie [12] one of the ICU’s most influential leaders, categorically rejected the notion of “class struggle” and ceased to integrate white workers (including members of the SACP) into his union. Finally, the ICU died in the early 1930s under the blows of the ruling power and from its own contradictions. However, later on a number of its leaders pursued their union activities in other groups known for their African trade union nationalism, while other elements opting for internationalism were marginalised or dispersed.

Unions designed according to the laws of the apartheid regime

Like all states, faced with the working class, the apartheid regime felt the need for trade unions, but in this case they were to be designed according to the principles of the segregationist system: *“(...) The unionised South African population was organised in unions partitioned according to the race of their members. A first distinction was officially imposed between recognised unions, that is to say, those registered with the Ministry of Labour and workers’ organisations not recognised by the government, that is to say, which did not enjoy the official status of a workers’ union. This primary cleavage was the result, firstly, of the law on the settlement of Bantu work disputes (...), which maintained that Africans without the status of “employee” did not have the right to form fully recognised unions; and secondly, of the law on reconciliation in the industry (...) that allowed whites, coloureds and Indians to join unions but prohibited the creation of new mixed unions.” [13]*

At first glance, one can see in the South African state's conception of trade unionism a certain cynicism and a very elementary racism. But really, the hidden purpose was to avoid at all costs a consciousness among the workers (of all backgrounds) that the resistance struggles of the working class were fundamentally confrontations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the two real antagonistic classes in society. What is the best instrument for this bourgeois policy on the ground? It is obviously unionism. Hence all the laws and regulations on trade unions decided by the government at the time in order to improve the effectiveness of its anti-proletarian defences. The fact remains that the African section of the proletariat was the main target of the oppressor regime because it was larger and more combative, hence the fury which the bourgeois power showed towards it:

"Since 1950, the African trade unions have lived under the threat of the law on the suppression of communism, which gives the government the power to declare any organisation, including an African union (but not the other unions), 'illegal' if it engages in activities to promote the objectives of communism. (...) The definition of communism includes, among others, activities aimed at provoking 'industrial, social or economic change'. Thus, a strike, or any action organised by a trade union to end the system of reserved jobs or obtain wage increases and better working conditions, could well be declared favourable to 'communism' and serve as an excuse to outlaw the union." [14]

For the South African government, behind the workers' struggles there was the spectre of the questioning of its system, which it identified with the struggle for communism. Such a perspective was, we know, far from corresponding to the possibilities of this period of counter-revolution, which was unfavourable to the struggles of the working class on its own class terrain and where the struggle for communism was identified with the establishing of Stalinist-type regimes. But this does not preclude the fact that, even in these conditions, regimes of whatever kind are faced with the need to block the spontaneous tendency of workers to struggle to defend their conditions of life and work. The apartheid system understood that the unions constituted the best means of doing this, any union not pliant with its rules running the risk of being outlawed.

The main existing unions until the 1970s

These were the following:

- The unions of European origin: these had always followed the orientations of the colonial power, and in particular supported the war efforts in 1914-1918 and in 1939-1945. Similarly they assumed until the end of the apartheid system and beyond their role as "defenders" of the exclusive interests of white workers, even when they included workers of colour in their ranks. On the one hand there was the South African Confederation of Labour, considered as the most racist and conservative workers' grouping in the country (close to the apartheid regime) and, on the other, the Trade Union Confederation of South Africa, whose complicit ties to the Labour Party were very old. Most workers of colour (Indian and 'coloured' as defined by the regime but neither blacks nor whites) were for their part sometimes in mixed unions (some coloured but mainly white) and sometimes in unions of "colour".

- African trade unions: these were more or less strongly tied to the CP and the ANC, proclaiming themselves as defenders of the African workers and for national liberation. These were the Congress of South African Trade Unions (SACTU), the Free Trade Union Federation of South Africa and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

In 1974, there were 1,673,000 union members organised on the one hand in 85 exclusively white unions and on the other in 41 mixed and coloured unions regrouping a total of 45,188 white members and 130,350 of colour. But although outnumbered by members of colour, the white union members were of course more advantaged and considered they were better than the latter: “(...) *White workers’ unions were concentrated in economic sectors long protected by the government and reserved as a priority for the Afrikaner workforce, the electoral base of the ruling party. The six most numerically important white unions (...) were implanted in public and municipal services, the iron and steel industry, the automobile industry and mechanical engineering, railways and port services.*” [15]

With this kind of union apparatus, we can better understand the difficulties of the white working class in identifying with its sister fractions (black, coloured and Indian), since the steel barriers set up by the segregationist system made it almost impossible to envisage any common action between proletarians faced with the same exploiter.

There were (in 1974) 1,015,000 union members organised, firstly, in trade unions exclusively of colour and, secondly, in mixed unions (i.e. all those in unions excluding black Africans). “*The white unions were racially homogeneous, while the coloured or Asian unions had to submit to the coercion of the nationalist government.*” [16]

In the same year (1974), black Africans represented 70% of the working population and some 6,300,000 were affiliated to unions that were not officially recognised, given that workers didn’t have the right to organise themselves. Here again is an aberration of the apartheid system with its bureaucracy of another age in which the state and employers were allowed to employ people while denying them the status of employees, but allowing them nevertheless to create their own unions. What could therefore be the purpose of the regime’s manoeuvres in this situation?

It is clear that the tolerance of the African trade union organisations by the regime in no way contradicted its objective of controlling and dividing the working class along ethnic or nationalist lines. Indeed it is easier to control a strike controlled by “responsible” union organisations (even if unrecognised) than having to deal with a “wildcat” movement without leaders identified in advance. Besides, in this regard, the South African regime was following a “recipe” that was applied by all states faced with a combative proletariat.

The national liberation struggle against the class struggle

In reaction to the formal establishment of apartheid (1948), which resulted in the legal prohibition of African organisations, the CP and the ANC mobilised their militants, including the unions, and embarked on an armed struggle. With terror being employed on both sides, the working class suffered the

consequences and could not avoid being enlisted by one or the other. Clearly, the working class as a whole was firmly taken hostage by the nationalists of all stripes.

“Between 1956 and 1964, the main leaders of the ANC, the PAC, [17] and the South African Communist Party were arrested. The interminable trials to which they were subjected eventually ended in life imprisonment or renewed banishment for the principal historic leaders (N. Mandela, W. Sisulu, R. Fischer...), while very heavy prison sentences hit all the militants. Those who could escape repression took refuge in Lesotho, Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, Botswana. (...) In addition, military camps in countries neighbouring South Africa regrouped refugees or ‘freedom fighters’ who underwent military training and stood ready to intervene. Inside the country, the decade 1960-1970 was one of silence: repression silenced the opposition and only the protests of some religious and student organisations were heard. Strikes could be counted on the fingers of one hand while black workers bowed their heads, and black puppet leaders appointed by the Nationalist government, collaborated in the policy of dividing the country.” [18]

From all this it is clear that the South African proletariat was chained, trapped between the repression of the ruling power and the impasse of armed struggle launched by the African nationalists. This amply explains the passivity of the working class during this long period ranging from the 1940s up until the 1970s (except for the ephemeral episode of struggles during the second world butchery). But above all, this situation was an opportunity for the parties and trade unions to fully occupy the ideological terrain, poisoning class consciousness by striving to systematically transform every struggle of the working class into a struggle for “national liberation” for one section and one to defend the interests of “white workers” for the other. Obviously all this could only satisfy the objectives of the enemy of the working class, namely South African national capital.

The recovery of the class struggle: the strike waves between 1972 and 1975

After a long period of apathy, when it was subdued and held in check by the apartheid government and supporters of the liberation struggle, the working class successfully renewed its struggles in Namibia (a colony of South Africa at that time), thus enrolling itself in the worldwide waves of struggle that marked the end of the 1960s and the 1970s. [19]

The example of Namibia

As in South Africa, the working class in Namibia was, on the one side, caught in the bloody clutches of the South African police regime, and, on the other, dominated by the supporters of the national liberation struggle (SWAPO [20]). But, unlike the working class in South Africa which benefited from a long experience of struggle, it was the working class in Namibia, one with no real experience (to our knowledge), that would start the ball rolling in the struggles of the 1970s: *“Eleven years had passed since the last African mass movements. The white regime took advantage of this respite to consolidate its plans for separate development. On the social front, peace and stability could be loudly proclaimed*

across the world. But, two series of events emerged to disturb the 'white peace' in South Africa and create a sense of disquiet: the first occurred at the end of 1971 in Namibia, a territory illegally occupied by South Africa, and which, since 1965, had been agitated by the resistance of the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) to the central government of Pretoria. The second took place in the course of 1972 in South Africa itself, in the form of spectacular strikes launched by the bus conductors of Johannesburg. These two waves of unrest are generally attributed with the role of detonator for the events which were unleashed in the first days of January 1973." [21]

The first strike started in Namibia in Windhoek (the capital) and its suburbs, in Katutura, where 6,000 workers decided to enter into struggle against the political and economic oppression of the South African regime. And 12,000 other workers spread over a dozen industrial centres would soon follow the same strike agenda as their Katutura comrades. Thus 18,000 strikers downed tools several days after the beginning of the movement – one third of the estimated workforce of 50,000. And, despite threats of state repression and the violent blackmail of the employers, the workers' fighting spirit remained intact: *"Two weeks after the start of the strike almost all the strikers were sent back to the townships. The employers announced that they would re-hire the Ovambo (the ethnic name of the strikers) who had been disciplined, but would seek their workforce from elsewhere if they did not accept the conditions on offer. With the workers standing firm, the employers launched a wide recruitment campaign in other parts of the country, as well as in Lesotho and South Africa: they failed to recruit more than 1,000 new workers and were forced to go back and talk to the Ovambo workers." [22]*

Clearly, faced with the fighting spirit of the workers, the employers began to manoeuvre to divide the strikers, but were forced to give way: *"The employment contracts against which the strike was organised were subject to some changes; the recruitment agency (the SWANLA) was dismantled and its functions devolved to the Bantu authorities with the obligation to create recruitment offices in each Bantustan; the terms 'masters' and 'servants' were replaced in the contracts with 'employers' and 'employees'." [23]*

Obviously, given everything that remained in the arsenal of apartheid in the world of work, we can say that the victory of the strikers was not decisive. However this was a highly symbolic and promising victory in the context in which the strike movement unfolded: *"The scale of the strikes was such that it made it impossible for the government to adopt any traditional style of punitive action." [24]*

This showed that the balance of forces began to change in favour of the working class, which was able to show its militancy and its courage against the repressive regime. Besides, the exemplary experience of the struggle of the Namibian workers did not fail to spread to South Africa, unfolding there on an even more massive scale.

Strikes and riots in South Africa between 1972 and 1975

After Namibia, the working class continued its struggle within South Africa in 1972 where 300 Johannesburg bus drivers went on strike, 350 in Pretoria; 2,000 dockers came out in Durban and 2,000 in Cape Town. All these strikes made demands for wage rises or better working conditions. And their

importance could be measured by the anxiety of the bourgeoisie, which was soon employing huge resources to defeat the movements: *"The reaction of the government and the employers was brutal and swift. The 300 strikers in Johannesburg were arrested. In Durban, 15 of them were sacked. In other sectors, at the Ferro Plastic Rubber Industries, they were penalised 100 rand or given 50 days in jail for stopping work illegally. At Colgate-Palmolive (Boksburg) all African staff were dismissed. In one diamond mine, the striking miners were sentenced to 80 days in prison, their contracts were cancelled and they were sent back to their townships."* [25]

This brutal reaction expresses very clearly the palpable concern of the ruling class. However, the savagery which the South African bourgeoisie showed was accompanied by a dose of realism, because wage increases were granted to certain striking sectors with a view to encouraging a return to work. And as Brigitte Lachartre says: *"Half-victory, half defeat, the 1972 strikes mainly had the effect of taking the authorities by surprise, and they swiftly took stock of the situation, refusing to negotiate with the black workers, deployed the police and dismissed the strikers. Some statistical measures help us to see the scale of the events that shook the country in the following years: coming from various sources, they do not match exactly and are inclined to under-estimate. According to the Ministry of Labour, there were 246 strikes in 1973, which involved 75,843 black workers. For its part, the Police Department declared that its forces were involved in dealing with 261 strikes in the same year. Meanwhile, union activists in Durban estimated at 100,000 the number of black workers who went on strike in Natal during the first three months of 1973. For 1974, the figure of 374 strikes was given for the industrial sector alone and there were considered to be 57,656 strikers. For the province of Natal alone from June 1972 to June 1974, there were officially 222 work stoppages involving 78,216 workers. In mid-June 1974, 39 strikes in metallurgy had been registered, 30 in textiles, 22 in the garment sector, 18 in construction, 15 in commerce and distribution. (...) Wildcat strikes were increasing. Durban had 30,000 strikers in mid-February '73, and the movement spread throughout the country."* [26]

As we can see, South Africa was fully drawn into the successive waves of struggle that unfolded from the late 1960s and which signalled the opening of a course towards the development of class confrontations globally. Many of these strikes had to face the harsh repression of the government and employers' militias and ended in hundreds of deaths and injuries in the workers' ranks. The aggression and fury of the forces of capitalist order were directed at strikers who were only demanding dignified living conditions. Therefore, we must underline the courage and the fighting spirit of the South African working class (black, in particular) that generally went into struggle in solidarity and relying on its own consciousness, as is illustrated by the following example: *"The first expression of anger took place in a construction equipment plant (bricks and tiles): Coronation Brick and Tile Co, located in the industrial suburb of Durban. 2000 workers, the entire African workforce of the company, went on strike on 9 January 1973 in the morning. They demanded the doubling of their wages (which then amounted to 9 rand per week) and then demanded that they be tripled. An increase had been promised the previous year but had still not yet been given.*

"The workers of the first factory told how the strike began: they were awakened by a group of comrades at about three in the morning, who told them to meet on the football field instead of going to clock in for work. A delegation of sorts then left in the direction of the warehouses in the Avoca area to ask other

workers to join them at the stadium. This first phase of the strike unfolded in good spirits and the slogans were warmly welcomed. Nobody was opposed. The Avoca workforce went to the stadium across town in two columns and without worrying about the heavy traffic on the streets of the city at that time or the prohibitions they were breaking. Passing through the gates of the stadium, they all sang: 'Filumuntu ufesadikiza', meaning 'the man is dead, but his spirit still lives on.' [27]

Here we see the working class engaging in a very different form of struggle, taking things into its own hands without consulting anyone; that is to say, neither the unions nor any other "social mediators", a development which could only disorient the employers. Indeed, as expected, the company's CEO said he did not want to discuss with the strikers inside a football stadium but would only be ready to negotiate with a "delegation". But since an enterprise committee already existed, the workers flatly refused to form a delegation, chanting "our demands are clear, we do not want a committee, we want 30 rand a week". So the South African government began to manoeuvre by sending the Zulu authorities (their puppets) to "discuss" with the strikers, while the police stood by with loaded guns. In the end, the strikers had to go back to work under the combined pressure of all the various forces of the regime and accept an increase of 2.077 rand after refusing 1.50 previously. The workers returned to work deeply dissatisfied because of the low salary increase obtained. However, with the press having broadcast the news of the movement, other sectors immediately gave it a fresh impetus by launching into struggle.

"Two days later, 150 workers of a small tea packing company (TW Beckett) stopped work, demanding a wage increase of 3 rand a week. The reaction of management was to call the police and fire all those who refused to return to work. There were no negotiations. One of the employees said: 'We were given 10 minutes to make our minds up'. A hundred workers refused to return to work. A few days later the management let it be known that it would re-hire the sacked workers but at the previous wage. Almost no one went back to his post. After only three weeks of the strike, the company agreed an increase of 3 rand for everyone. Almost all the workers were rehired. (...). At the same time as the strike at Beckett's, African workers from several service companies and boat repairers (JH Skitt and Co. and James Brown and Hamer) also stopped work. (...) The strike lasted several days and an increase of 2 to 3 rand a week was finally agreed." [28]

A new phenomenon had occurred: a series of strikes which had ended in real victories because, faced with the balance of force imposed by the strikers, the bosses (in a state company) were forced to give in to the workers' wage demands. In this sense, the most illustrative case is that of Beckett's, which had agreed an increase of 3 rand a week; that is, the amount demanded by its employees. At the same time they were forced to take back almost all workers they had wanted to sack. Another very remarkable fact in the struggle was the conscious solidarity between workers from different ethnic groups, in this case, Africans and Indians. This wonderful gesture illustrates the ability of the working class to unite in struggle despite the multiple divisions institutionalised by the South African bourgeoisie and knowingly condoned and enforced by the trade unions and the nationalist parties. Therefore, ultimately, we can speak of a glorious workers' victory over the forces of capital. Indeed, it was a success appreciated as such by the workers themselves, and which encouraged other sectors to launch strike action, for example in the public service sector:

“On 5th February, the most spectacular actions, but also the most tension-filled, were carried out: 3,000 employees of the Durban municipality went on strike from the roads, sewers, electricity and slaughterhouse sectors. The weekly salary of the staff at the time amounted to 13 rand; the demands were for this to be doubled. The protests had such an effect that soon there were 16,000 workers refusing the increase of 2 rand made by the municipal council. It’s noteworthy that the Africans and Indians acted more often than not in close solidarity, even though the municipality had sent a large number of Indian employees home, so, it was said, they would not be molested and forced to strike by the Africans! If it was true that the Africans and Indians had different pay scales, the gaps in pay between them were not very important and usually varied between very low and low. On the other hand, if the Indians had the right to strike – which the Africans did not – this right was only applicable to certain sectors and in certain circumstances. However, in the public services, considered ‘essential services’, strikes were prohibited to everyone in the same way”. [29]

This strike, where we see the struggles in the private and public sectors coinciding, is also a major element expressing very clearly the high level of militancy and class consciousness reached by the South African proletariat in the early 1970s, especially as these movements took place, as always, in the same context of bloody repression - the automatic response of the apartheid regime, particularly against strikes considered “illegal”. And yet, despite all this, the militancy remained intact and even grew:

“The situation remained explosive: the municipal workers had refused a wage increase of 15%; the number of factories affected by the strike had further increased and the majority of the textile workers had not returned to work. Addressing the striking workers of the municipality, one of the officials threatened them with the physical force he had the right to use, since their strike was illegal. (...) The crowd then began to jeer at him and ordered him off the stage. Trying to explain that the municipal council had already granted an increase of 15%, he was again interrupted by the workers who shouted to him that they wanted a further 10 rand. (...) The atmosphere of these meetings seems to have been mostly euphoric and the comments from the crowd of strikers more jocular than furious. The workers gave the impression of throwing off a weight that had long oppressed them. (...) As for the demands they made at these demonstrations, these also revealed the euphoric excitement since they were calling for wage increases much higher than could actually be achieved, sometimes in the order of 50-100%.”

Here we can speak in terms of a working class that had greatly recovered its class consciousness and was no longer content with wage increases but was more concerned with its self-respect and its dignity. More importantly, it demonstrated self-confidence, as shown above for example in the verbal exchange with the spokesman for the forces of law and order who the workers openly mocked. In short, in the words of the author of this quotation, the workers were euphoric and far from shocked by the police repression imposed by the state. On the contrary, in this situation where the South African proletariat had demonstrated its self-confidence, its class consciousness sowed confusion and panic inside the ruling class.

The bourgeois reaction to the workers' strikes shows its disorientation

Clearly, faced with a wave of struggles of such strength, the ruling class could not stand idly by. But the leaders of the country were visibly surprised by the scale of combativity and the determination of the strikers, hence the dispersion and incoherence of the reactions of the bourgeoisie's representatives.

This is demonstrated by these statements:

- The President of the republic: *"The subversive organisations persist in their efforts to incite sectors of the population to agitate. Their effects are resolutely opposed by the constant vigilance of the South African police. Sporadic strikes and protest campaigns, according to certain publications – organs of the Communist Party – are organised or given moral support by them, but have not produced significant results"*.
- The Minister of Labour: *"The strikes in Natal show, by their conduct, that this is not a wage problem. (...) Everything indicates that an action was organised and that the strikers are out to get something more than a simple wage increase. The action of the workers and their unwillingness to negotiate clearly shows that agitation for union rights is not the solution and that it is only a smokescreen that hides something else ..."*
- A representative of the employers: *"I don't know who first had the idea to replace the strikers by prisoners, but this solution merits study. The alternative would be to employ Whites, but they use paint guns, which is hardly practicable in the windy conditions. As for the prisoners, we could certainly use them to clean the port and its surroundings ..."*
- An observer reflecting on the attitude of the unions to the strikes: *"Another important aspect of the social situation in the country was specifically highlighted during these strikes: namely the loss of significant influence of the official unions. Although some members of these unions were themselves involved in some of these strikes, the majority of the union organisations were aware that the initiative was coming entirely from the non-unionised African workers and that there was no point in their intervening."*

This series of reactions clearly demonstrates a sense of panic at all levels of the South African state, and a particularly worrying phenomenon for the bourgeoisie was that these strikes were triggered and often controlled by the workers themselves, that is to say, with no union involvement. This attempt of the workers to control their struggles largely explains the divisions that were openly expressed by those in power over the means to be used to counteract the dynamic of the working class, as illustrated by the following quote:

"The Anglophone and international sectors of capital did not have the same attachment to the racist and conservative doctrines as the state administrators. For them, productivity and profitability took precedence – at least at the level of discourse – over the official ideology and the legislative encumbrances of the colour barrier. (...). The most advanced spokesmen of the employers, for whom Harry Oppenheimer – President of the Anglo-American Corporation – was the leading voice, were for the gradual integration of the African labour force into the higher-paying skilled jobs, for improving the living and working conditions of the black workers and miners, and for its introduction to be controlled, at each stage, by the African trade unions."^[30]

And, learning from the workers' struggles, the big boss (Oppenheimer) of one of the largest diamond companies was instrumental (with others) in calling for the legalisation of the African unions to give them the means to better control the working class. Similarly, here is the case made by a spokesman of the "Progressive Party", a close ally of the big boss quoted above: *"The unions play an important role in that they prevent political disorder, (...) which, as history amply demonstrates, often follows from economic demands. If we can prevent these disorders through trade unionism and with negotiations on wages and working conditions, we can also reduce other risks. And it is not unionism which risks aggravating the situation"*. Unlike the proponents of the apartheid "hard line", this spokesman of the bourgeoisie (who we can describe as "enlightened") saw very well the importance of the role played by the trade unions for the ruling class as forces for controlling the working class and preventing "risks" and "political disorder".

The workers' militancy forces the bourgeoisie to change its legislative system

Predictably, in drawing the lessons from the waves of struggle that shook the country in the early 1970s, the ("enlightened") South African bourgeoisie was forced to react by adopting a series of measures to deal with the rising combativity of a working class that was becoming more and more aware of its strength and confidence. *"The 1973 strikes broke out when its deputies were opening the parliamentary session in Cape Town. As was reported by the trade unionists in Durban, the representatives of the employers' organisations and chambers of commerce went as a delegation to meet with the Minister of Labour to set up the first firewall against workers' unrest. On this occasion, state-employer consultations were numerous and acted upon; past mistakes were not repeated."* [31]

Indeed, after a series of consultations between the government, parliamentarians and employers, it was decided to "relax" a number of repressive measures to prevent "wildcat strikes" by giving more space to the African trade unions so that they could assume control over the workers. In doing so, the South African bourgeoisie became more "reasonable", taking into account the changing balance of forces imposed by the working class through its massive struggles.

For a provisional conclusion on these great strike waves, we present the views of Brigitte Lachartre on these movements and those of a group of researchers from Durban, since both seem relevant in the light of the qualitative overall assessment: *"The development of solidarity among the black workers in struggle and the increased awareness of their class unity were highlighted by many observers. This unquantifiable acquisition of the struggles is understood by them as the most positive for the continuation of the organisation of the movement of the black workers."* [32]

And according to the analysis of the group of researchers [33] cited by Brigitte Lachartre: *"We note, moreover, that the spontaneity of the strikes was a major reason for their success, especially when compared with the relative failure of the mass actions of the Africans in the 50's, in a period of more intense political activity. It was enough that the strikes were clearly organised (...) for the police to quickly seize those responsible. At the time, organised as they were, the strikes were a much greater*

threat to the White power; their demands were not negligible and, from the point of view of the Whites, the use of violence seemed the only possible outcome.

But the spontaneity of strikes does not mean that their demands were confined to the purely economic framework. These strikes were also political: the fact that the workers demanded the doubling of their wages is not a sign of the naiveté or stupidity of the Africans. It indicates more the expression of the rejection of their situation and their desire for a totally different society. The workers did return to work with some modest gains, but they were not more contented than they were before the strikes..."

We concur especially with the last paragraph of this quote, which gives a coherent conclusion to the overall analysis of the conduct of the struggles. As shown by its various experiences, the working class can easily switch from the economic struggle to the political struggle and vice versa. But we should above all retain the idea that the strikes were also very political. Indeed, behind the economic demands, the political consciousness of the South African working class was developing and this was a source of concern for the South African bourgeoisie. In other words, the political character of the strike waves in the years 1972-1975 eventually caused serious cracks in the apartheid system by forcing the political and industrial apparatus of capital to review its machinery for supervising the working class. This gave rise to a broad debate at the summit of the South African state on the question of the relaxation of repressive measures and more generally on the democratisation of social life, particularly regarding the legalisation of black trade unions. And indeed, after 1973 (the year of powerful strike movements), 17 new black trade unions were created or legalised in addition to the 13 previously existing. In other words, this debate was triggered by the workers' struggles which led to the gradual process of dismantling the apartheid system but always under the pressure of workers' struggles. Clearly by creating or strengthening the union forces, the bourgeoisie wanted to provide "social firemen" capable of extinguishing the flames of the workers' struggles. For example, while maintaining the traditional means of deflecting social movements (nationalism, racism and corporatism), the bourgeoisie added a new "democratic" component by granting or extending "political rights" (supervised rights of association) to the black populations. It was this same process that allowed the ANC to come to power. However, as will be seen later on, the South African government would never abandon its other more traditional repressive measures against the working class, namely its police and military forces. This will be illustrated in the next article, particularly by looking at the large scale struggles of Soweto in 1976.

[1]. Published in *International Review* n° 154.

[2]. *Luttes ouvrières et libération en Afrique du Sud*, Editions Syros, 1977. We draw the reader's attention to the fact that a simple reading of the book does not allow us to really know its author, her profile in terms of precise political influences. Nevertheless this seems close (at the time of the release of her book) to the intellectual milieu of the French left (or extreme left), as indicated from the following passage in her introduction: "(...) *What to say to the individual concerned and aware of the game being played in southern Africa, to the political activist, trade unionist, student? Tell them about the struggles that led to it; that is, no doubt, what he expects. It is also a way of getting his attention by showing him how these struggles are close to him and how the society to which he belongs depends on their outcome. This is the choice that has been made here: to talk of*

the struggles of the black proletariat in recent years. Not that others have not done such work at different levels, and it would be a pity to pass over these in silence (those of intellectuals of all races, progressive Christians ...)."

It turns out that among the authors (and other researchers) that we encountered in our research on the history of the workers' movement in South Africa, Brigitte Lachartre is the only one who proposes to focus on the issue of workers' struggles in this region, describing their progress with conviction and detailed analyses. Ultimately, that's why we rely on it as a primary source document. Of course, where necessary, we reserve the right to express our disagreement with this or that element of her viewpoint.

[3] - [4]. Ibid.

[5]. 1924 law passed by the Labourites and Afrikaners when in power.

[6]. On the "specific" difficulties of the white working class see *International Review* n° 154, the sections on "Apartheid against the class struggle", and "National liberation struggle against the class struggle".

[7]. See *International Review* n° 154.

[8]. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/04/wpsa.htm>

[9]. Lucien van der Walt. <http://www.zabalaza.net>.

[10]. See the first article in this series in *International Review* n° 154.

[11]. Lucien van der Walt, *ibid.*

[12]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clements_Kadalie

[13]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[14]. A. Hepple, *Les travailleurs livrés à l'apartheid*, cited by Lachartre, *ibid.*

[15]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[16]. *Ibid.*

[17]. Pan-Africanist Congress, a split from the ANC.

[18]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[19]. See *ibid.*

[20]. South-West Africa People's Organisation. Namibia was called "South-West Africa" at that time.

[21]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[22] - [26]. *Ibid.*

[27]. *The Durban Strikes - 1973*, quoted by Brigitte Lachartre, *ibid.*

[28]. *Ibid.*

[29]. Lachartre, *ibid.*

[30] - [32]. *Ibid.*

[33]. Authors of *The Durban Strikes - 1973*.

Sources: <http://en.internationalism.org/series/1895>

1. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/145/contribution-history-workers-movement-africa-1>
2. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/contribution-history-workers-movement-africa-2>
3. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201111/4594/contribution-history-workers-movement-africa-part-3-1920s-30s>
4. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201203/4747/contribution-history-workers-movement-africa-part-4-second-world-war>
5. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201206/4991/contribution-history-workers-movement-africa-v-may-1968-senegal>
6. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201402/9459/history-class-struggle-south-africa>
7. <http://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201508/13355/south-africa-world-war-ii-mid-1970s>