

# South African miners strike for higher wages, 1946

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [an example of paradox of repression](#) [2]

## Timing

12 August

1946

to:

16 August

1946

## Location and Goals

Country:

South Africa

Location City/State/Province:

Gauteng

Location Description:

Witwatersrand hills

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Increase wages to 10 shillings a day

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 048. Protest meetings

Notes on Methods:

There are no methods under the 6th segment as the duration of the strike was five days, and so each segment is about 1 day.

The methods that are not under a particular segment denote the methods used on 4 August 1946, before the strike had officially begun, by the meeting called forth by the African Mine Workers' Union that ended with the decision for miners to go on a general strike.

Segment Length:

1 day

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Black South African miners

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU)

Partners:

African National Congress

External allies:

Sympathy strikers in Johannesburg

Involvement of social elites:  
Not known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Sympathy strikers in Johannesburg

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Women tobacco workers

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

The sympathy strikers and women tobacco workers tried to mobilize and join the campaign, but were met with immense police brutality. It was not noted in the sources whether the sympathy strikers and tobacco workers exited the campaign as a result of the oppression they faced.

Segment Length:

1 day

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

Transvaal Chamber of Mines

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Police opening fire, beating, bayoneting, bludgeoning, arresting, imprisoning, and deporting the strikers and African National Congress leaders

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

4 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

None of the demands by the miners on strike were met, which is why the success score is a zero.

Despite the immense police brutality throughout the campaign, the miners continued to follow the general strike. Although the brutality reached the point that the campaign had to end, the strikers were able to continue to grow and voice their demands during the duration of the strike.

The campaign did in fact grow much larger in number through the six days of protest. Also, sympathy strikers in Johannesburg and the involvement of women tobacco workers demonstrated the growth of the strike.

In 1941 the pay disparity between black South African mine workers and white South African workers was R70 to R848, respectively. The African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU) formed in response to address this issue. By 1946 the 12:1 ratio of pay had not changed, as black workers were paid R87 while white workers were paid R1,106.

On 4 August 1946 more than one thousand gold miners assembled in the Newtown Market Square because there was no hall available to black Africans to hold such a large-scale meeting. Workers mounted the platform one after the other calling for immediate action. By the end of the meeting, the miners had arrived at a resolution that expressed the demands of the miners: a minimum wage of 10 shillings per day and better work conditions.

If the Transvaal Chamber of Mines did not meet these demands, the miners would go on a general strike starting from 12 August. The miners called upon all Africans employed on the gold mines to join. The AMWU conveyed its decision from the meeting to general strike to the Chamber, making a last minute appeal for negotiations. This was ignored, and so the strike commenced on 12 August.

On the day of the strike about 60,000 miners walked off their job in the Witwatershed mine. The mass media reported on the decision of the AMWU to strike; the *Rand Daily Mail* portrayed the strike as a "complete failure" even before it had begun. The *Guardian*, a progressive South African weekly, was the only paper that supported the strike.

*The Star*, however, by that evening reported that tens of thousands of workers were out on strike from East to West Rand, that a special committee was formed to "deal with" the strike, and that thousands of police were being mobilized and drafted to the area.

On 13 August a peaceful procession of miners began to march to Johannesburg from East Rand. The police opened fire on the marchers, killing a number of them. Police at one mine chased workers down mineshafts with live ammunition.

The workers then proceeded to stage a sit-in, but were beaten by the police; the *Star* reported that the miners then "volunteered to go back to work." The day became known as Bloody Tuesday.

On 14 August, a special conference of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CONETU) called for a sympathy general strike in Johannesburg in response to the police brutality. On 15 August, CONETU called for a mass meeting of workers at the Newtown Market Square. The meeting was banned by the senior police officer under the Riotous Assemblies Act and the people were given five minutes to disperse.

Women tobacco workers were on a march to attend the meeting and were attacked by the police as well; one pregnant woman was bayoneted.

By 16 August 1946 the strike ended. Gold production had dropped by 169,000 tons, the lowest it had been since

1937. 75,000 strikers by record of the Director of Native Labour, but closer to 100,000 strikers by other records, were bludgeoned back to work by the police. Local African National Congress leaders were arrested and tried for treason and sedition.

Workers at 32 of the 45 mines on the Rand had participated in the strike. Hundreds of workers were arrested, tried, imprisoned, or deported. A total of 1,248 miners on strike were wounded and nine were killed.

Although the strike failed to force a raise in wages, it was noted to have been a historical event that catalyzed the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The participants of the strike were named as the forerunners of the freedom strikers of 1 May 1950 and the protest strike of 26 June 1950.

## Research Notes

Influences:

The strike by the African mine workers was noted to have been a historical event that catalyzed the Anti-Apartheid Movement; the participants of the strike were named as the forerunners of the freedom strikers of 1 May 1950 and the protest strike on 26 June 1950. (2)

Sources:

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Yein Pyo, 22/11/2012

[Back to top](#)

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