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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
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Title: The Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Diggers 1926-1929.

by: T P Clynick

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THE LICHTENBURG ALLUVIAL DIAMOND DIGGERS 1926 - 1929

by Mr T.P. Clynick

> "The unlucky one, the ignorant and the oppressed have only one conclusion to come to, and that is they have been beaten again ... the poor digger has been beaten so often that he has lost all faith in anything being run straight for his benefit. He has been beaten from forming small syndicates; he has been beaten from obtaining employment from small companies; he has been beaten from obtaining financial support from the buyers who are mostly on the spot almost daily; and last, but not least, he has been beaten from participating in one of the richest known alluvial fields in the world - namely Namaqualand - on the ground that to have a lot of poor diggers there would make conditions worse than before and cause greater starvation than at present exists."
>
> (Letter from "A SON OF AFRICA" to the Star, October 3, 1928).

INTRODUCTION

During the 1920s the face of the Transvaal countryside was transformed by the penetration of capitalist agriculture. This transformation was predicated upon the destruction of pre-existing relations of production, most notably that of share cropping.[1] However if this capitalist transformation was the most visible symbol of change in the rural areas of the Transvaal, its most essential characteristic was its uneveness, as different regions of the Transvaal were affected to varying degrees. One of the ways in which this uneveness was measured was in the capacity of various marginalised rural communities or groups to resist 'full proletarianisation' through their occupation of various peripheral niches in the rural economy.

Just as for marginalised Black producers, White petty-commodity producers and landless bywoners were forced by the same economic necessity to sell their labour in the burgeoning industrial sectors in the towns and cities of the industrial heartland of a sub-continent. Again the emphasis must be on the uneveness of this necessity in the various areas of the Transvaal, as for the Union as a whole. In the south western Transvaal, for instance, sharecropping arrangements between tenant and landlord remained in existence for much longer than

in the eastern Transvaal, where already by the 1920s farmers were steadily increasing the area of land under production and were busily transforming conditions of tenure for Black tenants.[2]

The fact that the area of White land under crops in the Transvaal increased by over 40% between 1921 and 1930, and that the number of White owned woolled sheep in the Transvaal increased by over 80% in the same period,[3] does not tell us much about the nature of this transformation nor of the responses of rural communities to the entry of capital into the Transvaal rural economy. Local class struggles qualify the picture which is presented of the inevitable and linear progression of alienated rural communities from 'peasant' to 'proletarian' status and force us to qualify such concepts.

For the south western Transvaal region one such group which displayed a well developed sense of community and a crude but effective awareness of interest during the 1920s was the alluvial diamond diggers.

Diamond diggings and diggers occupy a prominant position in the social and economic life of the rural population in the south western Transvaal, as well as the northern Cape, during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Although a permanent, 'professional' digging community had existed from the end of the Boer War, the population of this community was continually strengthened and weakened by the addition or subtraction of large numbers of so-called 'farmer-diggers' - those farmers who used the diggings during times of economic uncertainty or failure as an opportunity to recuperate losses suffered as a result of crop failure whether due to drought, locusts or floods.[4] Many bywoners and other landless Whites utilised the diggings in the same manner, responding to cyclical prosperity or decline. A similar response was shown by Blacks to the availability of employment on the diggings as claim labourers. Table 1 lists the fluctuating numbers of Whites and Blacks employed on the alluvial diggings in the Union 1920 - 1926.

TABLE 1

DIGGERS AND LABOURERS IN THE TRANSVAAL 1920 - 26

Year	White Diggers	Black Labourers
1920	5 871	6 917
1921	2 594	5 078
1922	3 573	6 849
1923	5 043	10 066
1924	4 125	10 096
1925	3 679	9 430
1926	9 698	28 374

Source: Annual Reports of the State Mining Engineer 1920 - 26

In the years 1926 to 1929 the most dramatic increase in the digging population took place. Although diamonds had been discovered in the Lichtenburg magisterial district in late 1922, these diggings were described as 'quite average . . . creating no abnormal conditions.'[5] The position was transformed when diamonds were discovered in large quantities on the farm Uitgevonden No. 99, where prospecting operations had begun in December 1925. The rumoured richness of the Elandsputte diggings (as these diggings were named) sparked off one of the most astonishing treks in the history of South African alluvial diamond diggings.[6] At the proclamation of Elandsputte over 5 000 people participated in a rush to peg claims. Following Elandsputte, a further seven farms were proclaimed in quick succession between June 1926 and March 1927.[7] Over 27 000 people participated in the Grasfontein rush which took place in March 1927 on the farm Grasfontein No. 240.

The most remarkable aspect of the Lichtenburg discoveries, apart from their remarkable richness, was the scale of participation, as the population of the district underwent a drastic revision. According to the Assistant Magistrate for Lichtenburg, between January and March 1927 there were on average 80 000 Whites and more than 100 000 Blacks on the diggings.[8] The Public Service Commission appointed to enquire into the effect of the proclamations on the Lichtenburg district attempted to put the population increase into perspective:

> The statement that the present population (European and Native) is approximately the same as Krugersdorp or Benoni is a fact which may prove helpful and assist towards comprehension of the extent of the population of the diggings.[9]

During the year 1927 the South African Mining and Engineering Journal estimated the male population of the diggings as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

LABOUR ON THE LICHTENBURG DIGGINGS 1927

Month	Diggers	Diggers Registering Finds	White Labour	Black Labour
January	6 140	3 923	592	22 660
February	4 229	4 752	596	24 632
March	19 937	8 038	590	35 575
April	7 716	6 641	693	33 004
May	8 056	6 343	563	30 769
June	5 705	4 167	533	30 896
July	5 668	3 684	537	13 703
August	11 155	3 428	498	18 049
September	6 304	4 010	163	19 170
October	8 049	3 435	117	45 496
November	8 312	*	445	42 664
December	8 045	*	433	29 787

* Not available.

Source: Kotze J.S. Geskiedenis van die Wes-Transvaal Diamant Delwerye, M.A., UPE, 1972, p. 123.

The 1926 census gave the total White population of the Lichtenburg district as 13 794.[10] By 1933 the total number of diggers and their families was 5 626 and the total population of the district itself was 23 442.[11]

This drop in the number of diggers and their families was paralleled by a drop in production of diamonds from the alluvial diggings (as shown in table 3).

TABLE 3

ALLUVIAL DIAMOND PRODUCTION IN THE UNION 1928 - 33 (1,000 CARATS)

Year	Namaqualand	Diggings	Total
1928	906,5	1 208,2	2 114,7
1929	265,8	1 101,9	1 367,7
1930	142,1	776,6	918,7
1931	137,9	509,2	647,1
1932	99,2	388,9	488,1
1933	50,7	440,4	491,1

Source: Viljoen D.J., 1956.

It appears from the above figures that the digging community occupied a transitory if not peripheral place in the social history of the Transvaal countryside in the late 1920s. This appearance has been strengthened by various historians interested in the alluvial diggings[12] who have seen the diggers as 'poor whites'. This point of view is articulated by Grosskopf in his contribution to the Carnegie Commission where he states that 'under modern conditions[13] ... the poor white problem is ... an unemployment problem' in which diggers were stranded by the inevitable and objective workings of economic progress and were unable to adapt themselves to the demands of modern economic life. Digging as an occupation was not only uneconomical : it was 'free life (where the diggers) are their own masters ... many of them have to learn the great lesson that, under modern economic conditions[14] they can prosper only by hard, thorough and regular labour'. The result of this propensity toward the easy life is that '... the whole atmosphere of the diggings, with the cosmopolitan population, their lack of community feeling or recognised moral standards, and their all-pervading spirit of gambling, recklessness and instability, reacts perniciously on simple rural people'.[15] Poverty and indigency were therefore a corollary to the existence of the diggings and forced the state to attempt to 'rehabilitate' the 'poor white digger'.

However, like urban Afrikaners, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, these rural Afrikaners in the late 1920s demonstrated a remarkable resiliance in the face of efforts by the State to transform them, either into a servile labouring class on Government

Relief Works in the countryside, or into petty-commodity producers in State or private funded agricultural settlements.[16] The State, in fact, was only capable of buying off a small section of the digging community which they were forced to maintain by Government relief in the forms of doles and handouts in the years 1931 to 1933; and into which service they pressed various private organisations.

The Lichtenburg diggers displayed a degree of group consciousness and exhibited a well-developed sense of community in the years 1926 - 1933. This essay is an attempt partially to explore the nature of the consciousness of the Lichtenburg digging community and the extent to which this was modified and transformed by the interests of the State and of Capital in the years 1926 - 29.

GENESIS

Government policy as regards the alluvial diamond diggings in the early 1920s was aimed at providing sufficient proclaimed ground for the digging community as was demanded by diggers. This policy was in the interests of the State, both because it maintained a political supportive class in the Transvaal countryside[17] and because this policy provided a lucrative economic sideline to numerous struggling farmers and bywoners who were subject to cyclical prosperity and decline in the south western Transvaal countryside in the 1920s. (See below).

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE OF FARMERS REPORTING LOSS DUE TO DROUGHT 1923 - 29

	1923/4	1924/5	1925/6	1926/7	1927/8	1928/9
Bloemhof	18,3	4,3	36,35	29,73	8,31	56,0
Klerksdorp	-	5,54	52,81	60,79	24,76	21,3
Lichtenburg	17,1	3,42	76,56	55,35	39,93	57,2
Potchefstroom	37,4	4,24	33,68	27,14	32,06	22,6
Ventersdorp	15,5	1,53	37,35	60,13	21,24	22,5
Wolmaransstad	21,8	4,24	43,77	35,80	23,57	37,1

Source: Agricultural Census's Nos. 9 - 14, compiled from.

These farmers depended largely on cereal crops such as maize and sorghum; and from 1923 on woolled sheep - however, losses due to drought and locusts especially in the years 1925 - 27 swelled the digging population in the south western Transvaal. Farmers were forced to cut back on the area of land under crops (Table 5). A similar decline in the number of woolled sheep also took place (Table 6).

TABLE 5

AREAS UNDER CROPS, TRANSVAAL PROVINCE, 1923 - 29 (IN MORGEN)

1. Mealies

	1923/4	1924/5	1925/6	1926/7	1927/8	1928/9
Bloemhof	9 242	21 912	6 650	23 428	3 951	1 866
Lichtenburg	79 530	101 990	64 415	96 996	76 543	111 664
Wolmaransstad	18 158	41 471	15 286	34 852	27 722	32 099

2. Sorghum

Bloemhof	10 333	21 410	1 519	5 695	625	730
Lichtenburg	39 340	49 817	17 006	20 159	21 386	20 196
Wolmaransstad	8 210	12 962	2 398	4 299	3 048	4 486

Source: Agricultural Census Nos. 9 - 14

TABLE 6

NUMBER OF WOOLLED SHEEP, S.W. TRANSVAAL, 1923 - 29

	1923/4	1924/5	1925/6	1926/7	1927/8	1928/9
Bloemhof	179 241	304 381	342 738	391 401	134 403	65 277
Klerksdorp	-	90 091	105 469	117 597	142 109	119 463
Lichtenburg	217 333	281 670	320 253	361 970	374 400	328 330
Potchefstroom	194 776	106 771	122 138	140 030	163 470	153 023
Ventersdorp	26 603	112 858	49 892	45 035	67 758	57 911
Wolmaransstad	163 389	9 304	246 865	298 457	309 024	261 839

Source: Agricultural Census Nos. 9 - 14

If short term credit facilities had been available fewer farmers would have been forced to migrate to the diggings, however the south western Transvaal area as a whole was characterised by heavy debt and foreclosures by the Land Bank and other creditors accelerated in the mid-1920s.[18]

In January 1926 the Mining Commissioner for Klerksdorp reported that 'there is great activity in prospecting in certain parts of the district due no doubt to the severe drought and consequent poor crops'.[19] In December 1925 private owners of farms in the Lichtenburg district began digging operations with in some cases up to 2 000 employees paying between 10% and 20% of the value of their finds to the owner.[20] According to the legislation then existing in the Transvaal, the owner of the land was able to prospect with as many labourers as he desired. In effect this meant that private owners, before proclamation of their farms as public diggings were able systematically to work out

diamond-bearing gravel by permitting hundreds of people to dig and to win diamonds on a percentage basis.[21] The consequence of this was that as soon as good finds were made diggers flocked to the farm to prospect under 'tribute'.[22]

A further loophole in the existing legislation allowed for unlimited subdivision of farms, which resulted in owners subdividing their farms into as many as forty-two sections in order to take advantage of 'Owners and Discoverers' claims. In the case of Grasfontein this division resulted in 8 400 owners claims and 21 000 discoverers claims accruing to the owners, in this case the African and European Investment Company.[23]

The result was that within one year the output of the Lichtenburg fields was fast approaching the total produced by the diamond mines. (See table 7) Within the period June 1926 to March 1927 the State was forced to proclaim a further seven alluvial diggings as private owners realised the monetary advantage of digging. (Map 1) This resulted in a proliferation of small companies and syndicates which were responsible for a large proportion of the output of the diggings.[24]

TABLE 7

DIAMOND PRODUCTION OF THE UNION (1,000 CARATS)

Year	Mines	Alluvial	Total
1925	2 192,9	237,2	2 430,1
1926	2 409,7	808,3	3 218,0
1927	2 389,6	2 318,4	4 708,0
1928	2 256,2	2 114,7	4 372,0
1929	2 293,5	1 367,7	3 661,2
1930	2 244,9	918,7	3 163,6
1931	1 472,1	647,1	2 119,2
1932	310,3	488,1	798,4
1933	15,5	491,1	506,6

Source: Viljoen D.J., 1956

The Lichtenburg discoveries created two quite specific problems for the State. The first was that, due to the great influx of Whites and Blacks onto the diggings and the consequent strain on the existing Government administrative structures, the State was faced with the existence of an unregulated population in the midst of great wealth. This posed two not unrelated problems. First, the rumoured richness of the diggings attracted tens of thousands of Blacks to the diggings, and the magnitude of this response threatened to break down the existing structures of White domination, those being based on the premises of a cheap, ultra-exploitable and regulated Black labour force. Not only the collection of Native taxes, but also the issuing of passes and the regulation of the locations, which sprang up in the midst of the diggings, forced the State to take direct action in its own interests. Secondly, and for the subject of this paper, more importantly, thousands of Whites flocked to the diggings - a large number of whom had been forced off the land in the mid-1920s by drought and consequent

crop failure or by foreclosures by commercial and State banks. Included in this group were large numbers of diggers who had taken up digging in the period following the end of the first World War and were themselves in a precarious economic position.[25] (See Table 8).

TABLE 8

Origins of Parents of Pupils in Lichtenburg Digging Schools 1928		Breakdown for Transvaal Province	
Transvaal	1 667	Bloemhof	313
Cape Province	822	Klerksdorp	67
Orange Free State	175	Lichtenburg	124
Natal	40	Marico	48
Rhodesia	10	Potchefstroom	77
Other	9	Pretoria District	164
		Pretoria City	67
	2,723	Rustenburg	86
		Schweizer-Reneke	65
		Ventersdorp	79
		Witwatersrand Central	120
		East Rand	63
		West Rand	66
		Wolmaransstad	173
		Others	155
		Total	1,667

Source: Van Wyk, A.A., Report of Lichtenburg Diggings Schools in T.P. 9-1929, Department of Education : Annual Report for Year ending 31st December 1929, p. 62.

On the Lichtenburg fields, an area 63 square miles in extent, the problems associated with an unregulated population were magnified as:

> "... thousands of acres (were) overspread by a loose, semi-permanent population. ... Herded in their thousands in close settlements, these people are now in the position equivalent to a slum city at its worse."[26]

The overcrowded conditions on the diggings raised similar problems for the State to those existing in the overcrowded slum areas of Johannesburg; insanitary living conditions, lack of facilities for juvenile education, no social welfare services for the unemployed and irregular and intermittent economic opportunities.

However, they provided the opportunity for many Whites to avoid full proletarianisation by taking to digging which,[27] in the phenomenally rich gravel runs in the Lichtenburg district, required little capital or professional skill. This could do either as a claim-owner or as a labourer in the services of a claim-owner. The large percentage of 'unprofessional' diggers present in the digging population in 1928 illustrates this fact. (See Table 9)

TABLE 9

PREVIOUS OCCUPATION OF PARENTS OF PUPILS ATTENDING LICHTENBURG DIGGINGS SCHOOLS IN 1928

Previous Occupation	No. of Pupils
Diggings	1 117
Farming	740
Miners	127
Labourers	265
Artisans	192
Officials	55
Traders	28
Transport Riders	15
Taxi Drivers	6
Diverse -	
Psythisis Sufferers	35
Pensioners	16
Others	3
Total	2,599
Pupils whose parents are not dependent on diggings e.g. Shop owners, officials	124
Total	2,723

Source: Van Wyk, A.A., Report on Lichtenburg Diggings Schools in T.P. 9-1929, Department of Education : Annual Report for Year ending 31st December 1929, p. 62.

The most prominant characteristic of digging in this period was that it was sharply divided between those who had access to capital and those who did not. Included in the former, were, companies and syndicates as well as several successful diggers from the 'Lower River Diggings' of Barkley-West, who had the ability and capital to work deep level claims,[28] with the help of mechanised hoists and washing machines.

For diggers without capital, digging was a question of 'scratching around on the surface' with picks and shovels and using manual washing and sorting methods. This had important ramifications for the 'small man' as economic survival now depended upon having access to unlimited, shallow, diamond-bearing gravel, that is, gravel which could be worked without machinery (capital) and which yielded regular finds.[29]

Such a situation existed on the diggings in 1932 as is explained by the Lichtenburg Mining Commissioner in a letter to the Secretary of Mines and Industries:

> "There is a very little shallow gravel bearing ground for the diggers and as the average digger is not today in a position to carry on deep working operations, owing to the lack of the means to obtain or hire the necessary

> machinery for such work, he is also forced to abandon his digging operations and join the ranks of the workless."[30]

In 1927 the State was faced with a problem at least as large as that of an unregulated population and that was over-production. As has been pointed out State policy towards the alluvial diggers in the early 1920s had been to proclaim as much ground as was demanded by the diggers.[31] The problems associated with the over-production of diamonds from the alluvial diggings and the effect of this over-production on the regulated diamond market were not foreseen by the State.

The State rather used the proclamation of the alluvial diggings to provide for a class in the Transvaal countryside that supported it politically as well as to provide a source of revenue for struggling farmers. In 1925, the Digging Control Act had been passed by Parliament, which gave the State sweeping powers to take over the sale and production of diamonds in the Union.[32] Alluvial production was pointedly omitted from its provisions. However, by 1926 the situation was reversed as first, the Lichtenburg discoveries and then the discovery of the Namaqualand fields occurred. Whilst the State was unprepared for the Lichtenburg discoveries, it took prompt action in regard to the Namaqualand, reserving for itself the right to prospect and dig there.[33]

For the diamond producers of the Union, namely De Beers, Premier and Jaggersfontein Mining Companies, over-production and unregulated marketing of diamonds resulted in a downward trend in the prices of stones.[34] For the State, which had through Namaqualand become a diamond producer, as well as being an interested party in the marketing of diamonds in and from the Union, over-production threatened its potential revenue.[35] The result of this congruence of interest between the State and diamond producers was the Precious Stones (Alluvial) Diamond Act, No. 44 of 1927, which was aimed at preventing over-production in the first instance by solving the problem of an unregulated population on the diggings in the second.

Amongst the more important provisions in the Act was the ban on further prospecting in the Union as well as the non-proclamation of further farms for twelve months after the Act was passed (December 1927). In order to put a stop to over-production by small companies or syndicates, the Act prevented the holding of 'digging certificates' by corporate bodies on the alluvial fields, the purpose being, explained the Minister, that 'the alluvial diggings ... should remain the reserve and preserve of the small man'.[36]

The results of this legislation were, however, quite different than the Minister had stated. Within six months Black claim labourers came out on strike in protest against the action of White producers ('small men') in cutting wages. These producers were caught in the pincers of an artificially induced production crises generated by a shortage of proclaimed ground and an inability on the part of these producers to migrate to new diggings outside of the Lichtenburg District.[37]

CONFLICT

The Lichtenburg Alluvial Diggings were characterised by cyclical unemployment rather than structural unemployment in the first two years of their existence. Generally speaking, the absolute difference

between the number of issued claims and the number of diggers participating in the rush for claims gives a broad indication of the extent of this cyclical redundancy. Poverty was not, however, the inevitable end-result of an inability to become a claim owner. Diggers without claims generally moved into direct labouring positions (See Table 10) or into some form of share-working with diggers who did own claims. Employment in the years 1926 - 1928 for those diggers who had to sell their labour was provided by the various companies and syndicates working on the fields.

TABLE 10

CLAIMHOLDERS AND LABOURERS, DECEMBER 1927.

Diggings	Claimholders	White Labour
Bakers	2 404	83
Bethal	7	-
Elandsputte	267	8
Grasfontein	2 203	49
Klipkuil	205	4
Manana	12	-
Ruigtelaagte	257	6
Putfontein	3	-
Vaalboschputte	146	5
Welverdiend	2 515	278
Witklip	26	-
Totals	8 045	433

Source: Department of Mines, Mining Commissioner, Klerksdorp. Monthly Report.

The 'small man' had begun to feel the pressure of the production crises from June 1927 when the Minister of Mines had ceased further proclamations pending the passage of the new Bill. Initially the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee had given its support to the provisions of the Bill (1927), hoping that its provisions concerning the companies and syndicates would 'release' the various owners' and discoverers' claims held by them. However, the State had refused to open these so-called 'reserved' claims to public digging after the passage of the Bill (1928). It also became apparent that the syndicates and companies had provided a lucrative source of employment for those diggers who had at various times been unable to obtain claims. With the provisions of the Act now in force the Lichtenburg Digging Community found itself facing extinction as the workable ground still existing was generally deep level and could be worked only with the aid of capital intensive machinery, which the majority of diggers could not afford. It is not surprising that the early months of 1928 were characterised by a large increase in 'lumpen' activities on the part of the more desperate diggers as they were increasingly forced into such activities as illicit liquor dealing and illicit diamond buying.

At this particular conjuncture resistance by the diggers took the form of local struggles as the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee, a Committee elected by all diggers in the Lichtenburg district, had been extinguished by the Minister of Mines in August 1927 following charges of corruption on the part of the executive Committee. In the months January to April the Minister of Mines was continually receiving deputations from the various local committees constituting the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee who visited the Minister with local requests generally calling for the revocation of the provisions of the Precious Stones Act relating to the ban on prospecting and the non-proclamation of further ground. At one stage the Minister received four deputations in one week from the Lichtenburg area.[38]

This early stage of protest received an undignified hearing from the Minister of Mines as well as from other Parliamentarians, the MP for Lichtenburg, Mr Tielmann Roos included.[39] The culmination of this period of protest was the Diggers' and Landowners' Conference held on the 24th and 25th April, 1928. The conference was called by the Diggers' Union, a body representing diggers throughout the Union, on the occasion of its annual meeting. It was hoped to mobilise support from the various landowners whose 'rights' had been tampered with by the Act. Unfortunately, the landowners concerned were in the main large landowning Companies which had either previous to the discoveries in 1925 or subsequently acquired large interests in diamond-bearing farms in the Lichtenburg District. This policy was aimed at 'locking up' large areas of diamondiferous ground for the purpose of preventing over-production by the alluvial diggers, in the interest of the holdings which were owned by the various mining groups in diamond mines and mining in the Union.[40]

The Diggers' and Landowners' Conference therefore failed to mobilise property owners against the provisions of the Act thereby making apparent the contradiction which was implicit in the diggers' demands for private property to be proclaimed as public diggings in the interests of a, generally speaking, dispossessed class. The Minister was able to treat the resolutions of the Conference in the same manner with which he had dealt with the petitions from the local committees in the previous four months.

Whilst the diggers' attempts to resort to 'respectable' protests failed to move the Minister concerned, an event occurred in June 1928 which served to focus the attention of the State wonderfully on the desperate situation which was developing on the diggings. On the 18th June it was reported that some 5 000 black workers employed on the poorer sections of the diggings had come out on strike in protest against the action of diggers at Grasfontein 'south' in implementing a general reduction in the weekly wage from eighteen shillings to twelve shillings per week.[41] By Tuesday 19th June the strike spread to further sections of the fields, until by Wednesday it was reported that the entire area of the diggings was idle. The Magistrate for Lichtenburg informed the Director for Native Labour in the Transvaal, Major H.S. Cooke, that some 35 000 Blacks were on strike and that 'all work on the diamond diggings was suspended'.[42]

The dynamic for the strike had been the reduction of wages, a decision which was taken at a meeting of the newly constituted Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee on Friday 15th June because of falling diamond prices and the determination of diamond buyers not to purchase diamonds

except they were of exceptional quality.[43] Representatives of the State met with those of Diggers' on Wednesday 20th June. At this meeting it emerged that it was under pressure from the marginalised diggers that the decision had been taken at the meeting of the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee to reduce the wages of Black claim labourers. In fact it was revealed that the digging community was itself divided over the issue of a blanket reduction in wages. However both marginalised and successful diggers desired to force the striking labourers back to work without recognising a minimum wage or the right of Black labourers to strike.[44]

By Thursday 21st June the drift back to work had begun. However the strike remained reasonably solid until Friday, where meetings of up to 10 000 Blacks were reported.[45] The State had exhibited remarkable restraint in dealing with the strikers even going to the length of blaming the diggers for generating the strike by 'unfair reductions' in the level of wages.[46] When the strike appeared to spread to surrounding areas, the State intervened directly by increasing the police presence in the locations on the diggings 'in case of trouble'.[47] By Monday 25 the strike was over.

The strike had begun in direct response to the action of a specific class of marginal producers to reduce the level of wages for Blacks in their employ, however, it was not only the level of wages which was at issue but also the regulation of the terms of payment of those wages. The Minister of Mines was frequently requested in the years 1926 - 1929 to extend the provisions of the Urban Areas Act to the diggings so that Black labourers could have some degree of control over their employers.[48] The chief culprits in this regard were the small producers who had little or no access to alternative resources of capital and in months where no finds were made therefore had to rely on the 'goodwill' of Black labourers when no wages could be paid.[49] Many small diggers resorted to 'digging-on-the-half', that is, working in partnership with Blacks where Black claim labourers provided their labour 'gratis' for a share of the finds.[50]

The action of Black labourers to the growing pressure on wages and living conditions in general allows us a fascinating glimpse into the organisation and resistance of Blacks on the alluvial diggings, constituting an unwritten chapter in the social history of the Transvaal countryside.[51] For white producers the 'Kadalie Strike' (as it was called) proved to be a turning point in its relationship with the State which ushered in a new period of protest by diggers.

In August 1928 the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee was re-elected and included on its Executive Committee were individuals well known to the State; Mr C.J. Jooste (Chairman of the Diggers' Relief Committee) who had a long record of involvement in diggers' politics; Mr M.C.P. Brink who drew his constituency from the poverty stricken sections of Elandsputte and who put forward the scheme for the opening up of the State Diggings in Namaqualand for the indigent digger so as to solve the unemployment problem; Mr Max Theunissen, also involved in 'poor white' politics, who had called for the rushing of the reserved portions of the diggings in late-1927. Already on the Executive of the Diggers' Committee were the Mayor of Lichtenburg, Mr H. Delaray (relative of the late General De La Ray), who represented the interests of the Lichtenburg Town Council and called for the proclamation of the Lichtenburg Townlands so as to stimulate local trade, and finally, Mr

A.J. Swanepoel, well-known diamond buyer on the diggings who drew his support from all sections of the digging community.

The Diggers' Committee was increasingly drawn into radicalised stand-points as its constituency felt the economic vice closing in the latter months of 1928. One of the issues which illustrates this point was that of bantom-sorting by women. The Precious Stones Act had determined that bantom-sorting could be performed by women only if they were working on the claim of their husbands. This successfully eliminated the very poor class present on the diggings who relied on bantom-sorting[52] for all, or nearly all, of their income. With the elimination of opportunities to acquire claims for all but the very fortunate, diggers increasingly had to rely on batom-sorting for a steady, if meagre source of income. By April 1928 the Lichtenburg local committees included the demand for the lifting of the ban on women sorting bantoms independently of their husbands claims. By August 1928 the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee saw independent bantomsorting as a right.

In the closing months of 1928 the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee demanded that the farms Goedgedacht and Holfontein in the Potchefstroom District be opened for digging and that diggers from the Lichtenburg district be allowed to participate in the rush for claims. This demand was directly in contradiction to the provisions of the Precious Stones Act which prohibited diggers resident in one geographical area from participating in rushes for claims in another unless they had been resident there for six months prior to the proclamation. This aggression on the part of the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee was mirrored by the local committees which it purported to represent. In the months July to November local committees on Welverdiend and Grasfontein threatened to storm the reserved claims on these diggings if they were not proclaimed, as well as those reserved claims on the already proclaimed farms of Grasfontein at Elandsputte.

Mr M.C.P. Brink, of the Executive Committee of the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee sympathised with these diggers and reiterated his demand that the State Diggings in Namaqualand be thrown open to the 'poor digger'. Mr Brink's demands were coupled with another threat which the State took more seriously. In October he addressed a letter to the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee in which he outlined plans for the formation of an Independent Diggers' Party in Namaqualand and the Western Transvaal:

> "... Fifteen independents would be enough to turn the scales against the existing parties in whose quarrels ... the capitalists are flying away over the heads of the people with the wealth of the country."[53]

Whilst Mr Brink's scarcely veiled threats to dispute possession of the Namaqualand diggings seemed at first far fetched they gained weight as rumours spread around the Western Transvaal in December 1928 that diggers at Port Nolloth were about to storm the State Diggings.[54] Mr Brink was very much involved in the campaign to present the case of the 'poor digger' as he toured the area in the company of the Reverend Steenkamp in December 1928.[55] In fact the State was much concerned lest the threat be realised; police reinforcement were rushed to Namaqualand in early January 1929.[56] A meeting of diggers and farmers

at Port Nolloth in January 1929 'not only passed a vote of no confidence in the Government, but they demanded that the Government resign.'[57] In sympathy with the Namaqualanders a meeting of diggers at Welverdiend on the Lichtenburg Diggings passed a resolution 'demanding the closing down of the State diggings' and criticised the Government, in particular Mr Tielmann Roos for 'broken promises'.[58]

The threat of an Independent Diggers' party growing in the western Transvaal gained weight as the year 1928 drew to a close. For the Nationalist Party, and in particular for Mr Roos, matters appeared to be heading out of control. Mr Roos had visited the diggings in August 1928 and promised the diggers the proclamation of new ground, in particular Goedgedacht. 'Before long', he stated, '10 000 claims would be available on the farm Goedgedacht, and before long further claims would be available'.[59] He also promised that the ban on prospecting would be lifted in September.

The promises of relief for diggers in late 1928 came to nothing as over 1 000 applications were made for available claims on Goedgedacht of which not more than five percent were payable.[60] If this were not enough the diamond price dropped between ten and twenty percent in November.[61] The plight of the diggers was poignantly illustrated at a meeting held under the auspices of the Lichtenburg Relief Committee, a sub-committee of the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee. In November; Mr Max Thenissen, Chairman of this sub-committee, addressed the diggers at Welverdiend:

> "On the day (on which) the remainder of Welverdiend was proclaimed, they all lived on the hopes of getting bread, but what did they get (he asked)?" (Voices) "We have lost our last few pounds and we are starving", was the answer.[62]

Mr Roos's promises in August were enough to secure him the nomination for the Lichtenburg seat as Nationalist Party candidate in October 1928. By November it became clear the circumstances had transformed the position on the diggings as first Goedgedacht and then the reserved portions of Welverdiend which were proclaimed in October 1928 failed to live up to expectations. Furthermore, although Mr Roos had been able to capture the support of the Lichtenburg Town Council and the Chamber of Commerce by expressing support for the proclamation of the Townlands as new diggings (thereby expressing a desire to stimulate local trade and commerce which would go the way of Lichtenburg rather than that of Mafeking)[63], these plans were shelved by the Minister of Mines in the same month.

Having the charges of 'broken promises' levelled against him by diggers who constituted his political constituency, Mr Roos was only too happy to concede the nomination for the Lichtenburg seat in favour of the seat for Bethal in December 1928. In his place the Nationalist party for the Western Transvaal region decided to throw its support behind the local candidate who had contested Mr Roos's nomination in October 1928, Mr A.J. Swanepoel. Mr Swanepoel was also Chairman of the Lichtenburg Diggers' Committee and thus, by no mean coincidence, a local diggers' candidate was nominated for the Nationalist party in the Lichtenburg constituency.

For the SAP and the labour party, their political prospects in the forthcoming election were not promising. Smuts had been unable to offer diggers promises as to the 'solution' suggested by them for the proclamation of further ground in the Western Transvaal, and he categorically rejected the suggestion of Mr M.C.P. Brink for the opening up of Namaqualand to public digging. The SAP nominated a prominant landowner in the Lichtenburg area as the official candidate for the SAP in Lichtenburg. Mr Brink had offered to stand for the SAP if Smuts would promise that Namaqualand would be opened. Smuts refused such confirmation.

Rumours circulated on the diggings in August 1928 that a South African Workers' party was to be formed, which would be affiliated to Madley's faction of the SALP but Madley's standpoint as to meeting with the ICU put paid to the success of this planned Workers' Party.

In June 1929 Mr A.J. Swanepoel was elected as MP for Lichtenburg in a three-cornered contest with Mr Taljaard (SAP) and Mr Brink (Independent Diggers' Candidate), with a majority of 743. Mr Brink's election-partner in Namaqualand, Reverend Steenkamp, was elected to Parliament.

CONCLUSION

The Lichtenburg diggers in the period 1926 - 29 exhibited a remarkable degree of resilience to the efforts by the State and Capital (represented by the large diamond producers in the Union) to eliminate the small man on the diggings through legislative and economic pressure. In their struggle, the Lichtenburg diggers displayed a well-developed sense of community and group conciousness which forced the State to deal with the diggers on a rather more sophisticated level than that of powerless 'rural people' unable to adapt themselves to the demands of modern economic life. On the contrary, the Lichtenburg diggers reacted rationally to the demands of 'modern economic progress' which they saw as the machinations of State and Capital. Diggers were able to mobilise around common economic problems and in this mobilisation they forced the State to react on a political and economic level which involved the recognition of the diggers as a class of rural producers having direct access to political power.

The capitalist transformation of the Transvaal countryside in the 1920s did not immediately create the urban proletariat; on the contrary rural communities seized local economic opportunities to delay their passage into the working class. It was only the setting in of full scale depression in 1930 which finally proved to be the nemesis of the Lichtenburg diggers, removing their productive base through the collapse of the world demand for diamonds, and transforming the majority of diggers into wage labourers.

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NOTES

1. See Bundy C., The Rise and Fall of South African Peasantry, 1979.

2. Bradford H., 'A Taste of Freedom': Capitalist Development and Response to the ICU in the Transvaal Countryside, p. 129 in Bozzoli B., Town and Countryside in the Transvaal, 1983 Ravan Press, Johannesburg.

3. Ibid., p. 129.

4. See Annual Report of the Land and Agricultural Bank, Reports for year 1922, p. 8. 'In the past it has been the practice of certain farmers living in the neighbourhood of the diamond diggings in the Bloemhof, Wolmaransstad and Pretoria districts to do a little digging during dry spells or in the slack time between planting and harvesting. In many cases this has proved considerable assistance in carrying the farmer over bad times ...' Also, Annual Report 1925, p. 28.

5. These discoveries in 1922 led to the proclamation of seven farms in the Lichtenburg district in the period 1923 - 1926, they carried a population of some 2 000 registered claim holders. See TBPA, JUS Vol. 309, Public Service Commission Report, 19 July 1927, p. 3.

6. Star, June 5th, 1926. Nearly 5 000 new applications for diggers' certificates were received by the Mining Commissioner in 1926 on the occasion of the Lichtenburg discoveries.

7. Public Service Commission Report, op. cit., p. 5.

8. Quoted by Grosskopf, J.F.W., Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus, p. 149.

9. Public Service Commission Report, op. cit., p. 11.

10. Grosskopf J.F.W., op. cit., p. 149.

11. Union of S.A., Department of Labour, Commission of Investigation into the conditions of alluvial diamond diggings, 1937, (Du Toit Commission) Pretoria, 1938, p. 8.

12. See for example Du Toit G.J., Die Geskiedenis van die Onderwys van Blankes in die Lichtenburgse Distrik, 1880 - 1955, M.Ed. Unisa 1958; Kotze J.S., Geskiedenis van die Wes-Transvaalse Diamant-delverye, M.A., UPE, 1972.

13. Grosskopf J.F.W., op. cit., p. 10.

14. Ibid., p. 154

15. Ibid., p. 147.

16. See van Onselen C., 'The Main Reef Road into the Working Class', in Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, Vol. 2, p. 112, Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1983.

17. See letter from C.O. Botha to The Star, June 5, 1929.

18. See letter from 'Aesculapius' to The Star, May 17, 1926, 'The whole rural population is gradually becoming a mass of wanderers, roaming from one digging to another ...'

19. Mining Commissioner, Klerksdorp, 2/1 A monthly report January 1926.

20. Kotze J.S., op. cit., p. 67.

21. TBPA, MNW Vol. 981, mm 1430/29. Memorandum on Conditions of Lichtenburg Fields pre-1926, 19 April 1929, p. 3.

22. Ibid., p. 3.

23. The ownership of claims were not the only advantages - revenue accrued from the sale of claims, sale of water, reserved trading sites, etc.

24. For example, in February 1928 Donaldson and Carlis, a Company on Welverdiend, produced 25 867 carats whilst 484 diggers on the same farm produced 14 268 carats in the same month. (MNW Vol. 914, Diamond Returns, February 1928).

25. Joubert S.P., Alluvial Diamond Diggers in South Africa, South African Journal of Industries, 1921, Vol. 4, No. 8. and Davidson T.M., Conditions on the Alluvial Diggings. An inspection of the Transvaal fields, South African Journal of Industries, Vol. 6, 1923. Davidson in his report states that in the period prior to the Lichtenburg discoveries, the problems of an unregulated population, both Black and White led to abuses - the most important of which was the action of Diggers' Committees in allowing almost anyone to dig (p. 178) and the non-segregation of Black labourers and white diggers which led to IDB, 'share working' and insanitary conditions on the fields generally, p. 180.

26. Mining and Industrial Magazine, July 1927.

27. Other activities open to Whites on the diggings included water-carrying, hawking, and other less salubrious undertakings including illicit liquor dealing, illicit diamond buying as well as other 'lumpen' activities.

28. In some cases, pot holes were discovered, sometimes up to 200 feet deep, for example the famous 'Maler' Pothole on Grasfontein.

29. TBPA, MNW Vol. 949, mm 4163/28, Tour of Minister of Mines to Lichtenburg, October - November 1928.

30. LMC, Vol. 2, MCI 204/31, Memoranda of Lichtenburg Mining Commissioner to Secretary of Mines, 16th April 1932.

31. See No. 17.

32. It did this by fixing quotas and minimum prices: creating a Union Diamond Board with powers to sell, purchase, deal-in, and hold stocks of diamonds, and to export from the Union.

32. The Pact Government established the State Diggings in Namaqualand which were to be worked in the 'public interest', that is, they were a State run operation from which private individuals derived no benefit.

34. The value of alluvial stones declined from 67/6 shillings per carat in 1925 to 57/10 shillings in 1929 and 39/6 in 1931.

35. 'The substitution of alluvial for mined diamonds results in a considerable loss of revenue to the Union Government. Of the total profits of the diamond industry of the Union and South West Africa, 20,46 percentage accrues to the State, but while the Union mines yield 23,1 percent, the State receives only 10,5 percent from alluvial production.' Round Table, Vol. 176, 1926 - 27, p. 847.

36. Ibid., p. 850.

37. The Precious Stones Act made provision for the prevention of an influx of new diggers into any particular Mining District by limiting the issue of licences to dig and peg claims to diggers who were resident in the particular district for six months prior to the proclamation of the diggings.

38. See Star, May 24, 1928.

39. See Star, April 13, 1928, 'Lichtenburg. Views of Mr H.H. Moll'. Also Star, August 8, 1928, 'Diggers Cause Amusement. Mr T. Roos addresses 15th Annual Congress of the NP (Pretoria)'.

40. For example, the African and European Investment Corporation owned in 1928 eleven out of the seventeen diamond bearing farms in the Lichtenburg District. It in turn was controlled by Messrs Solly Joel and Sammy Marks who had large interests in diamond mining through the Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Corp.

41. Star, June 18, 1928, 'Native Strike on Diggings'.

42. TBPA, JUS Vol. 421, File No. 3/978/26; Report of Meeting held in South African Police Offices, 20 June 1928.

43. TBPA, MNW, Vol. 892, File No. 1866/27. Diggers' Union Conference, Lichtenburg 3 September 1928.

44. TBPA, JUS Vol. 421, File No. 3/978/26, op. cit.

45. Star, 22 June 1928, Daily Mail, 23 June 1928.

46. TBPA, Jus Vol. 421, File No. 3/978/26, ibid.

47. On Friday 22 June it was reported in the Star that farm labourers employed on the farm Buitenhof adjoining the Witklip and Manana diggings had come out on strike in sympathy with the claim labourers for a 15 shilling a week wage plus food and accommodation. Star, June 22, 1928.

48. TBPA, NTS Vol. 2092, 'Natives on Diamond Fields, Failure to fulfil obligations'.

49. Ibid.

50. TBPA, MNW, Vol. 333, File No. 1789/16, Petitions by Diggers. See also MNW, Vol. 892, File No. 1866/27, Diggers Union Conference, Resolutions.

51. See T. Clynick, MA Seminar Paper 1983, 'The 1928 Black Alluvial Diamond Diggers' Strike: a Preliminary Account of Capital, the State and Labour on the Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Fields'.

52. Bantom-sorting involved the sifting through of the already sorted tailings of successfull diggers in the hope of finding diamonds which had eluded the normal sorting process.

53. Star, October 20, 1928, 'Diggers and Politics. Independent Candidates Wanted.'

54. See Star December 31, 1928, 'The reported Invasion of Namaqualand'; also Star January 4, 1929, 'The Fiery Cross in Namaqualand'.

55. Star, October 20, 1928, 'Diggers and Politics. Independent Candidates Wanted.'

56. Star, January 1, 1929, 'Big Draft of police for Namaqualand.'

57. Star, January 8, 1929, 'Trouble not over at Port Nolloth'.

58. Ibid.

59. Star, August 8, 1928, 'Mr Roos and the Diggers. Nationalist Meeting'.

60. Star, November 6, 1928, 'Max Theunissen. Radically Wrong'.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Star, August 18, 1928, 'Mr Roos' visit to Lichtenburg. Guest of Chamber of Commerce.