

https://dspace.org/

'Tshaya! He has our money!': the uprising of the municipal compound workers in Marabastad, 1942

Friedman, Michelle

1990-02-06T13:27:47Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7813

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HISTORY WORKSHOP

STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

6 - 10 February 1990

AUTHOR: Michelle Friedman

TITLE: 'Tshaya ! He has our money !' : The uprising of the municipal compound workers in Marabastad, 1942

AFRICANA LIBRARY

HWS 126

'Tshaya! He has our money!': The uprising of the municipal compound workers in Marabastad, 1942

Michelle Friedman

History Workshop Conference 1990

On the evening of 28 December 1942 some 2000 Pretoria municipal workers living in the municipal compound and "Tin Town" in Marabastad staged a large scale demonstration over conditions of service and wages. Within three hours a large police contingent, units of the Union Defence home-guard, joined by large numbers of armed white vigilantes, and led by three armoured cars, attacked the demonstrators. 16 African workers were killed, 111 were injured and a white policeman was accidentally shot to death by his fellow officers. The rank brutality of various arms of the state power, and of the surrounding white populous - some of whom continued to "randomly assault natives" through the night - alone suggests that this tragic episode merits detailed description and analysis. But the conflict is even more interesting because it represents a series of culminating and turning points in the history of the urban African working class, and especially for those in the Pretoria region. The Marabastad massacre ended a forty year long struggle for total urban segregation in Pretoria with the remaining population of Marabastad being urgently "relocated" the next year. The uprising and its brutal suppression was also a culminating point in long and keen battles between the central and local state over issues of the reproduction of the urban African population and the financing of residential segregation.

Besides being a watershed in the struggles between the local and central state, the uprising provides a focus for the emergence of trade unions in Pretoria in the early 1940s. The Communist Party, (which was initially blamed for causing the disturbances) had started to unionise the municipal workers and other workers in Pretoria, and the events in Marabastad highlighted the problems of extending unionism on a regional level. The Marabastad massacre also marked the beginning of a more repressive state policy towards labour and strike action.

For these reasons the Marabastad uprising - limited, brief, and tragic as it was - deserves comprehensive study. This paper will however focus on just three areas for the moment: the conflict between the central and local state over urban African wages and living conditions, the role played by the Communist Party and trade unions in organising the working classes in Pretoria, and, the myriad of factors leading to the overwhelming rage and frustration that propelled a desperately marginalised hostel population to, in the racially loaded words of the official commission's report: "run amok" in a "state of frenzied

excitement...and a spirit of lawlessness...(without evidence of) any concerted plan of action, or any leadership", to destroying 1700 panes of glass and seriously damaging large parts of their compound. But their rage was not the atavistic "primitive" and irrational outpouring of feeling that initial newspaper reports suggested. The Commission of Enquiry, to its credit, found conditions of the most appalling hardship, coupled with official high-handedness and rank stupidity, had been almost entirely responsible for the context and immediate spark to the "riot". It is these conditions that this paper will briefly examine. A more detailed account of the uprising, and the longer term context in which it took place and the key actors who precipitated it, is currently under preparation.

The Urban Areas Act of 1923 had placed the responsibility for the reproduction of the African working classes in the hands of the local authorities. Yet the struggles between the central and local state over the burden of finance continued to be played out. When a wage board determination threatened to put the local authorities substantially out of pocket, protest was vociferous and immediate, and central government initially showed itself willing to support local government on this issue. Such collusion and the high-handed behaviour of the Minister of Labour, as this paper will show, aroused the confusion and anger of the African unskilled workers, and precipitated the events of this tragic drama. It is significant that when strikes threatened to upset central government's desire for a stable labour force, the central state was unwilling to support the local state in their evasion of financial responsibility towards the African working classes.

On 6 November 1942 the Wage Board gazetted wage board determination 105 under the Wages Act of 1937 which would bring into effect a scale of minimum wages for unskilled workers from 30 November 1942. It also made provision for wages to be paid weekly and for two weeks annual paid leave.[1]

The Wage Board was a statutory body created by the Wage Act of 1925. It was authorised to investigate conditions in particular industries and to issue minimum wage determinations for specific job categories. Their determinations were to be non-discriminatory on the grounds of race.[2]

---

[1] UWL, AD1433, Cp9.2.3: Report of the Judicial Commission of Enquiry into the Pretoria Municipal Riot of 28 December 1942

[2] J.Lever: "Capital and Labour in South Africa: The passage of the Industrial Conciliation Act, 1924" in E.Webster (ed), **Essays in Southern African Labour**

The creation of the Wage Board was intended to provide protection to lowly paid white workers who had been excluded by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924. In 1937 the new Wage Board Act allowed unions to present evidence for minimum wage boards. This created the space for representation of black workers who had been denied representation on industrial councils and could not be members of registered trade unions under the above act.

The Wage Board machinery had been used to good effect by Max Gordon and the Joint Committee of African Trade Unions (JCATU) in the late 1930s. Gordon won several wage board decisions between 1937 and 1941 which gained legitimacy for JCATU and led to increased union membership. He had been concerned not to alienate the Department of Labour and worked within a legal framework.[3]

Many of the gains made by the growth of trade unions in the early war years were lost by the introduction of War Measure No.9 and No.145 of 1942. War Measure No.9 provided for the speedy settlement of labour disputes which might hinder the war effort or interfere with essential supplies or services while War Measure No.145 prevented black workers from striking.[4] Furthermore, by 1942 the leadership of trade union organisations and the Communist Party were sympathetic to the South African war effort and therefore did much to restrain the rank and file from strike action.[5]

Within the context of reduced bargaining power for workers together with a spiralling cost of living and inadequate wages, the Wage Board was clearly viewed as an important source for the redress of workers' grievances. The implementation of Wage Board Determination 105 was a significant piece of industrial legislation for many black unskilled workers. In particular, it was the first attempt to lay down a minimum wage for municipal

---

History, Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1978

[3] B.Hirson, "African Trade Unions in the Transvaal", Unpublished paper for the South African Social History Workshop, 1980

[4] Transvaal Archives, K 172, Vol.1: Memorandum submitted by the Department of Labour to the Commission of Enquiry into the Pretoria Riots, 28 December 1942

[5] T.Lodge, "Class Conflict, Communal Struggle and Patriotic Unity: the Communist Party of South Africa during the Second World War", ASI Paper, Wits University, 1985

workers. In 1927 a hundred municipal workers had made representation to the Wage Board to fix their wages with no effect.[6]

Wage Determination 105 was not however uniform it its application. Only 34 trades were included in the determination, and the rate of pay varied from centre to centre. In Pretoria, it was determined at 24/- a week whereas in Johannesburg, it was set at 25/-.[7] There does not appear to be any justification for this as both the cost of living and the conditions of industrial enterprise were practically the same in both areas. Furthermore, the fixing of a minimum wage at a maximum of 25/- a week undercut certain industries where wages were higher, and had the effect of lowering wages, such as the case of the building industry where previously unskilled workers earned 28/- a week.[8]

The Pretoria City Council, along with the other councils on the Reef, strongly objected to the proposed determination as this would subject them to added costs. The Municipal Association of the Transvaal and the Council of Reef Municipalities met with the Minister of Labour, W.B.Madeley, to request that the determination be deferred until the end of the war. The Minister agreed to exempt local authorities from the provisions of the determination until 1 April 1943, when they would be required to pay the minimum wage less 2/- until 1 July 1943 when the full wages would come into force. The Minister required that each local authority apply for exemption individually.[9]

On 21 November 1942 the Pretoria City Council applied for exemption from Wage Board Determination 105. The Council prevaricated around the issue of their financial responsibilities towards the African municipal workers. They argued that the establishment of Atteridgeville in 1939 had involved them in considerable expense and they could not afford the projected additional costs should the determination be implemented.[10] This

---

[6] K 172, Vol.2: Evidence of Solly Sachs to the Commission of Enquiry into the Pretoria Riots, 28 December 1942

[7] K 172, Vol 2: ibid.

[8] K 172, Vol 5: Memorandum of Evidence by the Native Representative Council and African Municipal Workers

[9] K 172, Vol.3: Summary of Meeting between the Minister of Labour and the Council of Reef Municipalities and the Municipal Association of the Transvaal, 12 November 1942

[10] K 172, Vol3: Memorandum submitted by the Pretoria City Council to the Wage Board, 3 March 1942

was essentially not true. In its budget for the year 1942-1943, the Pretoria City Council had made provision for an amount of £35,000 to meet the cost of an anticipated increase in wages. This sum was in fact sufficient to meet the proposed increase from 30 November 1942.[11]

Further justifications were also provided. The Council suggested that the living conditions of unskilled workers had not changed substantially since the outbreak of the war, while the rise in the cost of living had been met by an adequate cost of living allowance.[12] This was patently not true, the evidence of numerous workers bears testimony to the severe hardships endured as a result of inadequate wages, a soaring cost of living and shortages brought on by the Second World War. Municipal employees in Pretoria earned an average of 13/6d a week which was paid on a monthly basis and were also paid a weekly cost of living allowance of 1/.[13] However, since the determination had been passed, the cost of living had increased by at least 25 per cent. In particular, food prices were higher than all other items of consumption, and municipal workers were continually forced to supplement their frugal diet.

Failing this tack, the Council suggested that should exemption not be possible, the determination should be lower in Pretoria as

> "the type of non-European labour available in Pretoria must be classed in a much lower standard than that obtained in the areas where the Board has conducted its most recent investigations."[14]

The Pretoria City Council felt encouraged that they would receive the exemption from the determination as the Minister of Labour had agreed to exempt the Johannesburg City Council on the grounds that the City Council did not have the necessary financial resources available at the present time. The Minister had however exceeded his authority. The Wage Board had previously determined that the municipalities could afford to pay the increases and it was the duty of the Minister to administer and

---

[11] UWL: Report to the Secretary of the South African Trades and Labour Council, by V.C.Berrange, 5 July 1943

[12] K 172, Vol 3: Memorandum submitted by the Pretoria City Council to the Wage Board, 3 March 1942

[13] K 172, Vol.1: Memorandum submitted by the Department of Labour to the Commission of Enquiry into the Pretoria riots

[14] K 172, Vol.3: Memorandum submitted by the Pretoria City Council to the Wage Board, 3 March 1942

enforce the provisions of the determination.[13] To some extent, the actions of the Minister were responsible for the events of the 28 December 1942. His disregard of the Wage Board's decision and his attempts to appease the local authorities at the expense of unskilled workers led to immediate worker reaction.

On 8 December 1942, 600 municipal employees from the Selby Compound in Johannesburg went on strike. The apparent cause of the strike was the Johannesburg Municipality's refusal to pay the municipal workers their increases due to their exemption from the determination. Negotiations between the Council, the Department of Labour and the Municipal Workers' Union resulted in the Council's withdrawal of its application for exemption and payment of wages according to the determination.[14]

Once the Johannesburg City Council demonstrated their ability to pay the municipal workers in accordance with the determination, the Minister of Labour withdrew all exemptions and insisted that the increase be paid retrospectively from the 30 November 1942.

Central government proved willing to appease local authorities only as long as it did not affect its own political agenda. Between 1942 and 1943 the central state was at pains not to antagonise its urban African population. A stable urbanised labour force was required to meet the demands of war-time industry and with its soldiers at war, and a lack of funds and staff at its disposal to enforce influx control, the state adopted a conciliatory role towards the urban African labour-force. Pass laws were relaxed and a concerted effort was made to

---

[13] K 172, Vol.2: Evidence of Minister of Labour to the Commission

[14] K 172, Vol.1: Memo of Strikes in Johannesburg submitted to the Assistant Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg. There were three other strikes in Johannesburg, all taking place on the 14 December 1942. The Brick and Tile Workers went on strike for higher wages. Trade union leaders prevailed on the strikers to return to work. The second strike involved 1000 workers in the Wholesale Meat Industry who objected to the slow implementation of the wage determination. Negotiations between the trade unions, the employers and officials of the Labour Department led to the strikers returning to work the next day. In the third instance, 200 workers from the Sun Crush Mineral Water Factory demanded £2 a week. The strike was unauthorised by the trade union and fizzled out.

enhance the stability of the African labour force.[17] When the reality of strike action threatened to jeopardise this plan of action, the central government quite willingly handed over the crisis of administering the costs of urban reproduction to the local state.

The Pretoria City Council was informed by letter on 19 December 1942 that the Minister would not grant them the desired exemption. On 22 December 1942 the City Council decided that the provisions of the Wage Determination would be carried out and this information was conveyed, albeit inadequately, to the municipal workers on the 28 December 1942.[18]

The high-handed manner and tactlessness of the local state officials in dealing with the wage board determination and the municipal workers undoubtedly ignited the deep-rooted anger of the municipal workers into open confrontation. A meeting was scheduled for 7p.m. on the evening of the 28th December to inform the workers that they would receive their wage increase. J.S.Hardy, the Location Superintendent, who was particularly hostile to the African population, failed to arrive timeously, and F.J. Botes, the compound manager, went ahead with the meeting. Botes informed the crowd that they would receive their increases, but he was uncertain of the date. The general feeling of the workers was one of impatience, dissatisfaction and disbelief, and repeated shouts of "they are throwing a blanket over our eyes" resounded among the municipal employees.[19]

When Hardy arrived at 7.30p.m. a second meeting was held. This bewildered the workers and many believed that Hardy had arrived with their promised wages. Hardy explained that the municipal workers would receive their increases in salary from November but he failed to convey effectively to the crowd that they would receive their increase retrospectively from November 1942. It appears that many municipal employees understood that the determination would take effect from November 1943. Despite the atmosphere of confusion that reigned at the meeting, Hardy refused any questions to be asked.

The workers, feeling angry and confused, began shouting and singing. There were shouts of "Tshaya! (Hit him) He has our

---

[17] See D.Hindson, **Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat**, Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1987

[18] K 172, Vol.3: Summary of negotiations between the Minister of Labour and the Pretoria City Council

[19] K 172, Vol.5: Memorandum of Evidence by the Native Representative Council and the African Municipal Workers

money!" The meeting was disbanded and one African police constable attempted to clear a path for Botes and Hardy, with a cane, hitting one of the workers in the process. The workers, feeling under attack and with a sense of their grievances not being met, unleashed their pent-up fury and shortly after 7.30p.m, they attacked the compound. According to Charlie Muntsa, the workers attacked the buildings

> "to show those men in the police that we had nothing to do with them; there are other people whom we were up against."[20]

The refusal of the Pretoria City Council to recognise the African trade unions in Pretoria and to work through established worker channels does explain in part the level of confusion and anger that erupted in the municipal compound. Gana Makabeni, President of CNETU, indicated how trade union intervention in Johannesburg over the issue of wage board determination 105 brought the strikes to a quick end and no worker violence was reported.

The strikes in Johannesburg in December and the successful intervention of the trade unions raise certain questions. To what extent were workers in Pretoria aware of the events in Johannesburg? How effective was trade union organisation in Pretoria? And did the trade unions play a significant role in the events of the 28th December?

Attempts at effective trade union organisation in Pretoria began in 1939, largely through the initiatives of Naboth Mokgatle. Inspired by Max Gordon, Mokgatle established a Pretoria branch of the African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union (ACDWU). The problems encountered by Mokgatle in establishing a union reflect many of the stumbling blocks to effective organisation in Pretoria. The coordination of activities from the head office in Johannesburg hampered efficiency and thereby lessened the credibility of the Pretoria ACDWU. The dependence on white trade unionists, to provide direction and trade union training, as well as to organise essentials such as office accommodation and equipment, delayed effective organisation.[21] Furthermore, according to Lodge, the use of the least experienced and most junior members of the CPSA to carry out trade union work in Pretoria, suggests that the CPSA did not regard it as a top priority, and reflects the split in the party over the

---

[20] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of Charlie Muntsa to the Commission of Enquiry

[21] N.Mokgatle, **Autobiography of an Unknown South African**, London:C.Hurst and Co. 1970; B.Hirson, "The Mines, the State and the African Trade Unions", Unpublished paper

mobilisation of blacks.[22]

Much of the organisation and coordination of Pretoria's trade unions was carried out by Mike Muller. Muller was from an Afrikaans background and had matriculated at Greys College in the Orange Free State in 1939. He attended University College in Bloemfontein in 1940 and came to Pretoria in 1941 at the age of nineteen. He was a member of the Communist Party, from which he drew a salary, and he took up the task of organising trade unions for black workers in Pretoria.

Young, hardworking and filled with the fervour of his beliefs, Muller vigorously threw himself into the task of organising unions in Pretoria. In August and September 1941 he organised the African Match and Glass Workers Union, followed by the Cement Workers Union and the Dairy Workers Union. By 1942 there were twelve unions in Pretoria which were affiliated to the Joint Council of Non-European Trade Unions of which Muller was Secretary.

A rival grouping of trade unions, the Federation of African Trade Unions, was also established in Pretoria under the leadership of Jacob Modiba. He opened the offices in Pretoria in July 1941 and by the end of 1942 claimed to have 45 affiliated unions, of which 200 municipal workers were members. The Federation of African Trade Unions was affiliated to the Friends of Africa, which acted as a mouthpiece for the federation. According to Modiba, Mike Muller approached him with the intention of uniting the two unions, but negotiations broke up over the issue of communism to which the Federation of African Trade Unions was vehemently opposed.[23] The Federation of African Trade Unions appears to have been a marginalised grouping, and there does not appear to be any evidence of the existence of most of its unions.

The growth of trade unions in Pretoria did not go unchallenged by the government. When Muller first began organising, the attitude of the Department of Labour was friendly, but "in a patronising sort of way".[24] However, as the unions became stronger, they began to experience difficulties. There were instances where the unions were disregarded and Muller himself was threatened with imprisonment due to his activities as trade union organiser.

---

[22] T.Lodge, "Political Organisations in Pretoria's African Townships" in B.Bozzoli (ed), **Class, Community and Conflict**, Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1987

[23] K 172, Vol 3: Evidence of Jacob Modiba to the Commission of Enquiry

[24] K 172, Vol.2: Evidence of Mike Muller to the Commission of Enquiry

Towards the end of 1942, the attitude of the Department of Labour shifted once again as it indicated a willingness to enter into discussion with the unions.[25] This may be accounted for by the state's concern to avoid disruption of war-time production and the general attitude of conciliation towards African labour during this period. As a result the Department of Labour maintained a positive relationship with the trade unions, hoping that their leadership would restrain workers from strike action.

Muller organised the African Municipal Workers Union in August 1942. The sources of inspiration were the urgent need for increase in wages for unskilled labourers made acute by the rising cost of living due to war conditions. The municipal compound was, according to Muller, "the stronghold of the union."[26] At the time of the riot, the union had a membership of 581 which reflected only about 27% of the total population of the municipal compound and Tin Town. Although it is clear that the majority of the compound dwellers were not union members, it is reasonable to assume that a large number were aware of the disputes regarding the wage determination and the efficacy of the strikes in Johannesburg in December.

Union members had been informed of developments regarding wage board determination 105 at regular meetings from September 1942 onwards. At a meeting on 16 December 1942, the union members were informed of the success of strike action in Johannesburg, and Muller had called on the workers present to demand for 40/- a week, and "to shout so loud it would be heard at the Union Buildings."[27]

The Pretoria Municipality had been particularly worried about the impact of the Johannesburg strikes. J.S.Hardy stated that

> "from the time these strikes occurred in Johannesburg, we were all expecting it to come here and there were rumours from different sources that the municipal natives may strike."[28]

The Pretoria Municipality was extremely hostile to the Municipal Workers' Union, viewing it as a vehicle for industrial and communist agitation. It refused to work with the union, and, as the possibility of a strike intensified, it stepped up the level of intimidation. At the beginning of the meeting scheduled for 16

---

[25] ibid.

[26] ibid.

[27] ibid.

[28] K 172, Vol.2: Evidence of J.S.Hardy, Location Superintendent, to the Commission of Enquiry

December 1942, ten municipal police situated themselves at the front of the hall. Only about 20 workers were there, and when Muller went to the compound to investigate the lack of attendance, he found the municipal police blocking the entrance, on the pretext of conduction a liquor raid in the compound. The meeting was eventually attended by over 300 workers.[29]

The Pretoria Municipality did much to emphasise the activities of Mike Muller and the African Municipal Workers Union. Its attempts to place the blame for the riot on the trade union and communist agitators was probably intended to shift attention away from its own culpability. Its refusal to upgrade the conditions and to provide adequate wages, facilities and food in the municipal compound contributed towards a growing sense of grievance.

What emerges from an examination of the living conditions of the municipal workers of Pretoria is a chronicle of extreme hardship and abysmal degradation that left in its wake a festering rage and a growing desperation, which coupled with the possibility of a long-awaited wage increase being denied them, finally erupted into violence on the night of the 28th December.

Approximately one third of Pretoria's African population lived in compounds and hostels, with another third living in the locations, and the final third on employers' premises as domestic servants. The experience of urbanisation differed substantially within each grouping.

The location dwellers lived in the areas set aside for African residency, namely Marabastad, Bantule and Schoolplaats, and after 1940 Atteridgeville. The majority were Transvaal Sotho and Ndebele while a substantial 'oorlams'[30] population lived in Schoolplaats and Marabastad. In 1938 the total population of the three locations was 11 118, of whom more than 50% were born or had lived a lifetime in Pretoria, and a substantial percentage had resided there for ten years or more.[31] There are no official figures for the 1940s but it is clear that these would be substantially higher. The development of ISCOR attracted large numbers of workers to Pretoria, and the massive wave of urbanisation during the Second World War would be reflected in

---

[29] K 172, Vol.2: Evidence of Mike Muller

[30] **Oorlams** were urban blacks who had grown up on white farms or amongst white families in town, had acquired skills, and closely identified with Boer culture and society.

[31] NTS 7682, 169/332: Report on inspection of the Pretoria Urban Area, by C.Heald, 28 September-1 October 1942

Pretoria as well. The African population of the locations was relatively permanent and a strong sense of community existed among its residents.

The nature of the compound population was substantially different. It comprised a migrant population of single men, totalling 10 032 men in 1942. The largest compound was at Iscor, with a population of 3 800, where conditions and wages were somewhat better than those offerred by the municipality.[32] The municipal workers formed the second largest contingent, the majority of whom were employed as labourers, refuse removal and sanitary workers, and were housed in the municipal compound and Tin Town in Marabastad. The majority of compound dwellers were newly urbanised migrants, and much of their urban experience was confined to their work and the compound environment. There were however a number of workers who had been in residence in the compound for ten years or more.[33]

According to the Urban Areas Act of 1923, the Pretoria City Council was obliged to house its employers in a suitable compound. The Municipal compound was built in 1924 and was situated on 55 Proes Street, Pretoria West, adjacent to Marabastad and the Asiatic Bazaar. It had been originally designed to accommodate 1 109 men but by August 1942, 1 329 were crowded into the building.[34]

The nature of the accommodation was hopelessly inadequate. The litany of ills is long and indicates a complete lack of concern for human dignity and comfort. There were 86 rooms in the compound, each room being approximately 12 feet by 18 feet. The bunks were made of concrete slabs in three tiers and were designed to accommodate twelve people. However, an additional iron bed, with no mattress or bedding, had been added, increasing the number in each room to thirteen. The cramped quarters meant that the amount of air space per person was below the minimum health standards requirements. Privacy was an unheard of commodity, and personal belongings were held with little regard. There were no lockers provided and the continual theft of possessions was the source of tensions and fights amongst the

---

[32] K 172, Vol 3: List of Natives in Compounds and Hostels in Pretoria Urban Area

[33] K 172, Vol 2: Evidence of J.R.Brent, Manager of Native and Asiatic Affairs, to Commission of Enquiry

[34] UWL, AD 1433, Cp9.2.3: Memorandum on the Municipal Compound submitted to the Pretoria City Council by a Deputation of Representatives of Pretoria Organisations, 16 September 1942

compound dwellers.[35]

There was no provision for heating in the rooms. Compound dwellers were not allowed to bring braziers into their rooms and were forced to supply their own blankets which in themselves did little to alleviate the cold from the concrete. There was no hot water for washing in the compound.[36] Moreover, there were only six or seven water taps in the area, which were adequate for drinking, but not for personal cleanliness.

While the conditions in the main compound were extremely bad, they were far worse in Tin Town, another source of accommodation for municipal workers. Tin Town had been constructed in 1938 as a temporary measure to deal with the massive influx of people into Pretoria. It consisted of 67 semi-circular corrugated iron huts on the opposite side of Proes Street. However, since its establishment there had been no effort to relocate its inhabitants into a more permanent structure. Each hut, intended to house eight men, accommodated twelve, making the overall population of Tin Town 804. The men slept foot to foot on the ground and no water taps or heating arrangements were provided. As the huts were unlined, they lent themselves to extremes of heat and cold.[37]

The sanitary workers, comprising mainly Bhacca, were housed in a separate section of the main compound.[38] Their conditions of service were exceptionally bad. They worked seven days a week, in unpleasant conditions and there were instances where men had had no leave for the past three years.[39]

---

[35] AD 1433, Cp9.2.3: ibid; NTS 7682, 169/332: Report on inspection of the Pretoria Urban Areas, by C.Heald, 28 September-1 October, 1942

[36] UWL, AD 1433, Cp9.2.3: Memorandum submitted to Pretoria City Council, 16 September 1942. An interesting contrast to the living conditions of the municipal workers was the compound provided for the mules and horses belonging to the Pretoria City Council. Each animal was provided with a scientifically constructed stall, with a sufficient number of water taps to make hygienic conditions possible.

[37] ibid.

[38] NTS 7682, 169/322: Report by C.Heald, 28 September - 1 October 1942

[39] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of Joseph Mgilane to the Commission of Enquiry.

The majority of municipal workers were however Shangaan and Venda. According to David Moshela, a compound worker, they brought a distinctive quality to the compound.

> "As a people, they like music. Wherever they gather you will always see them dancing and enjoying themselves."[40]

As the municipality provided no recreational facilities, their only recourse to entertainment within the compound was war dancing. This practice, which was an integral part of the compound culture, went on from 8p.m. to 10p.m. nightly and on a Sunday, began at 9a.m. Competitions were often held with teams from Doornfontein and Braamfontein in Johannesburg and with workers in the Kirkness compound in Pretoria,[41] and in many ways served as a means of release of pent-up energies and tensions.

Shortly before the uprising, J.R.Brent, the Manager of Native and Asiatic Affairs, acting on complaints made by Pretoria West residents, had prohibited war dances in the compound. He offered the war dancers an alternative site in Bantule or Marabastad which they had rejected for fear of being attacked by the Amalaita in these areas.[42] The loss of their only source of recreation in the compound, particularly over the festive season, narrowly circumscribed the workers' cultural world. They "felt very sore about it",[43] and it clearly contributed to a growing sense of frustration and grievance.

The poor quality and inadequate food supply was central to the workers' discontent and their physical attack on the kitchen buildings during the demonstration became a symbolic unleashing of their anger. There was no dining hall, and men had to wait in a queue to be served. Often by the time they had returned to their rooms to eat, the food was cold. But the workers' anger was largely focused on their meagre rations. African witnesses at the Commission of Enquiry repeatedly voiced complaints about the quality of food. George Maori insisted that the "food at home is

---

[40] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of David Moshela to the Commission of Enquiry

[41] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of Mack Mabaso to the Commission of Enquiry

[42] The majority of Amalaita in Pretoria were drawn from domestic servants though approximately 10% of the gang membership was made up of young, compounded Africans.

[43] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of Mack Mabaso to the Commission of Enquiry

better than what I get here"[44] while compound rations were invariably supplemented by the workers' own food. Jackson Maboko, a compound dweller, spent as much as 6d. daily on extra meat which was only issued twice a week.[45] According to David Moshela, "this little kitchen is the one that is starving us."[46]

The men received weekly rations of two pounds of meat, half a pound of offal, one pound of dry beans and two and a quarter vegetables, which were usually not fresh and in certain cases not fit for human consumption, and daily rations of two pounds of mealie meal and one pint of coffee.[47] The paltry portions and the insipid nature of the diet clearly irked the workers, but the major complaint was the quality of the mealie meal, which was yellow instead of white, and was virtually unpalatable.[27] Had the compound manager explained to the workers that yellow meal was all that was available as a result of the shortages of food during the Second World War, the workers might not have voiced such vociferous complaints.

The Native and Asiatic Committee of the Pretoria City Council recognised that immediate improvements needed to be implemented in the municipal compound and it had intended to provide some cosmetic changes. The City Council voted £7,200 to provide dining-recreation rooms where the existing sleeping accommodation was and to build dormitories above the dining hall. However the scheme had not been introduced, largely as a result of the protests of the Pretoria West Ratepayers Association. They objected to the presence of Marabastad and the municipal compound in their midst and were concerned to have the principle of segregation applied in Pretoria West. They therefore blocked any attempts at improvements which might then make the structures

---

[44] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of George Maori, Commission of Enquiry

[45] K 172 Vol 2: Evidence of Jackson Maboko, Commission of Enquiry

[46] K 172, Vol 4: Evidence of David Moshela to the Commission of Enquiry

[47] K 172 Vol 3: Rationing of the Pretoria Compounded Bantu; K 172 Vol 5: Memorandum of evidence by the Members of the Native Representative Council and Spokesmen for the African Municipal Workers

[27] K 172, Vol 2:: Evidence of Jackson Maboko to the Commission of Enquiry

more permanent.[28] As a result the compound dwellers continued to suffer the indignities of their circumstances without redress of grievances until their desperation erupted into militant action.

The severity of the events of the 28th December, the loss of life and random violence, prompted the government to appoint a Commission of Enquiry to investigate the circumstances of the riot in the municipal compound. The Commission sat from 4 January to 22 February 1943. Much of the cross-examination of trade unionists by members of the Commission was highly antagonistic and it appeared that the Commission's hidden agenda was to place responsibility for the riot on communist agitators and the trade unions. Yet despite this disposition, the Commission vindicated the Communist Party and unionists. And in the final analysis the Commission found the Minister of Labour to have acted illegally, and disclosed definite shortcomings in the Council's treatment of its workers with regard to housing, food and recreational facilities.[29] Clearly the conditions in the compound were so devastating that the Commission could not help but highlight their negative effects on the municipal workers.

The municipal workers' deep-rooted anger at their intolerable conditions was undoubtedly compounded by the rising cost of living and food shortages heralded by the Second World War. But the findings of the Commission need to be contextualised within the framework of local state policy. The cornerstone of the Council's African housing policy was the removal of its inner-city locations. The Council's belief that Pretoria occupied a special place as the administrative capital of the Union led them to view total segregation as the only solution to presence of Africans in town.[30] A stronger motivating force for the removal of Marabastad and its environs was the continuous pressure exerted on the Council by the white ratepayers of Pretoria West. Historically, this group had raised the strongest objections to the presence of Marabastad and the municipal compound which bordered on the white suburb.[31] The Council's

---

[28] K 172 Vol 2: Evidence of J>Patmore, Representative of Pretoria West Ratepayers Association

[29] AD1433, Cp9.2.3: Report of the Judicial Commission of Enquiry into the Pretoria Municipal Riot of 28 December 1942

[30] TAB, TPB 170, TA 1444: Pretoria Native Location Enquiry Committee - Evidence of W.A.King, June 1910

[31] K 172, Vol 2: Evidence of J.Patmore, Representative or Pretoria West Ratepayers Association, to the Commission of Enquiry

willingness to acquiesce to the demands of the white ratepayers of Pretoria West meant that the harsh conditions confronting the inhabitants of the muncipal compound and Tin Town were not alleviated in any way. Removal also became a catchphrase for justifying the Council's inaction as to the ameriolation of conditions. According to the Council, the expenditure was not warranted as the locations and compound were to be removed eventually.

While the Commission's vindication of the trade unions was hailed as a triumph for the trade unions, it was in a sense a pyrrhic victory for it highlighted their ineffective organisation of workers in the compound. The African Muncipal Workers Union had succeeded in gaining a membership of only 27% of the compound dwellers. While it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of the AMWU on the ground, the union was responsible for increasing the awareness of the municipal workers of the labour legislation that affected them, and of industrial unrest in Johannesburg. Thus the role of the union appeared to be more that of a source of information than a strong mobilising force. The riot provided short term gains for the trade unions, but these were not sustained. Immediately after the riot, membership of the African Municipal Workers Union increased from 581 to 872.[32] Workers must have attributed the success of the wage board determination in part to the work of the union. The Pretoria City Council also decided to recognise informally the union. However strikes and lockouts were still considered illegal.[33] Union membership soon began to fall off and after the war, African labour organisation in Pretoria went into decline.[34]

The weaknesses of trade union organisation in Pretoria, and this is a question that the Commission failed to investigate, must be attributed to the CPSA's policy with regard to extending unionism on a regional level. The low priority given to Pretoria was reflected in the appointment of a young, inexperienced activist to head the Pretoria branch of CNETU. The difficulty of organising a compounded work force, which worked in different places and on different shifts, also proved a stumbling block to effective union organisation.

The reluctance of the Pretoria Municipality to recognise African trade unions and to work with them contributed to the outbreak of

---

[32] UWL, AD 1433, Cp9.2.3: Report of the Judicial Commission of Enquiry

[33] NTS 7251, 247/326: Letter from G.Mears, Secretary for Native Affairs to Town Clerk, Pretoria, August 1943

[34] T.Lodge, 'Political Organisations in Pretoria's African Townships'

violence on the night of the 28th December. The attempts of the Pretoria City council to evade wage board determination 105 and the complicity of the Minister of Labour in this regard served to fuel the discontent that the municipal workers were already feeling. Within this context, the possibility of not receiving the increase that was due to them, led to a spontaneous uprising on the premises of the main muncipal compund.