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9 - 14 February, 1987

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TITLE: The British Seamen's Strike - 1925
Solidarity in South Africa

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THE BRITISH SEAMEN'S STRIKE - 1925

SOLIDARITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Baruch Hirson

The Strike Across the Seas

On 1 August 1925, British seamen, on shore or on the high seas, had their monthly wages cut from £10 to £9, on the initiative of Havelock Wilson, General President of the National Sailors and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland (NSFU). Some who were about to embark in British ports, stayed ashore, although the strike never prospered in the UK; but those at sea, who landed in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, walked off their ships, and stayed out for periods up to three months.

A strike in the merchant marine in 1925 was a serious matter for the economies of Britain and the Dominions. Air travel was still exceptional: exporters of raw materials, agricultural produce, manufactured goods, mail and travellers, relied on regular sailings. Any prolonged delay would lead to losses by farmers, traders and manufacturers, but the intensity of the class struggle in the mid-twenties had reached a point where governments, and sections of the ruling class in Europe, were prepared to gamble with local economies in order to smash the working class movement.

The seamen looked like soft targets in Britain, at a time when miners, railwaymen and others threatened to defy the government over wage cuts. There was large scale unemployment in the merchant marine, and scabs were readily available in Britain. Furthermore, the NSFU negotiating directly with the ship owners through the National Maritime Board (NMB), made the offer of a wage cut, at a time when the trade union movement was fighting wage cuts in the coal and other industries. The seamen were split, occupationally, regionally, and politically: many belonging to the splinter Amalgamated Marine Workers Union (AMWU), with strongholds in Glasgow and Southampton, although some carried membership cards of the NSFU, required for securing a berth in most British ships.

Havelock Wilson relied on the fact that seamen in Britain could not sustain a strike, and in this he was correct. The seamen's action against wage cuts faltered, and seemed to collapse at an early stage. The NSFU condemned those who stayed out, and the AMWU leaders repudiated the strike throughout

August. It was left to the National Minority Movement (NMM),[1] to provide the personnel for the unofficial strike committee in London, consisting mainly of members of the NSFU, and including George Hardy, leader of the transport section of the NMM.[2] The use of scabs ensured the sailing of most ships, albeit with some delays. Furthermore, the tugboatmen worked normally, and the AMWU, to whom they belonged, refused to call them out throughout the seven weeks of the strike in Britain, on the grounds that they were governed by a separate agreement.[3]

The events in Britain will be presented elsewhere,[4] and will discuss the role of Havelock Wilson, Liberal M.P., anti-socialist, Empire patriot, and leading supporter of the Spencer union which broke away from the National Union of Miners in 1926,[5] and will show that the strike was as much against the NSFU as against the shipowners. The role of Emmanuel Shinwell, leader of the AMWU, irresolute and divisive through the strike, also needs appraisal.[6] What has also become apparent from our researches, is that the factor that altered the course of the strike, and which no one had forseen, was the action in overseas ports. Over and above strike action in Britain, some 10-15,000 men walked off the ships in the Dominions, and it was their action, together with that of tens of thousands of men and women who supported them, that kept the strike going for two to three months.

The first stoppage was in Australia on 21 August, where the sailors were fortunate in obtaining the backing of the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) - themselves locked in battle with the

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[1] The rank and file movement started by the Communist Party of Great Britain, and affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions, or Profintern.

[2] Hardy, a one time Wobbly was the only non-seaman on the Committee. For his version see G. Hardy, Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents, Lawrence and Wishart, 1956. Hardy was the Comintern representative in South Africa in the mid-30s. See also R.E. Bond 'The Unofficial Strike of British Seamen', International Press Correspondence, (Inprecor), Vol.5, No.55, 1925, pp.164-5.

[3] This accusation, contained in reports by members of the NMM, is partisan, and awaits confirmation.

[4] A book is being written on the strike together with Lorraine Vivian.

[5] J. Havelock Wilson, The Red Hand Exploiting the Trade Union Movement; The Communist Offensive Against the British Empire, 20th Century Press, 1927.

[6] In the many versions of his autobiography, Shinwell studiously avoids any mention of the strike. A letter to him, requesting an interview, received no answer.

government over local strike action.[7] There were few sailors available as scabs in Australia, and the strike continued, with the aid of the SUA, for almost three months. Partly inspired by news of the action in Australia, and also because of their own anger at receiving reduced wages, there were strikes in other countries within the week.

The Strike in Durban

On 24 August the Australian crew of the Anglda, a steamer chartered by the South African government demanded Australian wages and conditions, and the SUA demanded that this be adhered to, or all South African ships would be blacked. The event was not connected with the strike, and there was no question of pay being deducted,[8] but this seems to have acted as a catalyst, and two days later the crews of three ships were reported to have come out in Durban.[9] The men agreed to work in port, but would not sail unless their grievances were attended to, and there were reports that other crews might join them.[10] The strike spread to Cape Town, and with stoppages in East London and in Lourenco Marques, there was only restricted sea traffic between the South African ports, or between the country and the outside world for forty seven days.[11]

Economically, the strike affected South Africa badly. To maintain a favourable balance of trade, it was estimated that the country needed a surplus of visible exports over visible imports of £15,000,000. The only substantial exports, besides gold and diamonds, were food and wool, and the optimum months for the latter were from August to October. In 1925 plentiful rain, and control of pests and blight, had led to bumper crops after years of depression, and delays in shipping would severely affect the

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[7] The strike in Britain is discussed briefly in Basil Mogridge, 'Militancy and Inter-Union Rivalries in British Shipping, 1911-1929', International Review of Social History, Vol.6, No.3, 1961. There are short accounts of events in the antipodes, and the only account, in secondary sources, of events in South Africa, is in the biography of Col. Creswell by his widow.

[8] Natal Advertiser, 28 August 1925.

[9] There was a small South African Sailor's and Firemen's Union at Cape Town, but the Natal Advertiser, 28 August 1925, stated that it was not involved in the call for a strike.

[10] Star, 24, 26 August 1925. Argus (Melbourne), 28 August.

[11] There appears to have been only one boat affected in Lourenco Marques, and one in East London. The newspapers claimed that the strike lasted for 47 days, but in effect many ships were held up for 60 days or more.

country and local farming communities.[12] Maize and oranges due for export were stored in the ports or the countryside: the oranges in danger of rotting, and the maize attracting rats, with the added danger of plague.[13] Imported food, including flour, was in short supply, and more general imports - some ordered for the Christmas season - were threatened.[14]

Besides consumer goods, the mail to Britain was badly affected, and business communications with the country's main trading partner slowed down: the cable, as was pointed out early in the strike, could not replace the postal service and was heavily overloaded.[15] Machinery needed by the mines was either held up in Europe, or lay in the ships' holds, in danger of rusting.[16] Gold was not exported; bunker coal for the ships was unsold; and ostrich feathers lay neglected in storage, while the European market for this foppery collapsed.

In the first days of the strike business interests sought a means to man the ships, and one newspaper suggested that:

> We must protect ourselves if we can. We must span in the natives [who]... would be glad of the work. They would do it quite efficiently at reasonable rates... The stoking and stewarding of the steamers is a simple task and the natives could easily be trained to do it.[17]

The newspaper claimed it 'should be sorry to carry out such a change', but it would be necessary to stop the country's trade being brought to a standstill. The writer also thought that General Hertzog might have trouble with his labour colleagues in the Nationalist-Labour pact government, but would have to face the alternatives of losing the season's citrus crop, or offending the socialists.[18] Initially, the Nationalist Party opposed the strike and joined the NSFU in calling on the seamen to return to work, although keen republicans as they were, they could not have responded kindly to Havelock Wilson's claim that the strike was a plot by men who wished to break up the British Empire. All negotiating was left to Colonel Creswell, the leader of the South

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[12] Times, (London), 6 November 1925.

[13] Evening News, (Glasgow), 1 September 1925.

[14] Daily Dispatch, 10 September 1925.

[15] Natal Advertiser, 26 August 1925.

[16] Star, 3 September 1925.

[17] Eastern Province Herald, quoted in Natal Witness, 29 August 1925.

[18] Ibid.

African Labour Party (SALP). This threatened to tear the party apart: Creswell the Minister of Labour, wanted to end the strike, and offered to mediate between shipowners and seamen, while Walter Madeley and Morris Kentridge, expressed support, at least initially, for the seamen.

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), and white trade unionists were also drawn into the conflict. CPSA involvement, like so many of the events of the strike, seems to have been accidental. Soloman Biurski, a party member read of the strike in the local press, and he hurried to the docks with offers of financial assistance, and a campaign to back the striker's demands. which were gladly taken up. The trade unions also contributed substantially to strike funds, and this was of great assistance to the men who had no independent source of funds. But this was to be used by union officials in Cape Town, to lever the seamen away from their communist supporters.

However, that is running ahead of the story, which in South Africa starts in Durban, with the agitation that followed the court case of two seamen on 28 August, for refusing to obey the lawful commands of the master. The men were sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment with hard labour suspended for two weeks, subject to their immediate return to duties,[19]

There was further unrest amongst the strikers when Reuters reported on 1 September that the Union Castle Line was recruiting 700 lascars in Bombay to replace existing crews. The use of lascars was not a new departure by the shipping companies, as many vessels calling at South African ports were worked by such crews. However, the public was scandalised to hear that lascars would be used as scabs against white crews, and it was reported that the shipping companies lost the public support they had previously enjoyed. One observer was reported as saying that lascar crews would eventually take over all cargo vessals, 'but to introduce strike breaking crews at this present time is a different matter'.[20]

At this juncture two men, H.H. Kemp amd Dan Simons, with a history of involvement in earlier struggles, entered the fray in Durban. Kemp, one time assistant town clerk, and member of the municipal union, had been victimised in January 1920. This brought the workers out for three days, and all municipal services came to a standstill. A board of control (or 'Soviet')

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[19] Natal Mercury, 28 August 1925.

[20] Natal Advertiser, 1 September 1925.

was installed in the town hall, and within the day, he was reinstated and a permanent conciliation board of councillors and employees established.[21] Kemp was in the Labour Party (SALP) until May 1924, but was expelled for opposing the party nominee in the general election. He was defeated at the polls, and then called for the formation of a new party which would exclude all Asiatics from South Africa.[22] He now cabled the government to stop the recruitment of lascars, saying:

> Durban feels virtually as one man on this subject (sic). Ugly situation will arise. Would recall to your memory events of 1897 at the Point. Remember on this occasion there will be no Harry Escombe to thwart public will...[23]

Daily meetings were called at the Town Gardens to put the sailor's case to the public, and this forum was dominated by Kemp, and Dan Simons, who was described in the press as a paralysed ex-miner. Simons had been a Labour Party town councillor in Benoni in 1911. He worked at the New Kleinfontein mine, and in mid-1913 was on the strike committee before this incident grew into the general strike of July 1913. With his ardour undiminished he supported the railwaymen's strike in January 1924 and was detained when martial law was declared.[24] Sometime thereafter he was crippled, and he retired to Durban where he sold tobacco and cigarettes from his wheel chair near the Gardens.[25] There was a large crowd at the first meeting and Simons 'neglected his business', and organised a collection for the six men due to appear in court the next day. Thereafter, he presided at all meetings in the Gardens, and was appointed President of the Durban strike committee. Kemp was the main speaker at the second meeting and the crowd that gathered was stated to be 15,000 strong. He reminded his audience that he stood for the expulsion

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[21] J.H. and R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969.

[22] Umteteli wa Bantu, 10 May 1925.

[23] Councillor Kemp, Durban, to the Prime Minister, Pretoria, quoted in Natal Advertiser, 2 September 1925. (The Hon. Harry Escombe had intervened to prevent disorder at the Point in 1897, following public outcries against the continued importation of indentured Indians into South Africa).

[24] This profile of Simons has been pieced together from press reports, in which his name was accidentally found, in researches on the strikes of 1913-14. See Rand Daily Mail, 29 May 1913-3 June 1913; and Transvaal Leader, 18, 31 January 1914, (that of 18 Jan. reports his intervention at a meeting in Benoni where he stopped a Vigilance Committee being formed, and successfully moved a counter motion supporting the railwaymen's strike).

[25] Natal Mercury, 2, 3 September 1925. News reports in 1925 made no mention of either Kemp's or Simon's past activities, and fragments of their stories came to light during research on earlier industrial actions..

of all Asiatics from South Africa, and said that if lascars came, he would lead the citizens of Durban in throwing them into the Indian Ocean.

Other speakers brought messages of solidarity from the Labour Party, and the white trade unions, but Kemp dominated the gathering, and rallied the widest support. He spoke again the next day at a meeting of (white) railwaymen, and when he mentioned the lascars, and his many previous anti-Asiatic campaigns, he was greeted by cries of 'Bravo Kemp' and 'Up Boys and at 'em'.[26]

Kemp's call for Indian repatriation was not unique or original, and was the policy of all governments in South Africa (and also of the SALP). Measures to this end were placed before the Natal Provincial Council and Parliament in 1923-5. In 1924 Indians in Natal towns lost the municipal franchise, and their right to buy or lease land. A Class Areas Bill was introduced by Patrick Duncan in Parliament for their compulsory trading and residential segregation, but fell away in June with the defeat of the Smuts government. Dr Malan, Minister of the Interior in the pact government reintroduced the measure as the Areas Reservation Bill in mid-1925, with even more stringent clauses to restrict Indian rights. Although the Bill was shelved, it remained a permanent threat to Indian rights in South Africa.[27]

Mass meetings of Indians were held in Durban against the Reservation Bill, and there were calls for a Round Table Conference to discuss their position in the country. During the strike the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) expressedg 'deep regret' over the planned use of lascars as scabs, which they likened to the original importation of indentured labour in the sugar estates of Natal. Both events led to anti-Indian campaigns, and the introduction of lascars would 'intensify the activities of the anti-Asiatics'. They urged 'responsible leaders of India' to denounce the shipping companies.[28]

At a Cape Indian Defense Committee meeting speakers were more damning. They warned lascars to stay away as this 'was purely a white man's dispute, [because] ... both sides, in their capacities as voters when on shore, were parties to the repressive

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[26] Natal Mercury, 4 September 1925.

[27] Eric Walker, A History of South Africa, Longmans, Green, 1947, p.610.

[28] Natal Mercury, 2 September 1925; Times of India, 2, 3 September 1925.

legislation passed under the British Crown against their Indian fellow-citizens'.[29]

As reports came in that lascars were being recruited, and were on their way, the Indian organisations grew ever more apprehensive. Amod Bhayat, President of the Natal Indian Congress sent cables to 'prominent persons' in India:

> Community here disapproves such action as unfair to strikers, and further complicates present Indian problem. We implore you keep Indians out of this strike so preserve Indian honour. Suggest recall any lascars already left.[30]

Abdul Karim of the Natal Indian Association cabled the Viceroy of India and Pandit Motilal Nehru on similar lines, saying that,

> Arrival lascars South Africa this juncture when all minds agitated new Asiatic Bill disastrous Indian interests. Local Indians strongly resent Indian seamen exploited as strike breakers totally condemn action shipowners rushing to India unmindful serious issues involved. Pray recall lascars.[31]

The Times of India, reflecting local concern, condemned the recruitment of scabs, stating that they could be hurt, and warned of unpleasant consequences for the whole Indian community in South Africa.[32] The General Secretary of the Indian Seamen's Union also pointed to the rejection of lascars sent as scabs during the shipping strike in China, and he asked officials of the All India TUC to stop any lascars signing up for South Africa.[33]

Whether lascars were ever recruited remains a mystery. The Times of India, carried conflicting reports: that inquiries had been made about the availability of Indian crews from local agents of shipping companies; that such crews could be supplied; and then silence.[34] If attempts were made to raise the 640 scabs the Union Castle line was said to have requested, they were never sent. But the report did not stop intense agitation throughout

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[29] Natal Mercury, 2 September 1925.

[30] Natal Mercury, 3 September 1925.

[31] Natal Advertiser, 3 September 1925; Times of India, 4 September 1925 (which fleshed out the message, inserting words that had been excluded to cut the cost of cabling).

[32] Times of India, Editorial, 3 September 1925.

[33] Times of India, 5 September 1925.

[34] Reports appeared in Times of India between 1-5 September. Similar reports appeared in the South African, British and Australian presses - some coming via Reuters, others without reference to any news agency.

South Africa. The press carried copious reports (and rumours) on the matter and Die Burger was quoted as saying that 'Public opinion will not permit it, and we fear it will merely give rise to undesirable emotional excitement and even to worse things'.[35] Prime Minister Hertzog received hundreds of telegrams from all over the country protesting against the use of lascars as scabs, and the Cabinet response was that:

> Under the law, lascars, being Asiatics, are prohibited immigrants, and the Master of the ship bringing such persons to a port of the Union is ordered to retain such persons on his ship and to remove them from the Union, failing which he is subject to heavy penalties. Landing for temporary purposes or trans-shipment is not permitted without the consent of the Immigration authorities. The Government has received no information from the shipowners, who are well aware of the law if any such step is taken as that indicated by Reuter's telegram.[36]

The issue was dead, and when it was reported on 17 September, that lascars who were on ships involved in the strike in Durban, were fraternising with their white colleagues there was no noticeable reaction.

Seventeen British vessels were in Durban harbour in early September, and 1,235 men were ashore (including 200 engineers, officers and others who were not involved in the dispute). The men left the ships, after attempts to take the Port Curnow three miles out to sea, where men were ordered to work, or face mutiny charges.[37] On 18 September, Creswell visited Durban to meet shipowners and men and wired Hertzog that the men would not stay on the ships even though they said:

> We know that we are liable as prohibited immigrants ashore to be run in. We are quite prepared for you [to] put us in gaol or in detention camp under strict guard but we will not return [to] ship with risk be taken seas as Port Curnow was. If owners will guarantee us against this will return at once.[38]

The guarantees could not be given, and further discussions proved futile. Creswell urged that the government remain neutral in the dispute, particularly as 'unanimous denunciation that

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[35] Star, 2 September 1925.

[36] Letter from General Hertzog to the Mayor of Durban, reported in Natal Mercury, 3 September 1925; Times of India, 4 September 1925.

[37] The first such attempts to take a ship out with the crew held below board was in Cape Town (see below). See Natal Mercury, 10 September 1925; Star, 19 September; Daily Record and Mail (Glasgow), 8 September 1925.

[38] Telegram, 18 September 1925, Central Archives, Pretoria: Justice File, 409:4/385/25 part 2.

[of?] Union by seamen as not efficient agent and uncontrolled by them'. He thought that the government should charter ships to relieve the situation.[39] The men were billeted in the houses of sympathisers, occupied corners in work sheds, or camped in open spaces. They purchased food with funds collected by trade unions (including the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union - ICU), and Labour or Communist groups throughout South Africa.[40]

The strikers faced many setbacks. Men were being sent to prison, or faced charges arising from the strike. Furthermore, some ships sailed with skeleton crews, or with locally recruited scabs, and the seamen also watched helplessly when British vessels manned by lascars, or non-British ships, loaded produce and sailed for Europe.[41] Nonetheless the men remained firm, and countered press reports that they had surrendered. On 24 September the Durban Strike Committee issued their ninth strike bulletin, in which they claimed that:

> These statements are deliberate lies. No reductions have been accepted and the strike committee has not, and does not intend to put these so-called proposals in front of the men. The whole thing is a dirty attempt to sow the seeds of panic in the ranks of the strikers...Immediate steps have now been taken to prevent any trickery of this sort being flung against us in the future... Ship committees have been set up on ... vessels composed of delegates of the seamen and firemen in order to keep contact between the men on board the ships in harbour and the strike committee ashore. Henceforth every striker will know in detail how things stand... Meanwhile, the solidarity of the position is sill as strong as ever with every man-jack standing fast...[42]

The men faced many tests in the coming days, with an increasing number of unemployed trying to board the ships. Pickets were deployed in the neighbourhood of companies known to be recruiting crews, and were also posted at railway stations as far inland as Pietermaritzburg, to intercept men who were being brought down by the shippers. The press, (and strike bulletins), reported increasing violence, as men were confronted and stopped from reaching the ships. Meanwhile, the seamen approached some

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Star, 19 September 1925, and 24 September in which the Johannesburg branch of the ICU was reported as forwarding £3.5s.6d. to the strikers, with a pledge to continue.

[41] Daily Record and Mail, 8 September 1925.

[42] 'Strike Bulletin No.9', reprinted in Natal Advertiser, 25 September 1925. The Bulletin also reported on the number of strikers in prison, and stated that only one of the ships on strike had left South Africa for Britain, and that some ships with blackleg crews had left 'home ports', but very few had gone back. (Our thanks to the Durban Municipal Library, and to Rob Lambert for reprints from the Advertiser).

captains, with intimations that they would welcome talks to end the deadlock.[43]

Action in Cape Town

For the first week only the white unions and the SALP supported the seamen. In Durban they provided money and comforts for the crews, and on 30 August, the Transvaal Labour Party Conference, backed the seamen's strike, and rejected the government's support for the shipping companies. Creswell opposed the resolution saying that the seamen were duty bound to honour the agreement entered into by their union.[44] But there was another reason: the 'pact' government represented both farmers and white workers, and members of the SALP, seemed more concerned with placating farmers than advancing the cause of labour.

The Cape Federation of Trades, to which most (white) trade unions were affiliated, spoke for the seamen until A.Z. Berman, the acting secretary, announced: firstly, that the Federation was approaching the Fruit Exchange (the government's co-operative marketing board) to arrange for the sailing of the Roman Star with a cargo of oranges,[45] and secondly, that the men were prepared to accept the restoration of the status quo pending the reopening of the whole question through conciliation or arbitration in Britain; and the postponement of the new rates pending such negotiations.[46]

The seamen, who had not been consulted, repudiated Berman and the Federation,[47] and it was at this stage that Solomon Biurski, of the CPSA met the men, and they elected a strike committee, with Biurski as their secretary.[48] The CPSA offices in Long Street became strike headquarters, and the party called daily

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[43] Natal Advertiser, 29 September 1925, reprinted the latest strike bulletin, and also carried reports of picket activities.

[44] Evening Citizen, (Glasgow), 31 August 1925; Friend, 31 August 1925.

[45] Cape Argus, 2 September 1925. Berman, one-time editor of the Bolshevik, was a member of the SALP.

[46] Daily Record and Mail, 4 September 1925.

[47] Star, 4 September 1925.

[48] S. Biurski, Fleeting Memories, Typescript, n.d. I first learnt of the strike in this document, shown me by William Beinart, and together with Beinart asked Biurski in 1984, for more details. Newspaper reports confirm much of Biurski's account, but where there are discrepencies I have used reports that appeared at the time.

street meetings to put the seamen's case to the public, collect money, arrange billeting, and so on.[47]

Biurski claims that he led the strike action in Cape Town, and together with Joe Pick and S.A. Rochlin, both members of the CPSA, this seems to have been the case for at least three weeks. On 22 September, S.P. Bunting, the communist leader, declared that at the Cape the strike

> was being very largely and materially assisted, if not actually conducted, by the Communists, who were always associated with any trouble in which the workers' interests were at stake. The Communists took credit for that, and their object was to secure the unconditional surrender of the shipowners, which was the only possible condition of settlement....The men were fighting for 8d. per day, but as Communists we are supporting them for something more.[50]

The committee's first concern was the fifteen million oranges loaded in the specially refrigerated hold of the Roman Star. Berman and other leaders of the Cape Labour Party had appealed to the crew not to strike, because the ship had been chartered by the Fruit Exchange,[51] and many fruit farmers would be ruined if the boat did not sail.[52] It was this that prompted Creswell to mediate between shippers and seamen,[53] and Madeley and Kentridge said they would go to Cape Town because of their concern about agricultural cargoes, if they felt that their presence (as supporters of the strike at the SALP conference) would help.[54]

On 4 September, Biurski announced that the seamen did not wish to be discourteous to the government, and would therefore meet Creswell, but that the dispute could only be settled in London.[55] In private discussions the Minister appealed to the strike committee to let the ship sail 'as a gesture to the first labour government (sic) in South Africa'. The men agreed, provided that it was announced in every port that the committee had given its

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[47] South African Department of Justice files, 3/1064/18, Report to Secretary for Justice, 1 February 1926, microfilm held at School of Oriental and African Studies, Reel 5. See also statement by a fireman in Cape Argus, 5 September 1925: 'We are not Communists - but they are the only ones collecting money for us in order to send cables and wires, and they offered us their hall to meet in'.

[50] Cape Argus, 23 September 1925.

[51] Evening News, 1 September 1925.

[52] Star, 2 September 1925.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Star, 3 September 1925.

[55] Cape Argus, 4 September 1925.

permission, and also that the ship return to Cape Town with the same crew if the strike was still on. But Creswell had no power to agree to the terms, and when a ballot showed that the men opposed the sailing, this agreement fell through.[36]

The Roman Star did sail, but only after the crew was offered an extra £6 for the next year, much to the annoyance of the shipowner's federation.[37] The journey was not without its drama: there was an explosion in the engine room when a detonator was shovelled into the ship's furnace, and three crew members were injured[38]. Sabotage was suspected, and Biurski suggested retrospectively that it might have been the work of a fireman who burst into a strike committee meeting, and said he was volunteering for the crew, but they were not to think badly of him.[39] However, nothing was discovered.

Other consignments of oranges did not sail, and there were reports that oranges worth £35,000 would have to be dumped in Table Bay,[40] and it was said that in Marico alone, citrus growers and packers lost over £30,000.[41] Other produce was also held up, and maize got away mainly on foreign ships, while dairy farmers were forced to keep back butter and eggs, and faced considerable losses.[42]

Creswell's attempts to mediate failed. He could have met some of the seamen's demands, such as the release of all strikers from gaol, and a government guarantee not to tow ships to the outer anchorage. However, other demands were not within his powers. The seamen wanted the wage cut restored, and the abolition of the Maritime Board (a statutory body on which the shipowners and the NSFU were jointly represented, and at which wages were agreed). They also demanded that Havelock Wilson be denied any voice in the affairs of the British mercantile marine.[43]

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[36] S. Biurski, Fleeting Memoirs, p.36; Daily Dispatch, 9 September 1925.

[37] Star, 9 September 1925; Fairplay (London), 25 September.

[38] Daily Record and Mail, 9 October 1925.

[39] Fleeting Memories, p.36.

[40] Star, 17 September 1925.

[41] Star, 22 September 1925.

[42] Daily Record and Mail, 22 September 1925.

[43] Star, 5 September 1925; Natal Mercury, 9 September. A Department of Labour dispatch suggested postponement of the reductions for six months, and that the Unions be adequately represented on the Maritime Board, or that this be investigated at a

Support for the seamen also came from passengers on the Ballarat, consisting of a large number of migrants to Australia under a joint Commonwealth-State scheme, and some Australian seamen who were travelling home. These men and women had established warm relations with the ships crew in the three weeks it took to reach Cape Town.[44] It was the Australian seamen who were probably 'crucial in steeling both militance among the crew, and sympathy among the passengers'.[45]

The Ballarat was in port for forty three days, being there from the start, and remaining until the very end. Some of the determination shown by the men can be ascribed to the support of the passengers, but other factors soon entered into their determination. Men of the Ballarat persuaded the men of the Arundel Castle, to join with them against the cut in wages, and together they constituted the 'local fortress of dissent'.[46]

With no sign of an end to the strike, the captains tried to get their ships out to sea. In one incident which was to affect all strikers, the master of the Sophocles locked his crew in the messroom, and with the assistance of the officers got the ship beyond the three miles limit. The seamen were then ordered down to the boiler room, and warned that non-compliance would lead to charges of mutiny, but they retorted that they had stated when at anchor that they would not sail, and this negated the charge of mutiny. Three hours later the Sophocles was back in port,[47] and the crew called on everyone to stand firm,[48] Fears of other capains trying the same ruse led to crews walking off the ships in Durban and Cape Town.[49] In Cape Town there were insufficient billets, although many families helped with accommodation. Assistance was sought, and the men were taken to the Wynberg military

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top level British inquiry; see Daily Dispatch, 9 September 1925.

[44] My thanks to Michael Roe, of the University of Tasmania, for a copy of his unpublished paper, 'Strike Bound in Cape Town, 1925: Responses Aboard an Australian Migrant Ship'. Life aboard ship had been 'perhaps beyond the norms of shipboard liberation' according to one prurient passenger, quoted by Roe.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Natal Mercury, 7 September 1925; Biurski, Fleeting Memories, p.35. Biurski states that the crew had signaled (by semaphore) that the officers were firing the boilers, and that he had suggested this course of action.

[48] The statement is printed in Natal Mercury, 11 September 1925.

[49] For the events in Durban, see above.

camp, where they were bound by minor restrictions, and became charges of the government. Ultimately, some 600 men were in the camp, under canvas, supplied with blankets, rations and cooking utensils.[70]

But ships did get away in increasing numbers as some men drifted back to the ships, or as unemployed whites volunteered (at £9.10s. per month), for service. The scabs faced a barrage of abuse, but they were defiant and generally impervious to the pleas of the men on strike.[71]

A Labour 'Coup', and the End of the Strike

Except for the agitation over the lascars, the strike seemed to have been supported mainly by whites in South Africa - but mainly as sympathisers. White workers who rallied behind the seamen did not contemplate industrial action, and at most the unions passed the hat around. The rumours (as early as 31 August) that African stevedores in Durban were discussing a strike[72] did not lead to any action.

One week later, James LaGuma, the General Secretary of the ICU in Cape Town informed Clemens Kadalie, the President, that dockers were discussing strike action if their demands for better wages and conditions were not met. He also said that the strike committee in London sent a cable to the crew of the Arundel Castle, via the ICU office in Cape Town, stating that the strike was 'solid' in London, and calling on the strikers to stay firm.[73] LaGuma continued:

> I have also been approached by several representatives of the seamen, or at least it has been suggested that we, the ICU should take up the negotiations on behalf of the seamen; but I pointed out the regrettable colour prejudice in this country and the fear that it would be detrimental to them by alienating the sympathy of the European public. which they have strongly at present...[74]

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[70] Cape Argus, 16 September 1925.

[71] See e.g. the defiant response of 120 scabs employed by the Arundel Castle, when strikers appealed to them, as reported in Natal Mercury, 22 September 1925.

[72] Natal Mercury, 31 August 1925.

[73] Cape Argus, 7 September 1925.

[74] The fullest account appears in Natal Advertiser, 8 September 1925.

Kadalie, however, offered to take over negotiations on behalf of the seamen.[75] But he agreed with LaGuma, that after the strike there would be a large demand for dock labour to load the ships, and urged the implementation of the ICU demand, of 1925: that all dockers be paid the same rate as that prevailing in Cape Town.[76] No more was heard of the negotiations, although members of the ICU did attend rallies in support of the seamen in Cape Town. There was no further talk of strikes in the docks.

Large numbers of seamen were charged for disobeying orders, and only stayed out of gaol pending appeals. For this, bail was needed and funds were not easily available. The trade unions provided considerable sums,[77] and in late September, R. Stuart, Secretary of the Federation of Trades used this to 'invite' the strikers to switch their headquarters from the CPSA to his offices, and when rejected, threatened that financial support would be withdrawn.[78] The committee moved to the offices of the Federation,[79] but this did not end the matter: a strike bulletin critical of the Federation appeared, and the strike money was immediately suspended. The committee thought of breaking with the Federation, but then sought a compromise.[80]

The South African economy was in difficulties, with wool producers facing disaster; the bank exchange rate moving against the local currency, and gold still awaiting export. But the shipowners and the NSFU would make no concessions.[81] There was a ballot in Durban at the end of September, despite the disclaimer in the strike bulletin (of 25 September), but only thirty voted to return to work.[82] But the strike was collapsing, and on 10 October men in Durban agreed under protest to end the strike by 311 votes to 230, with the promise of no victimisations, no prosecutions, clean discharges and the customary opportunity of

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] See e.g. Cape Argus, 17 September 1925. The Cape Town Tramway Union voted the sum of £100 per week for four weeks; the Typographical Union called for a voluntary levy of 1s. per man per week; the Carpenters Union was to discuss the matter.

[78] Cape Argus, 24 September 1925.

[79] A Reuter message, dated 26 September, Natal Mercury, 28 September 1925.

[80] Cape Argus, 1 October 1925.

[81] See Daily Record and Mail, 22 September 1925, for a gloomy assessment of the economic situation in South Africa.

[82] Natal Mercury, 1 October 1925.

select the next voyage. Those whose ships had departed would be repatriated and would also get clean discharges.[83] The terms were communicated to the AMWU, who recommended acceptance, and on the 12th called off the strike in Britain.[84]

The London strike committee held out for another week before conceding defeat, but the strike continued in Australia, and was only declared over in South Africa on 24 October. In November many seamen were still out in Durban,[85] but ships sailed regularly, stranded passengers had gone, produce and other goods were moved. In December, some 500-600 destitute seamen were shipped home by the South African government.[86]

The Impact on South Africa

The strike was not of South African origin, and the major impact must be sought in Britain. Nonetheless, for two months there had been strikers in the main ports, and thousands of local citizens were involved. They were obviously affected, but in the absence of records of their reactions, during or after the event, the historian is left with surmises rather than hard fact.

Ultimately the strike failed, and failures lead to a loss of morale. Consequently, there was no rise in spirits in the CPSA, and Biurski, who had invested so much energy in the strike, was destitute, and unemployed. But the problem was not that of an individual: there had been little political education during the 47 days, and despite the show of solidarity in this rare case of an international strike, the CPSA gained little.

The white unions gained little (if anything) despite their support for the seamen - and even this was blemished by the threat of fund withdrawal in Cape Town. The SALP showed from the beginning of the strike that it was split. It had been in the government for barely a year when confronted by the seamen's action, and the division in their ranks was a warning of events to come. In 1928 the party was torn apart: Creswell remained a supporter of the pact government, and Madely led a minority who

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[83] Cape Argus, 12 October 1925; International Transport Workers Federation, Press Report, No 22, 24 October 1925 (which stated the number of votes against as 240)

[84] Daily Record and Mail, 13 October 1925.

[85] International Transport Workers Federation Press Report, Nos.22 and 23, 24 October and 7 November 1925.

[86] Workers Weekly (London), 4 December 1925.

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broke ranks. The differences in 1925 undoubtedly contributed to the dissension inside the party but to what degree is unknown.[87] The Labour Party stalwarts who played a part in the events in Natal, particularly Dr Minnie Alper,[88] who conveyed messages of solidarity, and provided money and provisions, continued for many years as a worker for the SALP. But Kemp and Simons did not make the headlines again, and their further activities are not known.

The Indian community was relieved of the fear that lascars might arrive and make their position more uncomfortable. They continued their agitation for a Round Table conference, and it was convened in 1927. Its outcome was not affected by the strike. What might have become obvious to more radical elements in the community, was the timerousness of the leadership, if indeed they needed further evidence.

The greatest impact of the strike was on the country's economy and whatever the tendencies in economic planning at the time, the event must have helped concentrate minds sharply on the physical isolation of the country. This had been obvious during the first world war, and was now brought home again. In the absence of a local fleet, the need to develop manufacture must have been obvious. The historian can only guess at the impetus this lent to plans to build up the steel and other indutries: a more important factor than those usually advanced, involving attempts to secure employment for 'poor whites'. It is not necessary to propose that the strike was the over-riding factor, to see that it must have played a part in speeding government intervention in the development of local industry, but it will remain a guess until we learn more of the strike's effect on local thinking.

The group that had most to lose from a seamen's strike, were the farmers, who were dependent on British mariners for the export of their produce, and despite all the rhetoric of breaking imperial ties, the farmers would stay beholden to the Empire - until alternate markets were discovered, or new methods of transport became available.

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[87] Articles on the strike appeared in Forward, written by Kentridge, and putting the case for higher wages. There seems to have been no reply from the Cresswell 'camp'.

[88] The Alper family had a record of radical activity, starting in Pretoria, when some members were involved in the activities of the International Socialist League, and then in Durban, where they were known as supporters of radical causes. The Natal Advertiser, 21 September 1925, condemned Minnie Alper as an 'unabashed Communist' in an editorial, and also printed a letter in which she was accused of being one of the fomenters of the strike.