

A last desperate, but futile, attempt to shore up the industrial pillars of apartheid: the miners' strike of 1979 and the impact of the Wiehahn reforms on South African labour

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ABSTRACT

In February 1979 a strike by members the white South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU) broke out on an obscure copper mine at O'Okiep in the interior of South Africa. But by March this wildcat strike has escalated into a country-wide strike involving 9 000 members of the union on 70 platinum, gold and coal producing mines. The pretext for the O'Okiep strike was the appointment of non-white artisans in positions previously held by white miners, thus the regulation of industrial white job reservation was transgressed. The ulterior reasons for the nation-wide MWU strike, however, was a test of strength between the union executive and the government's resolve to implement the recommendations of the so-called Wiehahn commission of inquiry into South African labour legislation. Among others, the commission recommended that black trade unions be legally recognized and that statutory job reservation for white workers be abolished. The chapter will analyse the failure of the 1979 strike as a last futile attempt by white miners to thwart the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa's labour structures. Thus the Wiehahn recommendation would become a catalyst for the eventual abolishment of political apartheid in 1994.

KEYWORDS

South African Mine Workers' Union, O'Okiep strike, Wiehahn commission of inquiry, White workers vs. black workers, Apartheid

1 Introduction

Skilled work in South African industries remained an almost exclusively white preserve until the late 1960s, while at the same time persistent shortages of skilled artisans were beginning to appear in the labour market. As the South African economy continued to expand, there were no longer enough white workers to provide all the artisans required. In addition, South Africa's white worker population was declining steadily. The unemployment that had prevailed among whites in earlier periods had effectively been eliminated and the labour shortage faced by industry was aggravated by the tendency of increasing numbers of white employees to choose higher-status, white-collar occupations in preference to manual work. For the economy as a whole, the lack of skilled labour was becoming an increasingly serious bottleneck. During the early 1970s, the expansion of modern industry and related services was increasingly being retarded by a lack of skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Black workers sensed that the labour market was turning and their bargaining position was improving, especially for those with some skills and experience. A new mood of confidence reinforced old grievances and demands, and a long period of industrial quiescence was finally broken by a remarkable wave of strikes. The movement started spontaneously in the Durban-Pinetown industrial centre at the end of 1972 and continued through 1973 and into 1974, spreading to the Witwatersrand and other key industrial regions. The strikes were a series of spontaneous, unorganised actions by black workers with no clear demands, but in essence the causes were low wages, increasing cost of living, increasing transport costs and lack of adequate bargaining machinery. There were also hostility between workers and management.¹

The institutionalized racial separatism entrenched in labour structures and the 1973 strike waves prepared the ground for the unprecedented growth of a new brand of black trade unionism in the history of the South African labour movement. The work stoppages signaled the evolution of a profound consciousness of solidarity and power among the black working masses.²

The initiative in the labour field had now passed beyond the reach of the traditional organizations of white labour. However, a clear distinction should be made between mining and manufacturing. Since the Durban strikes, the manufacturing sector experienced black labour activism, employer reform efforts, and structural challenges, which, for various reasons, were not experienced to a similar level by the mining sector until the end of the 1970s.³ Eventually though, this period of intense turmoil among the

¹ Maré, G.P. *The Durban Strikes 1973*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 2001, pp.9-27,35-38,49,84,99; Feinstein, C.H. *An Economic History of South Africa. Conquest, discrimination and development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.191,230-231.

² Ncube, D. *The Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1985, p.114,143; Maré, Op.Cit., p.45.

³ See e.g. von Holdt, K. *Transition from below. Forging trade unionism and workplace change in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003 and Forrest, K. *Metal that will not bend. National*

black labour force in the manufacturing sector was moving the mining industry to re-examine old labour practices. Events in other spheres, most notably the Soweto uprising of 1976, were putting paid to past policies of paternalism and grand apartheid.⁴ Black unrest resulted in a capital out-flow and a decreasing influx of immigrants, as well as declining business confidence. South Africa was increasingly threatened with sanctions and disinvestment, while multi-national companies doing business in the country were increasingly forced by employment practices such as the American Sullivan Code to employ black workers also in those labour sectors that were regarded as the exclusive domain of white workers. Apartheid was creating political and economic instability, which was detrimental for industrial peace, and it became clear to the National Party (NP) government that labour reform was essential: firstly, as a result of the white manpower shortages, and secondly, to accommodate the interests of black workers in the labour relations system. These factors also resulted in a declining growth rate and would force the apartheid government to reconsider its policies.⁵

In the face of challenges by black workers, the international climate, anxiety on the part of employers, and declining growth rates due to a lack of consumption and shortage of skilled labour, the apartheid state thus embarked on a journey of labour reforms. But, in doing so, they ran head-on into the intransigent interests of one of apartheid's key constituencies and stakeholders: white workers and white miners in particular.

Change in South Africa was not confined to the realm of labour only as political fissures also began to develop in Afrikaner society and within the NP itself since the 1940s. Various authors conclude that the character of the NP in the 1970s was completely different from the "people's party" it had been in the 1940s, when party policy was determined by ordinary party members during NP congresses. In contrast with the situation during the 1948 general election, when the party's victory was determined to a great extent by white working-class constituencies, the NP of the 1970s was controlled by an Afrikaner elite. This elite consisted of an increasing group of urban, middle-class professionals, who were more concerned about their own materialistic needs and comforts than about the altruistic ideals and the obligation to sacrifice and consolidate for the purpose of Afrikaner ethnicity. Consequently this group began to dominate the formulation of party policy, which was submitted for rubber stamping at NP congresses without criticism. Their identification with the Afrikaner people as an ethnic group weakened, while their identification with the idea of a multi-racial South African state grew. These factors, among others, caused the NP to become more and more estranged from Afrikaner working-class supporters and eventually the party forsook them.⁶

Union of Metalworkers 1980-1995. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011. For a discussion of the incipient intransigence in terms of black labour relations in the mining industry, see pp.15-17 of this article.

⁴ Lever, J.T. South African Trade Unionism in an era of Racial Exclusion. PhD thesis, UNISA, 1992, p.220.

⁵ Beinart, W. *Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.172-248.

⁶ Friedman, S. *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987, p.167; O'Meara, D. *The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-*

This article investigates the consequences of the recommendations made by the so-called Wiehahn Commission for white labour in the light of these developments as well as the (white) Mine Workers' Union's reaction to the recommendations.

2 Prologue to strike: The MWU's reaction to the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry

Against the background of a worsening economic climate the government appointed the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation on 21 June 1977. The chairperson was Nick Wiehann, a professor of labour relations at the University of South Africa, and in general the commission became known as the Wiehahn Commission. Its terms of reference were to examine all labour legislation and the whole system of labour relations in South Africa, and to make recommendations that would ensure future industrial peace.⁷ According to Douwes Dekker, the appointment of this commission was also the result of increasing pressure from organized commerce against discriminating and restrictive labour legislation, the rise of unrecognized black trade unions and the impossibility of suppressing them any longer, as well as increasing pressure from abroad that made it more and more difficult for South Africa to obtain foreign loans.⁸

The conservative, all-white South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU) was deeply concerned about these developments and would eventually react vehemently to the report and the reforms recommended by the Wiehahn Commission and their implications for white labour. Because of the protracted period of state protection since the promulgation of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, many white workers were totally unprepared for any socio-economic reforms or black advancement, which they saw as a direct threat to their own position. The recommendations of the Commission drew the battle-lines along which the MWU would attempt to thwart these reforms on every level of implementation. White workers resented the desegregation of public amenities and the possibility of having to work under black supervision. On the one hand, there were fears that they could be replaced by blacks or that their wage levels could be undermined by cheaper black labour. On the other hand, the numbers of white workers in relation to the total South African labour force were declining and therefore they became less valuable as a resource. Consequently their political and bargaining power to influence

1994. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996, p.165; Lipton, M. *Capitalism and Apartheid. South Africa, 1910-1986*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1989, pp.308,310; Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003, pp. 544,598,607,609; Beinart, Op.Cit. p. 248; Barnard, H.J. "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek, 1978-1982". MA-tesis, Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1991, pp.118; van Rooyen, J. *Hard Right. The New White Power in South Africa*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994, p.30; Cooper, C. The Mineworkers' Strike. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5, 3, October 1979, p.20; Usher, D. The strike that fell on deaf ears. *Sunday Tribune*, March 3, 1979, p. 20; "Moenie die Kiesers Vergeet!". *Oggendblad*, January 31, 1980, p.10.

⁷ Friedman, Op.Cit., pp.149-150; J.A. Slabbert en M.E. Steyn, *Vakbondwese en arbeidsverhoudinge*. Roodepoort: Digma-publikasies, 1987, p.21.

⁸ Douwes Dekker, L.C.G. Aspects of the labour market. In: Matthews, J. (ed.), *South Africa in the World Economy*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983, p.76.

labour legislation was also reduced.⁹ For instance, in 1960 there were 26 white holders of blasting certificates to every 1000 black workers in the gold-mining industry, whereas in 1979 there were 17. As a result of new designs of mining at the stope, improved drills, safer explosives, the use of more efficient fuses and other technical innovations, fewer rock-breakers were required by 1979 to supervise more black miners for a higher level of ore output than in 1960; 88 fewer white artisans were employed than in 1960, and 2,863 fewer semi- and unskilled white workers.¹⁰

There were also other factors that placed the MWU in a vulnerable position in terms of the expected Wiehahn recommendations. Firstly, the union's intransigence on maintaining white job reservation was increasingly undermined by artisan unions and other employee organizations in the mining industry, which had begun to accept black workers into their occupations since the 1970s. In terms of collective bargaining for the position of white workers, the MWU thus became increasingly isolated. A very important reason for the artisan unions' complaisance compared to the MWU's resolutely defiant attitude was that the positions of the technically well-qualified artisans were more secure against black encroachment than those of white miners, because such qualifications enabled these artisans to move freely between industries. They were well qualified, while miners required only Grade 8 school education and sixteen months' training. Much of their work consisted of supervising blacks, some of whom consequently became proficient without formal training and certificates. These positions occupied by white miners would be the first occupational level to which black workers could be promoted. The white miners, unlike artisans, had no trade affiliation to protect them and so they stood to lose more from reform than most other white workers. The threat to their position was more immediate and their fears about job security – in that they could be replaced and that their high earnings which depended upon barring black competition were in danger – were therefore rational. Because they did not have the same skills as artisans, they relied on protectionist legislation to defend their privileges.

The number of white miners in the mining industry also dwindled because of the unpopularity of mine work as an occupational choice among whites. The strong bargaining power of the MWU, which led to the relatively high wage levels of its members, was thus situated in statutory job reservation as entrenched by the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926. This protection could easily be eroded if white miners lost their occupational monopoly in underground mining positions. Because of economic growth and development after the Second World War, white miners constituted a declining percentage of the total South African labour force, while the entry of Africans and Coloureds into strategic skilled jobs further eroded their bargaining power. Therefore

⁹ Giliomee, H. *Afrikaner Politics 1977-87: from Afrikaner Nationalist Rule to State Hegemony*. In: Brewer, J.D. (ed.), *Can South Africa Survive? Five Minutes to Midnight*. Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1989, pp.118-119; Van Rooyen, Op.Cit., p. 31; Sparks, A. *The Mind of South Africa. The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1990, p.324.

¹⁰ Lever, J. and James, W.G. *Towards a Deracialised Labour Force: Industrial Relations and the Abolition of the Job Colour Bar on the South African Gold Mines*. Department of Sociology Occasional Paper No. 12, University of Stellenbosch, October 1987, pp.5, 30-31.

their industrial and political power declined accordingly. There was also a decline in the degree of mobilization of white labour, a consequence of both prosperity and complacency, and the centralized Industrial Council system, which discouraged activity at plant level and left much of the work of unionists to Industrial Council officials. The unions thus did not have tight control over developments at the shop-floor level, where informal deals were often struck between management and white workers. According to Lipton, this loss of control over the changing labour situation often meant that at the negotiating table the unions were faced with the *fait accompli* of black advance.

Unions such as the MWU were also weakened by their unduly close connection with the NP government, which led them to rely on political support rather than industrial organization. A tradition of unrestricted access to, and close alliance with, a pro-white labour government created a situation in which the MWU began to rely on political backing, rather than labour organization, to protect and promote its position. However, this open channel to the government – and even the Cabinet when they felt disgruntled at legislation pertaining to the mining industry – began to change. With the MWU's dwindling influence as a labour and political factor, the NP became less prone to take notice of the miners' complaints.¹¹ During Fanie Botha's term as Minister of Labour, the relationship between the Department of Labour and the MWU disintegrated to one of general and mutual distrust. A feeling of mutual aversion developed between Botha and Arrie Paulus, the MWU's unyielding and hard-line general secretary.¹² According to Botha, it was unacceptable for the MWU, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Mines, to be involved in an investigation by the Department of Labour that could have a profound consequence for their occupations.¹³

Against this background Paulus and the MWU were implacably opposed to change. Paulus refused to give evidence to the Wiehahn Commission because there were blacks on the commission and, from the moment it was appointed, he began to mobilize resistance to it. He threatened at a hearing of the commission that should any blacks be appointed over MWU members in the mining industry, South Africa "would know industrial peace no more" and that there would be "friction" and "labour unrest" as union members "would definitely not work under a non-white".¹⁴ When rumours began to emerge that the Wiehahn Commission was going to recommend the abolition of job

¹¹ Lipton, Op.Cit., pp.207,210-214,309; Cooper, Op.Cit., p.5; Wiehahn, N.E. *Die Volledige Wiehahn-Verlag*. Johannesburg en Kaapstad: Lex Patria Uitgewers, 1982), pp. 730-731,737; Hamilton, D.F. *The Role of the Mine Workers' Union in the Gold Mining Industry - A Present and Future Perspective*. MBL thesis, University of South Africa, 1977, pp.92,94; Giliomee, H. en H. Adam, *Afrikanermag. Opkoms en Toekoms* (Universiteitsuitgewers en Boekhandelaars (Edms) Bpk., Stellenbosch en Grahamstad, 1981, pp.202-203; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.163-164,166. For the MWU's close labour relations with the NP government see Visser, W. *Van MWU tot Solidariteit. Geskiedenis van die Mynwerkersunie, 1902-2002*. Pretoria: Solidariteit, 2008, Chapters 3 and 4.

¹² Private interview with Mr. P.J. Paulus, July 7, 2001; Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.32,34,114; Hamilton. Op.Cit., p. 27; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.164.

¹³ Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002.

¹⁴ Jacobsz, J.A. *Die Amptelike Standpunt van die Mynwerkersunie en die Standpunt van Mynwerkersunielede ten opsigte van Werkreservering*. Bedryfsosiologie Honneurs, PU vir CHO 1980, pp. 10,12-13,20; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.163; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.47,79; Alle Blanke Werkers moet Lid van een Vakbond wees. *Die Mynwerker*. February 7, 1979, p 3.

reservation, Paulus warned in no uncertain terms that such a move could cause a repetition of the violent miners' strike of 1922. According to Paulus, the MWU would never allow job integration and that the white miner would not "yield an inch" to such a development.¹⁵

3 The strike of March 1979

The gauntlet was finally thrown down on 22 February 1979, when MWU members at the obscure O'Okiep copper mine in the dry Namaqualand region of South Africa began to strike. Ostensibly the strike was about a wage dispute, but the underlying issue was the protection of white miners against a gradual relaxation of job reservation. The MWU miners at O'Okiep disputed the transfer of three Coloured artisans to posts which, according to the job reservation regulations of the Industrial Conciliation Act, were allocated to whites. Soon after the outbreak of the strike, however, the O'Okiep mine management dismissed all the striking workers on the grounds that the MWU's demands were contradictory to the company's policy of eliminating racial discrimination. On 6 March 1979, the MWU head office reacted by announcing a country-wide sympathy strike of white miners on platinum, gold and coal mines in solidarity with the dismissed mine workers of the O'Okiep mine. Approximately 9,000 of the MWU's 16,800 members took part in the strike, which spread to about 70 mines.

In anticipation of the findings and recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission, this country-wide strike thus served as a catalyst for the mobilization of white miner protest to warn the government of the consequences of the possible abolition of job reservation. Clearly the Minister of Labour's assurances that the MWU would be consulted if any changes were to occur in the existing labour dispensation did not convince them. Even the Chamber of Mines was of the opinion that the strike was not directed in the first instance against the employers but against the government. However, the Chamber regarded the strike as illegal, because the MWU had not announced its resolve to strike according to the procedures of the Industrial Conciliation Act. Therefore, in terms of the Chamber's agreement with the MWU that all contracts would automatically be terminated at the outbreak of any strike action, the strikers were dismissed accordingly and their accumulated benefits were forfeited. Should the strike continue, strikers would also have to evacuate any homes belonging to mining companies within seven days.¹⁶

¹⁵ Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.45,57; Paulus, P.J. Min Fanie Botha: Sê aan Werkers of die Berig waar is!, p. 1, Swart vakbonde gaan erken word berig Die Vaderland, p.3 and MWU sal nooit brood uit wit monde laat neem, p.6 in *Die Mynwerker*. March 7, 1979.

¹⁶ Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.4,6-7,9-11; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.83-84,114,117; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.164; Lang, J. *Bullion Johannesburg. Men, Mines and the Challenge of Conflict*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers,

There were also other factors which doomed the strike to failure. Although there is conflicting evidence as to the status of the strike and the motives behind it, and whether it was spontaneous industrial action or not,¹⁷ it seems apparent that the nature and reasons for the strike were not known to the rank and file members of the MWU and no strike ballot was held beforehand. Neither was the Council of Mining Unions, a joint body representing all the employee organizations in the gold mines, informed about or consulted on any resolve to strike. It seems that there were even cases of pickets intimidating those miners who wanted to return to work as early as 9 March 1979. The MWU executive also threatened to suspend union members who wanted to resume work before the dispute was settled. Both the Chamber of Mines and the MWU made various claims and counter-claims about the number of strikers to prove its success or failure, and to advance their own image among the miners in this way. On the gold mines alone, the absentee figure was between 60% and 80%. The Chamber, however, made use of the Underground Officials Association (UOA) artisans who were not members of the MWU to fill certain positions held by the strikers in order to minimize as much as possible any decrease in production for the duration of the strike.

In the meantime Fanie Botha, the Minister of Labour, refused several requests by Paulus calling on the Department of Labour to intervene in the dispute. He declared that the government would not interfere and that the employers and employees should resolve the dispute among themselves, as the Minister regarded it as a domestic affair. Consequently, a motion of no confidence in Botha was passed at a meeting of miners in the mining town of Rustenburg. The MWU's efforts to arrange an interview with Prime Minister John Vorster were equally unsuccessful. The Chamber was also resolute in its resolve that no negotiations could be resumed unless the strikers were prepared to resume work again. By 13 March 1979, a constant stream of miners was applying for reinstatement in their posts. In the light of all these factors, the MWU executive decided by 17 votes to 2 to call the strike off and on 14 March the strikers began to return to work. According to Paulus, the MWU executive took the decision at the request of the Minister of Labour. The Chamber of Mines, though, claimed that the union called the strike off because only 40% of the miners were still on strike by 13 March.¹⁸

Press views on the strike were that the miners' failure to challenge the state's new labour dispensation was the result of "weak leadership" by Paulus and the MWU executive, because they over-estimated white miners' willingness to strike at all costs on the principle of job reservation. In this regard the flaws in the MWU's strategy to try and

1986, p.469; Paulus, P.J. Wat het op O'Okiep gebeur voordat lede daar besluit het om te staak?. *Die Mynwerker*. March 21, 1979, p.3; Strike hits mines. *The Star*. March 7, 1979; 9000 se werk in gedrang. *Die Transvaler*. March 8, 1979.

¹⁷ See Visser. Op.Cit., pp.236-237.

¹⁸ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30, 1979, p.23; Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002; Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.8-18,21-23,25; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.79,84-86; Lang. Op.Cit., p.469; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.164-165,177; Coetzee, J.H. Mynstaking: Deur 'n raaisel. *Woord en Daad*, 200, April 1979, p.2; Mynvakbonde-Raad wis niks van Staking. *Hoofstad*. March 8, 1979, p.1; Usher, D. The strike that fell on deaf ears. Op.Cit., p.20.

protect white workers against a change in labour policy were exposed.¹⁹ According to Cooper, by using strike action, Paulus tried to demonstrate that the white miner was irreplaceable for the mining industry and that production would be seriously affected without them. She also concurs with Lipton that, in the light of the increase of black miners' competence levels, white miners' fears that eventually they could be replaced as a result of pressure by the mining houses were real. Ironically, the strike made the Chamber of Mines realize that a white work stoppage created an opportunity for training blacks in skilled mining tasks such as blasting. It also seems as if there was dissatisfaction among the miners about the MWU executive's handling of the strike. MWU membership on the O'Okiep mine also fell dramatically from 223 to 52 after the strike. Many miners were simply not prepared to lose benefits such as subsidized housing on the mines.²⁰ This view was confirmed by Peet Ungerer, who succeeded Paulus as MWU general secretary. Ungerer acknowledged that the fear of hardship and hunger among the wives and families of those men who were on strike put tremendous pressure on the executive to call it off.²¹ Barnard also claims that the outcome of the strike damaged the image of Paulus and the MWU among white miners.²²

With their refusal to intervene, the Minister of Labour and the government indicated that they would not tolerate illegal lightning strikes in the mining industry and that they were even prepared to prevent such occurrences in the future by means of legislation. In a speech in Parliament, Botha warned Paulus not to create his own form of "mine politics". According to O'Meara, Friedman and Lipton, the failed miners' strike of 1979 was another indication of the changed relations and growing divide that appeared between the interests of the state and those of white workers, and of the schisms that began to appear in Afrikaner politics since the founding of the right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party or HNP (Reconstituted National Party) in 1969. Throughout the 1970s the NP government moved further away from its former white working-class supporters and closer to the business sector. White union demands for protection and higher pay stood in the way of economic growth and the government now preferred growth. The fact that certain sectors of the white labour movement, in contrast to the MWU, adopted a more flexible approach to controlled reform of the labour dispensation also made it easier for the government to implement a labour policy that the union tried to oppose. In this regard, the UOA's willingness to do some of the work of the strikers during the dispute contributed towards undermining the strike effort. Thus the failure of the 1979 strike emboldened the Chamber and the pro-labour reform mining unions. The UOA agreed to phase out job reservation protecting its members, provided it could enroll blacks moving into the jobs concerned. In 1982 the all-white Council of Mining Unions was disbanded

¹⁹ Groot fiasco. *Beeld*. May 31, 1979, p.6; Mislukte Staking. *Oggendblad*. March 15, 1979, p.12; Staking misluk. *Die Burger*. March 15, 1979, p.14; Lessons from the Strike. *The Natal Mercury*. March 16, 1979, p.10; Usher, D. The Strike that fell on deaf ears. *Op.Cit.*, p.20.

²⁰ Cooper. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 2,4,17-18,20-25; Lipton. *Op.Cit.*, p.208. See also MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 29-30, 1980; O'OKiep-Bestuurder wil van die MWU ontslae raak. *Die Mynwerker*. April 18, 1979, pp.1-2; van Loggerenberg, J. Ek voel slegste oor Paulus se hou na my. *Die Transvaler*. May 23, 1979.

²¹ Private interview with Mr W. Ungerer, July 2, 2001.

²² Barnard. *Op.Cit.*, pp.79-80,87-88,116.

in favour of a confederation including multi-racial unions, thus further isolating the MWU.²³

As this strike was an industrial action launched entirely by white miners in an effort to protect and maintain white job reservation and white privileges in the mining industry, the position of black miners during the strike comes to mind. As mentioned before, UOA artisans were willing to do some of the strikers' work "in order to keep the industry going for the good of the country". The Chamber of Mines contended throughout that the strike had not affected production significantly due to this aid and the general efforts of the miners, both black and white, who remained at work. Throughout the years, black miners had picked up skills "unofficially" on the job as well as through official training. According to Cooper, the maintenance of production was no doubt due to this factor also. However, despite the Chamber's claims those miners who remained at work were pushed to their limits and development as well as production were affected negatively during the strike.²⁴

There were various reasons for the inertia towards black unionization at the time of the release of the Wiehahn recommendations and the white miners' strike of 1979. The Chamber of Mines and the white mining unions were reluctant to contribute towards a climate conducive to the establishment of trade unions for black miners. No trade union for black miners existed to argue their case at the Wiehahn Commission's hearings. The Chamber of Mines assumed the responsibility of informing the commission what it should do in the best interest of black mineworkers. Mining companies such as the Anglo American Corporation and Johannesburg Consolidated Investment insisted that there was no possibility of any black mineworkers' union emerging in the near future and that when it did, it would begin at mine level. The big mining companies rather advised the continuation of controlled mine-level liaison and works committees.

The Wiehahn Commission was enthusiastic to the idea of establishing an industrial council where bargaining rights for black employees could take place. Only registered unions, however, could participate so that they were dominated by the white unions and could remain that way because the existing memberships had the right to veto new applications. Without different constitutions, the white mining unions could prevent a black mineworkers' union from ever becoming a member of an industrial council for the mining industry in the event that one was established. Neither the Chamber nor the white mining unions were impressed with this proposal and took no action to implement it.²⁵

The mines were able to adopt this stance partly because they were not subject to the same pressures for black unionization as those in secondary industry. Because all but a handful of their workers were migrants, housed in compounds on mine property ruling

²³ O'Meara, D. *Forty Lost Years. The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996, p.130; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.164-165; Lipton. Op.Cit., p.208.

²⁴ Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.12,22-23.

²⁵ Allen, V.L. *The History of the Black Mineworkers In South Africa. Vol. II, Dissent and Repression in the Mine Compounds 1948-1982*. Keighley: The Moor Press, 2003, pp.451-452,455.

out any access by union organizers to these hostels or workplaces, the mines had been able to exercise tight control over their workforce. A further factor was the relative white monopoly on both artisan and skilled production jobs in the mines. It also ensured that black mineworkers would remain relatively unskilled and thus easily replaceable if they attempted to strike.²⁶

The Wiehahn Commission also proposed various possibilities of black representation but each one was to be a management creation into which black mineworkers were fitted rather than independent black unions free of restrictions and managerial control. The commission concentrated on mine-level committees as the most suitable form of organization.²⁷ Against the background of a lack of any labour representation in the mining industry by 1979, the position of black mineworkers was quite precarious. Eventually however, even the more conservative members of the Chamber of Mines agreed that some form of effective communication between workers and local management was absolutely essential to quiet the dissent that kept surfacing and interfering with gold production. Thus, in 1982, the Chamber decided to grant access to unions who wished to recruit black mineworkers. As a consequence, the black National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), with Cyril Ramaphosa as general secretary, was launched in August 1982. The NUM applied for access to mines and was granted it, thus becoming the first independent black union in the mining industry since 1946.²⁸

4 Futile resistance to the inevitable: The MWU's reaction to the findings and the recommendations of the Wiehahn Report

According to Barnard, the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission and the government's subsequent adoption of its recommendations – *inter alia* to abolish job reservation and to legalize black trade unions – were the most important factors in the eventual rupture of the ties between the MWU and the NP. The political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour reform was the loss of political support from the MWU and the white workers. After the release of the recommendations, the estrangement between the MWU and the NP government became complete and irreversible.²⁹ Although the gist of the recommendations of Part 1 of the Wiehahn Commission had been anticipated by the MWU to be negative on issues such as job reservation, its endorsement by the government still came as a shock. Suddenly white workers would no longer be able to rely on state protection of their jobs.³⁰

²⁶ Friedman, S. Chamber of Mines' Policy and the Emerging Miners' Unions. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8, 5, April 1983, pp.27-28.

²⁷ Allen. Op.Cit., pp.456-457.

²⁸ Allen, V.L. *The History of the Black Mineworkers In South Africa. Vol. III, The Rise and Struggles of the National Union of Mineworkers 1982-1994*. Keighley: The Moor Press, 2003, pp.91,100; Dunbar Moodie, T. *Going for Gold. Men, Mines and Migration*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994, p.249; Friedman, S. "Chamber of Mines' Policy and the Emerging Miners' Unions". Op.Cit., p.29.

²⁹ Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.35,66.

³⁰ Giliomee en Adam, *Afrikanermag*. Op.Cit., p.203; Lipton. Op.Cit., p.322.

Spokespersons for the MWU vilified and lambasted the findings and recommendations and the union declared its outright rejection of the Wiehahn report in its entirety. For Paulus it meant “suicide” for the white worker and he regarded the recommendations as “the greatest act of treason against the white workers of South Africa since [the strike of] 1922”. Paulus stated that the “so-called guarantees” which promised to protect the white workers were rather “gradual arsenic poisoning”, because they eroded their positions so slowly that they would not notice it. To him the amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1979, which legalized trade union membership of black migrant workers who had permanent residence rights in “white” South Africa, was a “sugaring of the arsenic pill”. Even before the report was released, Paulus threatened that the union would not budge on labour equality in the mining industry and that no black worker “would take bread from the mouth of a white miner”. Fanie Botha, the Minister of Labour, was accused of breaking his promises to consult with white workers before considering any changes to labour legislation.³¹

Part 6 of the Wiehahn report was released on 30 September 1981 and dealt specifically with legislation regarding relations in the mining industry. It confirmed the MWU’s “worst fears”, as the union’s president, Cor de Jager, put it. The term “scheduled person” in the wording of the 1965 Mines and Works Act was replaced with “competent person”, thus implying that black miners would in future also be able to obtain blasting certificates.³² Lipton, Lang, Friedman and Hamilton, however, concur that, despite the MWU’s lament that the Wiehahn recommendations had abolished job reservation, the union succeeded in keeping the colour bar intact on the mines until as late as 1987, because of its pervasive influence in the mining industry, its persistent opposition to the encroachment on job reservation, and their awareness of the government’s wariness of this situation.³³

Obviously a time lapse occurred between the publication of the Wiehahn recommendations and parliamentary White Papers on labour relations and the actual passage and implementation of new labour legislation. Therefore Paulus and the MWU tried to play their cards at each stage in order to disrupt the process. The MWU made an effort to rally the South African Confederation of Labour (SACLA), a conservative umbrella body representing pro-segregationist unions at the Wiehahn hearings, to endorse a report by Paulus which called for the banning of black unions, a crackdown on black strikers and tougher job reservation. But the white railway unions, who supported government policy, threatened to leave SACLA if Paulus’s plan was adopted so it was

³¹ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, May 15, 1979, p.1; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 29-30, 1980, pp.1-4,22,25; MWU sal nooit brood uit wit monde laat neem. *Die Mynwerker*. March 7, 1979, p.6; Paulus, P.J. Wiehahn-Arseenpil” slegs tydelik bietjie versuiker. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1979, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Wanneer Regering sê nee – Pasop!. *Ibid.*, November 26, 1980, p.1; Paulus, P.J., Die Grootste Verraad teenoor Blanke Mynwerkers!. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1979, pp.1-2; Paulus, P.J. Min. Fanie Botha het geen Simpatie met Mynwerkers. *Ibid.*, May 30, 1979, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Paulus antwoord Volksraadslid oor Wiehahn-verslag. *Ibid.*, September 19, 1979, pp.1-3.

³² Wiehahn. *Die Volledige Wiehahn-Verslag*. Op.Cit., pp.740-765; Lang. Op.Cit., p.471; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., p.173.

³³ Lipton. Op.Cit., pp.63,208; Lang. Op.Cit., p.471; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., pp.167,173; Hamilton. Op.Cit., pp.28,79.

shelved. Eventually SACLA lost its influence with the government and, by the mid-1980s, was a little noticed oddity.³⁴

Another MWU strategy to try and thwart the government's implementation of labour reforms was to extend its scope by recruiting members beyond the ranks of mine workers especially among members of white unions who did not feel at home any longer in the new racially integrated labour circumstances. The idea was that the MWU would become the mother union and home for all resentful and aggrieved white workers.³⁵ Recruiting was done in an organized way through the appointment of liaison officers who recruited new members for the MWU in other industries.³⁶ As a first step the union targeted steel and electricity workers at Iscor and Escom and in March 1983 opened its first office outside the mining industry in the industrial town of Vanderbijlpark. As part of a recruitment drive, *Die Mynwerker*, the union's official mouthpiece, advertised the benefits of membership and presented the MWU as being "the last sanctuary of white workers". Eventually membership applications were received from workers on Iscor plants in Pretoria and Newcastle, the Modderfontein dynamite factory, the Sasol plants at Secunda and from workers in industries at Sasolburg, Middelburg and Witbank. Scores of workers from Iscor power stations in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) also joined the union.³⁷ And an increasing number of white workers from trades in industries such as steel and metal, electricity, chemicals, wood, printing, plastics, food, building, engineering and explosives became members.³⁸ Hence, at the 1983 general council meeting the MWU president could report that the union's membership has increased approximately by 20% in that year.³⁹

³⁴ Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., pp.165-166,177.

³⁵ Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.52,56-58,64; Wat ons aanbied aan blanke werkers wat by MWU beskerming soek. *Die Mynwerker*. September 13, 1978, p.4; Ons roep alle blanke werkers op Vanderbijlpark. *Ibid.*, October 11, 1978, pp.1,3; 1000 Staalwerkers gereed om by MWU aan te sluit. *Ibid.*, November 22, 1978, p.1; Alle Blanke Werkers moet lid van een Vakbond wees. *Ibid.*, February 7, 1979, p.3; MWU werf wyd vir een groot vakbond. *Beeld*. January 29, 1981, p.5.

³⁶ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 27-28, 1981, p.12; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 25-26, 1983, p.20; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit. p.176; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.60-61; Private interview with Mr. P.J. Paulus, July 3, 2001.

³⁷ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, 27-28.1.1981, p.12; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.22; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, June 23, 1982, p.1; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.62,66; Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.5-6; Paulus, P.J. Kragwerkers word lede van MWU. *Die Mynwerker*. February 25, 1981, pp.1,7; Ons open kantoor op Vanderbijlpark. *Ibid.*, February 2, 1983, p.2; Baie nuwe lede in Vaal-Driehoek. *Ibid.*, June 8, 1983, p.3; Paulus, P.J. Mynwerkersunie 'n toevlugsoord vir blanke werkers. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1983, p.1; 400 Ambagsmanne en Myners van Sasol Secunda nou lede van M.W.U. *Ibid.*, August 31, 1983, p.4; Paulus, P.J. Die Mynwerkersunie se voordele bly verreweg die beste. *Ibid.*, September 28, 1983, p.3; Paulus, P.J. Met 400 lede by Secunda vorder onderhandelings met Sasol fluks. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1983, p.5; Paulus, P.J. Ons praat met ons lede by Yskor en Modderfontein. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1983, p. 5; de Villiers, R. Miners' union spreads its wings. *Rand Daily Mail*. February 10, 1981, p.2.

³⁸ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.22; Paulus, P.J. Meer lede: MWU op pad na 'n blink toekoms! *Die Mynwerker*. August 22, 1984, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Ons groei van krag tot krag! *Ibid.*, January 25, 1985, p.1; Jaaroorisig deur Paulus. *Ibid.*, February 8, 1985, p.4.

³⁹ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.7; Cor de Jager lewer staatsmansrede voor kongres van die MWU. *Die Mynwerker*. February 8, 1984, p.5.

In political terms the MWU under the Paulus administration would, for the first time since the period of militant strikes in the 1910s and 1920s, begin to oppose the governing party and provide moral support to right-wing opposition parties. A disillusioned De Jager reproachfully declared in his presidential address that “the National Government of 1981 is indeed not the same as the National Party we helped to bring to power in 1948”.⁴⁰

By implementing the Wiehahn recommendations the government could eventually not escape the political counter-reaction among white workers and in particular those who were members of the MWU. For Arrie Paulus the final break between the MWU and the NP had already taken place on 5 May 1979, when he returned from a meeting with Fanie Botha (then Minister of Manpower) in Pretoria because the government’s new labour policy, as recommended by the Wiehahn Commission, was not acceptable to the union. But this schism left the MWU without a political guardian or parliamentary representation.⁴¹

The MWU therefore gave moral and electoral support to the HNP in the by-elections of 1979 and the general election of 1981. In NP-controlled constituencies where white miners formed a large portion of the electorate, these elections served as political barometers of white counter-reaction at a time when the contents and implications of the Wiehahn report were still fresh in people’s minds. For both the MWU and the HNP reciprocal moral support had practical advantages. Since the HNP broke away from the NP, the party showed few signs of growth, because the South African political situation was turning away from racist Verwoerdian policies. The white miners’ grievances coincided with those of the HNP regarding the dismantling of apartheid. The MWU offered the party the ideal opportunity to expand its membership as the HNP was the only political party to fully support the abortive miners’ strike of March 1979. The HNP offered protection to the white worker and saw the abolition of job reservation as a move by the mine owners to increase their profits by employing cheap black labour.⁴² Although the NP retained the mining seat of Randfontein in the by-election of 1979, the election results indicated a marked swing to the right in what was regarded as a strong anti-government protest vote against the Wiehahn recommendations.⁴³

In the mining constituency of Rustenburg, the home of MWU president Cor de Jager, the electoral swing towards the right was even more phenomenal and the NP won the seat only by a small majority of 846 votes over the HNP. And in the 1981 general election, De Jager stood as HNP candidate in the mining constituency of Carletonville. The HNP, aiming to become the white workers’ new political guardian, vowed to protect their interests but, surprisingly, lost to the NP again as a result of internal strife and an

⁴⁰ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 27-28, 1981, pp.1-2,4,8-9.

⁴¹ Barnard. *Op.Cit.*, pp.65-66,78-80,92-93,114; Hamilton. *Op.Cit.*, p.44; Yudelman. *Op.Cit.*, p.269; Staking. *Rapport*. March 11, 1979; Don’t flinch at the Rightwing threat. *Rand Daily Mail*. May 18, 1979, p.10.

⁴² Barnard. *Op.Cit.*, p.93; Cooper. *Op.Cit.*, p.15; Coetzee, J.H. Mynstaking: Deur ‘n spiel in ‘n raaisel. *Woord en Daad*, 200, April 1979, p.2; Private interview with Mr. C. de Jager, January 22, 2004.

⁴³ Barnard. *Op.Cit.*, pp.65-66,78-80,92-94,114; D. Yudelman. *Op.Cit.*, p.269.

ineffective election campaign and strategy.⁴⁴ O'Meara, Bekker and Grobbelaar argue that material considerations also played a role in the election outcomes. According to these analysts, the Afrikaner working class realized that the HNP, despite its pro-white ideology, still did not possess the means to increase their economic wellbeing. As long as the economy, managed politically by the NP, would continue to raise their standards of living, the majority of these workers would only symbolically acknowledge the HNP's warnings that the Nationalists "betrayed and sold them" to the Afrikaner and English capitalist class. The HNP failed to see the changing material and structural circumstances that were taking place in South Africa, especially as far as the budding materialism and middle-class norms in Afrikaner society were concerned.⁴⁵

The clearest indication of the MWU's anti-government political position, however, was the moral support the union's leadership gave to the new right-wing Conservative Party (CP) since its founding in 1982. This party was founded in reaction to the NP's liberal reformist policies on racial issues in South Africa. Soon after its establishment Paulus indicated that the MWU agreed with party leader Andries Treurnicht's criticism of the "Botha-Wiehahn labour policy" and that they supported the CP leader's point of view. The union's attitude towards the NP steadily chilled even further and even turned to hostility.⁴⁶ Therefore it came as no surprise when Paulus was approached to contest the Carletonville seat for the CP in the general election of 1987. Although he won by a narrow margin of only 98 votes, this victory constituted a huge swing towards the right in mining constituencies, as had been the case in 1979 and 1981. Paulus succeeded in turning the NP's majority of 3 000 votes in the previous general election into a CP gain.⁴⁷

However, it became clear that in terms of influencing the country's labour agenda in a significant way, white labour had become a spent force. The events of the 1970s and 1980s generally confirmed the long decline of white miners as an influential political and economic entity. By 1976, according to statistics of the Chamber of Mines, the (non-unionized) officials' associations on the mines had almost as many members as all the white unions put together – 18,815 compared to 18,994 unionized men. Of the union men, less than half – 9,409 – were MWU members.⁴⁸ The MWU could also not escape the political ferment in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1987 the Mines and

⁴⁴ Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.98-100,104; Yudelman. Op.Cit., pp.264,269; O'Meara. Op.Cit.,p.165; Ries, A. en E. Dommissie. *Broedertwis. Die Verhaal van die 1982-skeuring in die Nasionale Party*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Bpk., Kaapstad, 1982, pp.83,96.

⁴⁵ O'Meara. Op.Cit., pp.165,310; Bekker, S. and Grobbelaar, J. The white right-wing movement in South Africa: before and after the May 1987 election. In: van Vuuren, D.J. (eds.) *et al, South African Election 1987. Context, Process and Prospect*. Pinetown: Owen Burgess Publishers, 1987, p.71.

⁴⁶ MWU Archives, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive, January 24, 1983, p.2; Ons is reg vir praat", sê Arrie Paulus aan dr Treurnicht. *Die Mynwerker*. July 1, 1981, p.1; Ries en Dommissie. Op.Cit., pp.96,108-187; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.118-119.

⁴⁷ MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, January 26, 1987, p.11; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, April 29, 1987, pp.1,12-13; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, May 27, 1987, pp. 1,13-14; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, June 24, 1987, pp. 1,14; Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee, April 29, 1987, pp. 3-4; Private interview with Mr PJ Paulus, July 3, 2001.

⁴⁸ Yudelman. Op.Cit., p.269.

Works Amendment Act (the actual implementation of Part 6 of the Wiehahn recommendations) was promulgated. This signaled the final scrapping of job reservation in the mining industry and enabled black miners to enter job categories previously reserved for whites.⁴⁹ Clearly, the writing was on the wall for apartheid in the sphere of labour in general.

5 Conclusion

All things considered, the mining strike of 1979 was a last desperate, but futile, effort by white miners to obstruct a major change in the South African labour dispensation based on apartheid legislation. Arrie Paulus was well-known for using brinkmanship tactics⁵⁰ to force concessions from the Chamber of Mines and the government in order to protect white workers' privileges, but the 1979 strike backfired on the MWU hardliners. White workers' resistance to erosion of the job colour bar was less effective and less fierce than expected.⁵¹

The report of the Wiehahn Commission was a bold move by the NP government to test the white electorate's readiness to move away from discriminatory practices in South Africa. Although the Commission's report did not bring an end to the official policy of apartheid, the implementation of its recommendations to end discriminatory practices in the field of labour represents a clear watershed in South African politics. Labour reform was thus the first legislative initiative taken by the white minority government towards the eventual dismantling of apartheid. The failure of the 1979 mining strike and the results of the political elections which followed in its wake proved that the claim by right-wing political parties – that the NP government was acting against the interests of the majority of white South Africans and therefore no longer represented them politically – was grossly exaggerated.

In the general election of 1989 (and also in the referendum of 1992) a majority of the white electorate gave the NP a mandate to negotiate a political settlement with the ANC. This was followed by President F.W. de Klerk's announcement in Parliament on 2 February 1990 that all anti-apartheid political organizations and exiles were to be unbanned. These negotiations led to the establishment of a democratic political dispensation from 27 April 1994 and the institution of a de-racialized South African Constitution in 1996.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ungerer, W. My siening van die MWU. MWU Memorandum, Carletonville, 2001.

⁵⁰ Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., p.164.

⁵¹ Lipton. Op.Cit., p.212.

⁵² See Beinart. Op.Cit., pp.252-304.