

# AVENGE THE MART

## COALBROOK DISASTER

Four hundred and thirty five miners have been trapped and killed 600 feet underground at Coalbrook in the Union of South Africa—the worst disaster in the history of South African mining. The rock-fall which sealed them in is officially described as an “accident”. Yet every miner who has ever worked underground will know that even in a dangerous occupation like mining, ‘accidents’ on this vast scale are almost invariably the result of some human element—of callous disregard for the safety of the lives of working men, or of criminal greed for profit at any cost. To this general rule, the Coalbrook tragedy is no exception. Doubtless the caving of the roof was the result of tremendous natural forces, acting independently of men’s wishes; but equally doubtless, the scale of the disaster was the result of South Africa’s system of race and class oppression. Without apartheid things could not have happened as they did.

Consider the facts. The first rockfall took place at about 4.30 p.m. No one was killed or severely injured. While the rock still creaked and split, many of the African workers rushed from the underground shaft to the surface. They were ordered back to work. Those who protested or argued were given the South African Masters and Servants Act alternatives—obey or be arrested. Two who still refused steadily to return underground were arrested and locked up—to survive. 429 others were driven underground. At 6.30 the mine collapsed and buried them. No one escaped.

## NO MINERS’ UNION

Where else in the world could such a scene occur. Except perhaps in the fascist dictatorships of Spain and Portugal, everywhere the miners’ own representatives, their shop-stewards, their trade union officers would have entered upon the scene. Everywhere the trade union would have intervened between the management and the workers, between the time of the first collapse and the first return underground.

Not in South Africa. There is no trade union of African miners. The trade union that existed before the great miners’ strike of 1946 has been systematically smashed. Workers have been sealed off in the mine compounds from all outside influences by an army of private mining-company police. Union organisers and union members have been weeded out by a wide network of spies and informers, sacked and blacklisted. There is *no* trade union.

# S OF COALBROOK !

Nor is there any discussion ever between mine owners and African workers. There is no collective bargaining over wages, or conditions of work, or even over safety measures. Instead there are government appointed "Labour Officers"—allegedly to settle disputes between workers and the bosses. In practice their settlement measures are identical with those of the Verwoerd government; they order the workers to work, and whistle up the police at the first sign of refusal.\*

To complement this police-ridden regime, there are laws. The Gold Law prohibits the holding of meetings on any land proclaimed for mining purposes—inside or outside the companies private boundaries. The Bantu Labour Act makes striking a criminal offence for African workers. The Masters and Servants Act makes refusal to carry out any order of a boss a crime. The Native Labour Regulation Act makes any breach of contract between an indentured labourer and his boss—including failure to complete the full contract of 270 shifts a year—a criminal offence. In case this is not enough, African miners specifically are exempted from any compulsory determination of minimum wages by the Wages Board which operates in other industries. And they are exempted, specifically, from even the minimal unemployment insurance of other industries.

## "CIVILISED" LABOUR

What purpose can be served by such a massive repressive structure except the purpose of keeping wages as low as possible, almost on the 1930 level despite the astronomical rise in the cost of living? The African miner goes underground for 3/4 (three shillings and fourpence!) per shift, plus compound and food. Irrespective of length of service or experience or ability, he is virtually restricted to the work of unskilled labourer—and the wages of unskilled labourer. All skilled work—blasting, timbering, developing—is reserved exclusively for white miners by the Mines and Works Act. This is known as South Africa's "civilised labour policy".

"Civilised labour" is the other side of the coin—the white worker's side. The white workers have a trade union, tolerated, even encouraged by the bosses. By collective bargaining, the white workers have gained conditions and privileges miners in other countries may well envy—paid holidays, pension schemes, a forty

\* On the very day that rescue operations at Coalbrook were abandoned Labour Officials supervised the arrest of 175 African workers for the crime of striking for better pay in a Natal textile factory.

hour week, subsidised housing, stop-order system and a closed shop agreement. The pay for civilised labour is over £3 a shift. "Civilised" labour is permitted to strike—legally—though the trade union leaders have bargained that right away in exchange for privileges. There is always something to be paid for privileges. The white workers pay for theirs by supervising the black workers, by taking over on themselves some of the burdens of management, by becoming finally a wage-earning part of the management of Africans, hangers-on of the bosses. When black workers strike, the white workers' trade union takes it on itself to organise white scab labour "to keep the mines going". When the roof collapsed at Coalbrook, six white miners were underground to 'boss-up' as they call it in South Africa, 429 labourers. This is the civilised labour policy.

It pays dividends to everyone except the black miners. The gold and coal mines of South Africa are controlled by the same half-dozen "Groups"—sprawling combines of financial, industry and mining corporations producing dividends to shareholders in South Africa and abroad, particularly in Britain and America. Millions more are tucked away in balance sheets under headings like 'Reserve Account' or 'Appropriation Account'. The year's work by some 340,000 black miners, which produced profits of nearly £100 million, equal to £294 for each worker. During the same year, 733 African miners died in accidents, many more were injured.

Here, in the middle of the twentieth century, in the year 1960, the year of African independence, we have a picture of classic imperialism; a vast, multi-millionaire monopoly combine, financed and controlled largely from outside Africa, extracting basic raw materials from Africa, making super-profits from the poverty and high rate of exploitation of the black workers, closely allied with the apparatus of state, with influence in banking and industry till none can say where one begins and the other ends. This, in our age, in an anachronism, a hangover from the pirate days of late nineteenth and early twentieth century imperialism. This monopolist combine is the largest employer of labour in South Africa—probably in all Africa. It sets the pattern for wages and conditions of work in all other South African industries; it dominates the state itself, and relies on the apparatus of state-police, labour officials and "Bantu" administrators—to maintain its flow of profits. Its basis is—and can only be, the constant provision of a flow of cheap, docile, black labour. The South African state's first function is to ensure that such a constant flow is readily available, and to oversee and control it.

## **MINING THE BACKBONE**

South Africa's mining industry, then, is the backbone of the whole South African system of apartheid. And the state which

has grown up around it has become not only the most hated centre of racialism and reaction in South Africa but also a buttress of imperialism in Africa. When the imperialist authorities in Nyasaland forced the possibility of popular revolt, their first step was to ensure the readiness of South African troops to come to their aid. When the white settlers of the Central African Federation come face to face with the possibility of an African majority in the government, their first thought is to turn to the Union of South Africa for possible realignment against an independent Nyasaland or Northern Rhodesia. Thus South Africa becomes, more and more, the policeman of reaction for the whole continent.

The special feature of South African mining, which sets it apart from every other industry in the country—and for that matter in the whole of Africa—is that it is based not on South African labour, but relies heavily on “foreign” labour, recruited under contract from all parts of Africa. Today the majority of the industry’s labour force is recruited from other territories—from Angola and Portuguese East, from Tanganyika and Nyasaland, from Basutoland and Bechuanaland, from Uganda and Nigeria. Every year, almost a quarter of a million able-bodied males are drawn from their own territories to South African mines, thus depriving their own countries of their valuable labour and continuing the debilitating and wasting process by which the slave trade reduced Africa to inertia and backwardness.

A blanket of silence is drawn by the mining companies about this imported labour. No figures are revealed which will tell how many men there are at any time from each of the countries of Africa; no details are ever revealed of the arrangements between South Africa and other governments by which this traffic in men is controlled; no details are ever given of the conditions of pay and labour to which these men are subject. The tragedy at Coalbrook lifted a corner of that blanket. Of the 429 African dead, half came from the British Protectorate of Basutoland, half from Portuguese East Africa. For several days, neither the exact numbers of those trapped underground nor their names were known even to the mine owners themselves. Finally, two weeks after the disaster, a list of the dead was published, revealing that for many of the men only their Christian names were even recorded on the mine lists. No surnames were deemed necessary. In so far as the Portuguese workers are concerned, it is known that the convention regulating the recruitment from Portuguese territory places an obligation on the South African government to protect these workers from the influences of “communism”; in South Africa “communism” means everything from criticism of the ruling Nationalist government to trade-unionism and national liberation.

## **IMPORTED LABOUR**

When all Africa was under the control of imperialist administrations, it was understandable that the conditions under which

Africans were shipped to South African mines should be a matter of indifference. It cannot remain a matter of indifference today in countries where Africans have either achieved their independence, or participate in governments on the road to full independence. Even the fascist government of the Portuguese Empire, under pressure from public opinion, has been forced to take a critical view of conditions in South African mines, and to insist on its right to be represented at the inquiry which is to be held into the Coalbrook disaster. How much more attention should be paid by the Basutoland administration, now that the Basutoland Congress has won a majority of the elected seats? It is high time that throughout Africa the people's movements and the people's leaders press for an end to the recruitment of labour to South Africa, without a convention which guarantees those workers rights and liberties and conditions in keeping with a democratic, modern age.

In 1958, at the All-Africa People's Conference in Accra there was a decision taken to boycott South African goods as an act of solidarity with the South African people, and as a blow against this stronghold of reaction and race-hatred on the continent. But the key trade between South Africa and the rest of the continent is not in the export of consumers goods, but in the import of men. The key industry and prop of the South African system is not consumer-goods manufacturing, but mining. This the Accra Conference recognised, by adding to its boycott resolution a less publicised call to the independent states of Africa to develop their own economies, so that it will no longer be necessary for men from those countries to sign themselves on as labourers in the South African mines. This side of the boycott resolution, now repeated at the Tunis conference, is necessarily a task requiring time, and not capable of fulfilment overnight.

In the meantime, until it is possible to cut off the flow of indentured labour entirely, there is still much that Africa can do. It is possible, here and now, for the people of Africa to demand the publication of all agreements by which this trade is regulated; it is possible for the people of Africa to insist that—so long as recruiting continue—those who sign on be guaranteed civilised standards of work and wages, and fundamental rights to trade-union organisation and collective bargaining. And it is possible for the conscious and organised trade-unionists of Africa to set out to instil a militant trade-union spirit in all their countrymen who are headed for Africa, so that—while the traffic still continues—this annual flood of men to the gold and coal mines of South Africa will come as a source of strength and vigour to the people of South Africa, and not—as now—as a means for continuing their enslavement and holding their wages down to inhuman levels.

This at least Africa owes to the men who died at Coalbrook.