

## Chapter 5

# 'Digging a way into the working class': unemployment and consciousness amongst the Afrikaner poor on the Lichtenburg alluvial diamond diggings, 1926–1929<sup>1</sup>

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*... experience over many years has proved that the non-professional digger is not prepared to exchange an indolent, carefree existence for one demanding regular work under supervision.<sup>2</sup>*

Afrikaner proletarianisation has prompted a number of studies on the diamond diggers on the alluvial diggings near Lichtenburg.<sup>3</sup> These accounts draw on the classic exposition of impoverishment outlined in the path-breaking 1932 Carnegie Commission:

After an initial period of boom, the richer fields became more and more exhausted and many diggers who went there became further impoverished, and their families were all subject to the psychological influences of the general conditions of life on the diggings and the type of mentality which developed there.<sup>4</sup>

The commission's investigations concentrated on the collection of local case studies of poor white families, describing the social conditions on the diggings, the poverty and squalor of white digging families. They described the moral failings of 'the poor whites', their 'lack of initiative', and their failure to adapt to the 'progressive' spirit of modern industrial life. Grosskopf attributed their impoverishment, for example, to 'the whole atmosphere of the diggings, with their cosmopolitan population, their lack of community feeling or recognised moral standards, and their all-pervading sense of gambling, recklessness and instability ...'<sup>5</sup> And Wilcocks repeated the well-known aphorism about the poor whites' unwillingness to undertake manual labour:

... the digger ... carrying out his own operations, employing natives to do the hard manual work, was unwilling to surrender his position and mastership. The man who had formerly been an underdog felt that here 'he was his own master and not the rich man's dog'.<sup>6</sup>

The Carnegie investigators offer a superficial analysis of the historical process which created impoverishment on the diggings. They explain the success and failure of diggers purely in terms of market rationality and the economic resourcefulness of individual diggers. They do not explore the relationship between white poverty and the broader economic structure of the diggings. Class interests and class structure on the alluvial diggings, which this chapter contends are of vital importance in understanding the persistence of white poverty and the political consciousness of the diggers, have therefore remained unexplored. The explanation offered by the Carnegie Commission also reflected a belief about the involvement of the state with white poverty during the period of the Pact government. It is asserted that the Pact, which replaced the South African Party, was sympathetic to the needs of the Afrikaner rural poor in this period. This focus, it is implied, transcended the concern of the South African Party government with Afrikaner impoverishment. No evidence is offered of this benevolence however, and, as recent studies have suggested, the Pact was unable to mould the political economy in its own image, without an accommodation with capitalist interests in the market place.<sup>7</sup> This relationship has, as yet, not been explored for the alluvial diamond diggings.

This chapter explores the fortunes of the diamond diggers, therefore, by focusing on the themes of class structure, economic and class interests, and political mobilisation and consciousness amongst the most vulnerable and seemingly powerless section of the white digging community between 1926 and 1929.

## **The Lichtenburg alluvial diggings**

In January 1926 two Du Plessis brothers discovered diamonds whilst prospecting on the farm Klipbankfontein, twelve miles to the north of Lichtenburg, where they farmed. On Elandsputte, an adjoining farm, Dr Harold Harger, prospecting under contract with the landowner, Kosie Voorendyk, located one of the richest deposits of alluvial gravel in the sub-continent. This farm, situated on the so-called Klipveld – a barren, desolate and unproductive stretch of country separating the western Highveld from the rich Marico River valley – was unremarkable in appearance or agricultural potential and had been subdivided (in 1921) in an effort to sell it. But by August 1926 scarcely a farm in the Lichtenburg and adjoining Ventersdorp districts could be acquired whether it

carried gravel or not.<sup>8</sup> From this barren dusty corner of the Western Transvaal there sprang into being a local industry producing over a million carats of diamonds in 1926 and over two million carats in the following year. This represented a total money value of five million pounds. The new industry had its economic foundations firmly rooted in the world's demand for diamonds, and supported a local population of over 150 000 people.

From June 1926 till August 1927 forty-five public alluvial diamond diggings were proclaimed on seven farms in the Klipveld, and from January 1928 to December 1928 a further fifty proclamations followed on six farms.<sup>9</sup> For a brief moment the small village of Lichtenburg blossomed into the noisy hub of the alluvial diamond industry where 'everybody seemed to be making money'. These discoveries sparked off an astonishing local migration:

From all parts of the Transvaal, men, women and children, were wending their way to Elandsputte [the centre of the diggings] ... Many people are transporting their entire homes ... Cows, sheep, donkeys, goats and even pigs are being driven along behind the wagons – just like the moving of the tribes described in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Professional people, civil servants, white workers, and altogether the flotsam and jetsam of the towns and cities were drawn towards this vortex of the alluvial diamond world.<sup>11</sup>

An average of some 60 to 75 per cent of farmers from the Western Transvaal districts of Lichtenburg, Ventersdorp, Zeerust, Wolmaransstad and Potchefstroom trekked to these diggings in 1926, and farmers as a category constituted some 60 per cent of the total diggings population in 1927.<sup>12</sup> The unemployed from the Witwatersrand and the smaller Transvaal towns and villages constituted the next largest percentage (10 per cent) of white diggers. Professional diggers formed only the third largest portion of the population. The old established diggings on the Orange and lower Vaal rivers and at Bloemhof and Wolmaransstad were like cemeteries, 'the old guard' of diggers having trekked to Lichtenburg 'to the last man'.<sup>13</sup>

Voorendyk's farm, Elandsputte, formed the hub of the diggings:

It is here that all the diggers are congregated, living in their huts not far from the ground which has proven to be so rich in diamonds; here we have the Hatton Garden of the diggings; here we have the 'Piccadilly' – the street of shops and bars and cafes which runs along the edge of the ridge; here we have the police barracks and the magistrates court; here we have the pumping station ... which gives water to all the inhabitants of the diggings.<sup>14</sup>



The central feature of Elandsputte was the spacious square with its four cafes, a bioscope and dance halls, and many stores. All along the main street of the camp there were stores occupied by grocers, bakers, butchers, jewellers and watchmakers, clothing merchants, bootmakers and hairdressers. The township formed the social centre of the camp. Here the tempestuous diggers meetings were held, with the speakers addressing the milling crowds from the safety of a raised platform or the tailgate of the nearest truck.

The township at Elandsputte was the economic nucleus of the diggings. On Saturdays work ceased in the claims, and diggers flocked to the 'Piccadilly' – the diamond buyers' quarter of the camp – to dispose of the week's finds. This cash flowed out to the traders, merchants and hawkers:

Eloff Street shopkeepers would gnash their teeth in envy at the roaring trade done by the 250 traders who have set up their tin shops in the streets. There are traders of every conceivable kind, and each one appears to be prosperous ... Round the shops were hordes of white men and natives, eager to buy.<sup>15</sup>

The source of all the wealth on the diggings, though, was produced on the 45 foot square claims. Here labour commenced at sunrise and ceased at sunset, the long unending, monotonous process of digging, sieving and washing going on for hour after hour, from Monday to Friday. The descriptions of this largely unmechanised process takes us back to the 1870s and the working of the Kimberley mines:

... huge stones are hurled, laboriously and dangerously – only to be shovelled back when the space they occupy is required ... At others, picks rise and fall, wrestling with the solidly packed gravel and stones. Everywhere cradles are rocked and gravel and water carried to the puddling troughs. Puddle boys handling short wedge-shaped spades, combine gravel, sand and water into a mixture capable of passing through the revolving circular machines which separate and eject the valueless light pebbles from the 'heavy stuff' ...<sup>16</sup>

Lichtenburg's brief flowering attracted considerable commercial interest. The gamble of diamond digging provided quick and ready profits to the owners of the farms, the hotel and canteen keepers, the merchants and the diamond buyers. One digger cynically remarked that 'the owner of a proclaimed farm, the nearest hotel, the storekeepers, and the diamond buyers, in about that order named, are the only sure profit-makers from the gamble of diamond digging'.<sup>17</sup> The opportunity for diggers to accumulate capital was limited, and their capacity for independent economic activity was severely curtailed by a

capitalist class that owned the farms and held the commercial rights over trading, and hawking. It is to this class that we now turn.

## Capitalists on the diggings

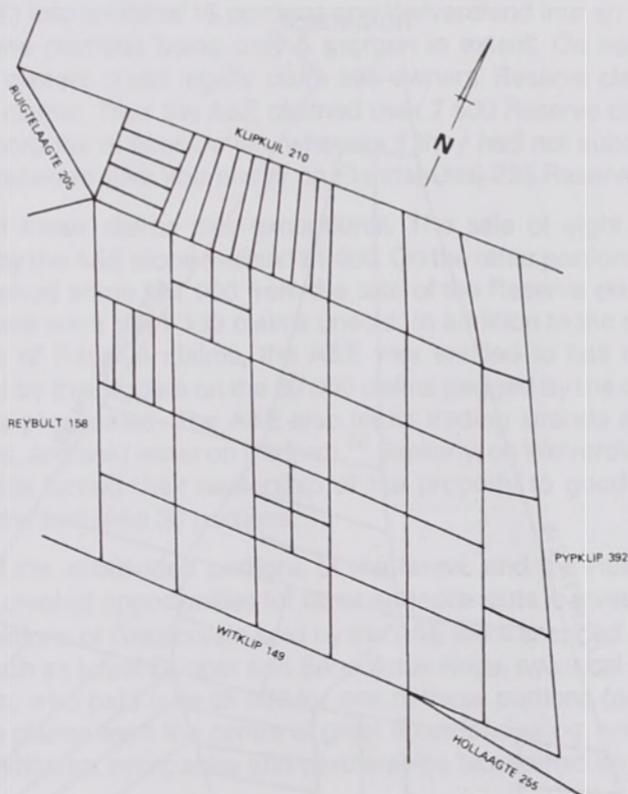
The landowners of the eight Lichtenburg farms on which alluvial diggings were proclaimed included four private owners and four companies. They were the first to extract a surplus from the diggers, who were the direct producers. As owners of property they were entitled to certain rights, including that of prospecting their property to prove the deposits, and the right to compensation following the public proclamation of their property (taken in the form of Reserve claims). In addition, the landowners retained their surface rights on the proclaimed farm, from which they received rent from the digging population for residing on the property, utilising the grazing, and drinking the water. Finally, all commercial rights on the property were held by the landowner, who could lease out trading stands on the property.

These property rights placed landowners in a good position. On Elandsputte, for example, Voorendyk sold his 235 Reserve claims to professional diggers at an average price of £35 per claim, as compared to the 5 shillings licence fee required for pegging a claim on the public areas of the farm. The population of 40 000 that congregated on Voorendyk's farm to rush the 7 000 public claims there made possible a second financial windfall, for merchants paid up to £100 per month for stands in the township. Finally, Voorendyk sold water on the farm at 4 pence per digger's barrel of 64 gallons and within six months he netted over £40 000 from this activity.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the owners of Uitgevonden (Bakerville) took full advantage of their property rights for financial gain. David Russell, a diamond buyer and speculator from Kimberley, and Henry Clarke, his partner, purchased the farm from A. W. Baker in June 1926 for £30 000 and in September 1926 they floated a public company, the Treasure Trove Diamonds Syndicate Limited (Treasure Trove), to work it. Their revenue from water sales alone realised £80 to £200 per day. They let their trading stands at prices ranging from £50 to £100 a month from which the company received over £3 000 in six months. In October 1926, just one month after proclamation, some 30 000 diggers and 50 000 black claim workers resided on Treasure Trove. Diggers pegged 10 000 claims at the rush and the company received a monthly revenue of 2s 6d from each claim. Treasure Trove was very successful, paying a dividend of 40 per cent from June 1926 to November 1927.<sup>19</sup>

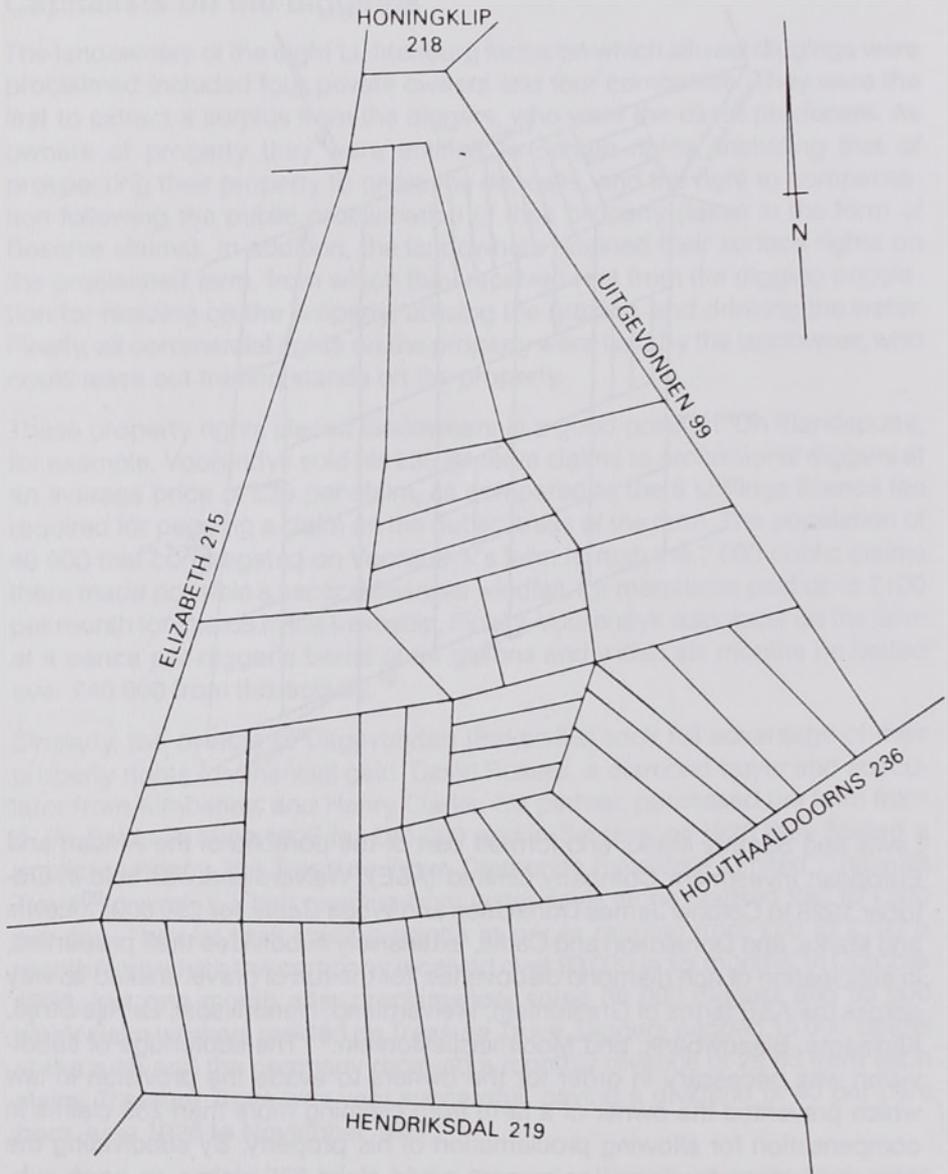
Yet the most dramatic examples of unfettered capitalist enterprise took place on the farms Grasfontein and Welverdiend. These farms were owned by Isaac

**Map 3: Welverdiend 249**  
**3 900 morgen, 187 roods**



Lewis and Sammy Marks and formed part of the portfolio of the African and European Investment Company Limited (A&E). Welverdiend was sold in October 1926 to Colonel James Donaldson and Woolf Carlis, for £30 000.<sup>20</sup> Lewis and Marks, and Donaldson and Carlis, extensively subdivided their properties, in anticipation of rich diamond discoveries, for the run of gravel snaked its way across the A&E farms of Grasfontein, Welverdiend, Hendriksdal, La Rijs Strijd, Kliplaagte, Blaauwbank, and Mooimeisjiesfontein.<sup>21</sup> The subterfuge of subdivision was necessary in order for the owners to evade the provision in law which prevented the owner of a farm from claiming more than 235 claims in compensation for allowing proclamation of his property. By subdividing the property *before* proclamation owners could claim 235 claims on *each* subdivided portion of their properties, as opposed to being satisfied with one grant of 235 Reserve claims.

**Map 2: Grasfontein 240**  
**3 315 morgen, 395 roods**



Grasfontein and Welverdiend proved to be the richest farms proclaimed at Lichtenburg and digging operations on them attracted the most intensive capitalist investment. Both farms were extensively subdivided, Grasfontein (in October 1926) into an initial 15 portions and Welverdiend into an amazing 30 portions, some portions being only 5 morgen in extent. On each of these portions the owners could legally claim 235 owners' Reserve claims and 60 discoverers' claims. Thus the A&E claimed over 7 500 Reserve claims on the subdivided portions of Grasfontein, whereas if they had not subdivided they would have received (like Voorendyk on Elandsputte) 235 Reserve claims.

The value of these claims was exceptional. The sale of eight portions of Grasfontein by the A&E alone realised £1 000. On the other portions of the farm the A&E received some £61 000 from the sale of the Reserve claims by April 1927, and there were still 1 133 claims unsold. In addition to the subdivisions and the sale of Reserve claims, the A&E was entitled to half of the claim licences paid by the diggers on the 60 000 claims pegged by the diggers after the farm was proclaimed. The A&E also let its trading strands at exorbitant monthly rates, and sold water on the farm.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, on Welverdiend Donaldson and Carlis turned their ownership of the property to good advantage, subdividing the farm into 30 portions.

The sales of the subdivided portions of the farms, and the Reserve claims themselves, created opportunities for other entrepreneurs to invest in digging. The eight portions of Grasfontein sold by the A&E were snapped up by eager investors, such as Israel Cooper and Benedictus Krige, two local Lichtenburg businessmen, who paid over £5 000 for one of these portions (portion 'E').<sup>23</sup> The Reserve claims were the centre of great financial dealing, and a veritable jungle of syndicates, companies and partnerships blossomed on them.

One of the most spectacular examples of this was seen on portion 'L' of Grasfontein, where a company called the Carrig Diamond Company Limited (Carrig) was floated on 1 November 1926 with nominal capital of £25 000 ('more than twice the required capital being offered within a few hours of its inception'). F. K. Webber, the chairman of Carrig, was the Government Surveyor at the Deeds Office at Pretoria.<sup>24</sup> The company was registered on 1 November 1926; ten days later the transfer of the property from the A&E to the Carrig was completed. On 15 November prospecting was begun. In December 1926 the Carrig declared a 50 per cent (10s) interim dividend. By the end of December Carrig's prospectors had found over 3 000 carats. The company then subdivided portion 'L' into a further six portions. Following the example of other companies, the Carrig allowed its prospectors first options to purchase the Reserve claims on these six new portions of the property. These prospectors put up over £13 000 in just four hours, the price per claim going

up to £1 000. By February 1927, the Carrig had sold 883 Reserve claims on portions 1 to 4 of the property (the original portion 'L') for £64 085. It kept the Reserve claims on portions 5 and 6 for itself, and diggers working these claims paid tribute (20 per cent of the total finds) to the company. The Carrig also leased the water rights on the property, and trading sites on each of the subdivided portions. In March 1927, the property was proclaimed, and 4 000 claims were pegged, of which the company received a 2s 6d monthly fee per claim. Carrig declared five interim dividends within the first six months of its operations, a return of over 475 per cent per share, or £4 15s returned on a £1 share. Very soon the company began to expand, purchasing other alluvial properties — in March 1927, for example, they bought the farm De Paarl in the Lichtenburg district immediately subdividing it into nine portions, and began prospecting operations there.<sup>25</sup>

Other investors soon snapped up claims on the Carrig's property on Grasfontein. The Reserve claims on portions 1 to 4 were sold to three syndicates and two companies. One of these, the Eldorado diamond Company Limited (Eldorado) represented a consortium of Johannesburg businessmen 'well-connected in mining circles'. It purchased 150 of these claims, working them through the services of tributers. So successful was the Eldorado that these same businessmen floated another syndicate to purchase 97 more of the Carrig's Reserve claims.<sup>26</sup>

On Welverdiend the position was, if possible, as frenetic. Donaldson and Carlis floated two companies, the Welverdiend Diamonds Limited with a capital of £70 000 (the second largest company on the diggings), and the Lichtenburg Diamond Gravels Limited, to take up the 30 subdivided portions of the farm. These two companies employed the services of 349 prospectors (who in turn employed their own diggers) to work their Reserve claims. These tributers produced over £89 000 worth of diamonds by October 1927, and the company received as its share £14 114 of this total. Portion 'P' of Welverdiend, the richest deposit on the farm, was worked by the company as a mine, such was the depth and richness of this deposit. Some 500 white workers were employed by the company on wages to work 'P Kopje'. The trading rights for the entire farm were retained by Donaldson and Carlis. By February 1927 there was 'little but flags to be seen' on Welverdiend as a result of the subdivisions.<sup>27</sup>

It is thus clear that the landowners, syndicates and companies dominated the economic skyline on the Lichtenburg diggings. There was a clear distinction between 'company land', on which lay the Reserve claims, and the public diggings on which all white diggers, over the age of eighteen, were entitled to peg a claim on proclamation day. As we have seen, the companies and syndicates which were floated sought to monopolise the richest deposits on

the diggings. Individual diggers had to come to terms with these capitalists in order to gain access to the rich Reserve claims. Indeed, the term 'digger' was recognised as a descriptive title having little analytical meaning, given to those whites who simply made a living from the diggings. In June 1926, for example, although 6 681 diggers had taken out licence to dig at Lichtenburg, almost four times that number were digging without licences, in various contractual ways with licensed diggers, or with the companies. Most of them worked in partnership with three or four other diggers under one licence. Others who lacked capital to attract partners, worked on shares for wealthy diggers who acted as their backers. A further 1 670 of these diggers were employed on wages by the companies on the Reserve claims.<sup>28</sup>

Prospecting was another avenue for employment. Independent diggers, using their own capital and machinery, and paying their own expenses, worked for companies and syndicates in prospecting the properties before proclamation, in return for paying a fixed percentage of their finds – as tribute – to them. Some paid as much as 25 per cent of their finds, so confident were they of these rich deposits.<sup>29</sup> Thus diggers were clearly stratified, and divisions between them blurred with their changing fortunes. Professional diggers with capital tended to work on the Reserves as prospectors on company ground; individual diggers with limited resources worked on their own or in partnership with other diggers of a similar status on the public diggings. It was amongst those diggers with little but their labour to exchange, and who worked on shares, and who constituted the majority of diggers at Lichtenburg, that impoverishment became a major theme almost from the inception of digging in the balmy days on 1926.

## Poverty on the Lichtenburg diggings

The domination of the local economy by a flourishing capitalist sector resulted in a great deal of local poverty which was not directly related to agricultural collapse. The diggings were 'for those possessed of considerable capital'.<sup>30</sup> The successful digger was a professional, with life-long experience, up-to-date machinery, and money to see him over the bad patches. Or he was a speculator with reserves of capital with which to buy up Reserve claims, to set up companies and to engage wage workers.<sup>31</sup>

'Why not make the diggings as unattractive as possible for the moneyed element', enquired one of the marginalised diggers. 'Under present conditions syndicates, rich farmers, moneyed speculators who can afford to pay runners and unscrupulous diggers get the plums and the poorer and older diggers get nothing.'<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the 'New Eldorado' attracted the unemployed, the down-and-outs, from all over the Union, to such an extent that one observer complained that Lichtenburg was becoming 'a happy hunting ground for life's failures and unfortunates'.<sup>33</sup> Whilst some of these Afrikaner proletarians began digging by pegging claims in the public rushes on proclamation day, others found a livelihood indirectly by working as supervisors and foremen for professional diggers, sorting the castaway gravel of larger operators, bantom-sorting, and transporting water from the wells to the claims. There were also opportunities for employment in the retail sector of the economy, as shop assistants and waiters, petrol-pump attendants and barmen. Informal sector employment was also common, with a thriving shebeen traffic for both white diggers and black location dwellers, because the sale of liquor on a digging was prohibited.<sup>34</sup>

The economic fortunes of these Afrikaner proletarians was fully dependent upon the state of the local digging economy. Within the first year of digging observers noted general prosperity amongst the diggers, and a conspicuous absence of large-scale unemployment. 'Everyone seemed to be making money', stated one of these reports, as the local economy remained buoyant and boom conditions ensued.<sup>35</sup> Even in the midst of such optimism there was some general poverty for children of unfortunate diggers, as well as low standards of living on the public diggings. A soup kitchen was, for example, necessary at Welverdiend in the winter of 1927 which was kept going throughout the summer because of need. Reports from the schools in 1926 and 1927 noted low levels of nutrition, whilst scurvy and rickets were common, and many children could not attend school owing to a lack of suitable clothing.<sup>36</sup>

Initially the Pact government provided ample livelihood for the community in 1926 by proclaiming as public diggings all farms which had been prospected and proved to be carrying diamonds. The government was in fact compelled by legislation to proclaim those farms on which prospecting had been successfully completed. Many impoverished diggers were able to peg claims in the rushes, and thus temporarily joined the ranks of the independent diggers in these balmy months. The rank and status of these small producers, who constituted the bulk of the diggings community, were transient, and their production was simply extractive and low-budget. By October 1926 the shallow deposits at Uitgevonden and Elandsputte were exhausted by these diggers. They cast around for more shallow, rich gravel, and their eyes fell upon the last remaining deposits on the Reserve claims owned by the companies and syndicates on the surrounding farms.

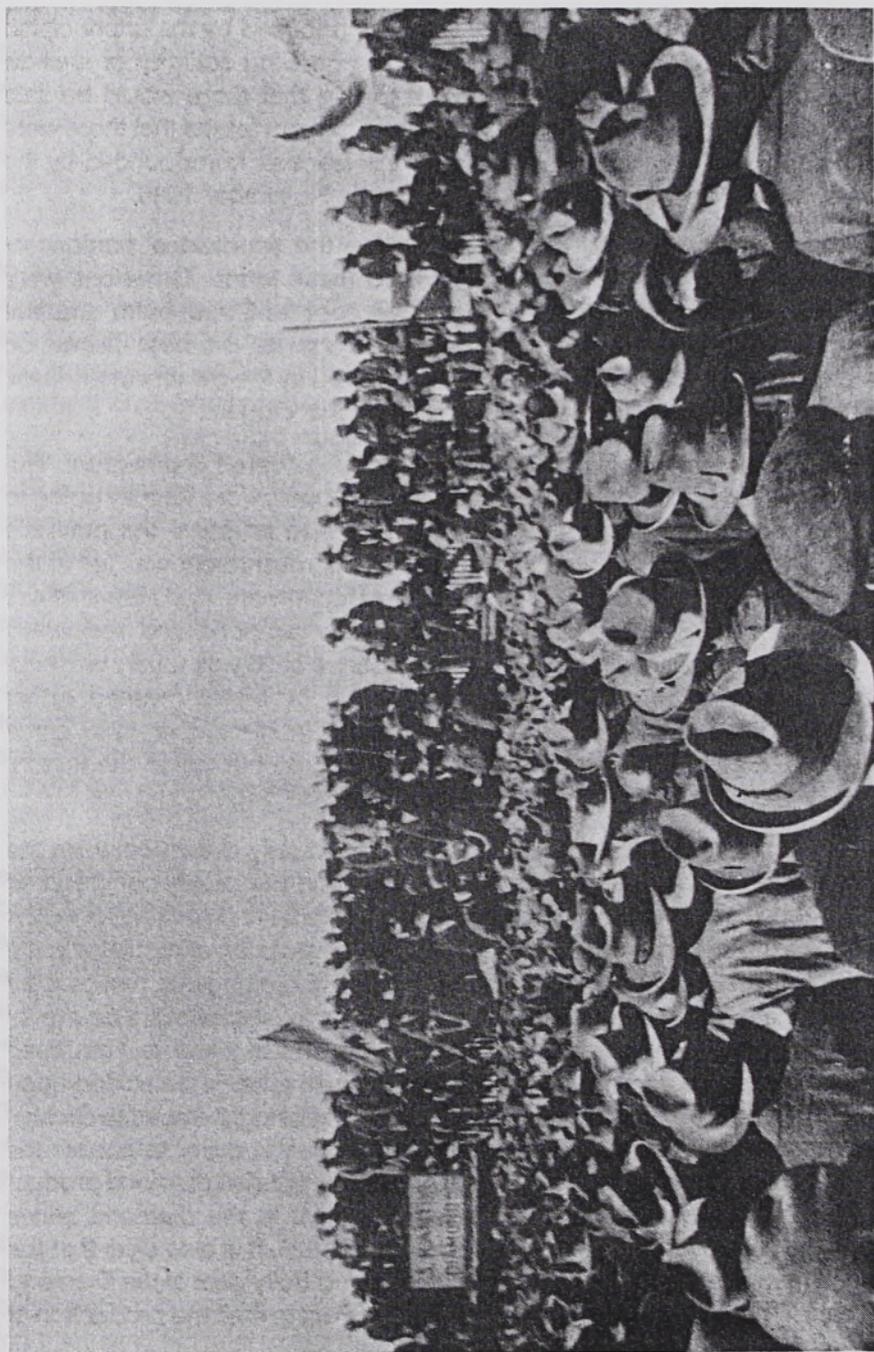
Popular resentment at the activities of 'the moneybags' began to grow from the close of 1926. This resentment was couched in the rhetoric and imagery of

the 'small man', the 'bona-fide' digger who was opposed by the unprincipled exercise of money-power. It resulted from the growing scarcity of shallow gravel on the public diggings and from a feeling that there would be little ground left for the vast crowds of diggers. Many diggers feared that there were no rich deposits left for the small man, and this fear was compounded by the failure of the Witklip and Klipkuil proclamations in November 1926.

Eyes were eagerly focused on the activity on the subdivided portions of Grasfontein and Welverdiend, which adjoined these farms. Questions were asked as to why Grasfontein, 'which was next door' to Elandsputte, was not proclaimed earlier. Rumours quickly circulated that 'all the best claims' on Grasfontein had, through subdivision, been secured by the owners of the farm, the companies and syndicates, and the professional diggers.<sup>37</sup>

This groundswell of popular opposition quickly gathered momentum. Rumours circulated in November 1926 that certain diggers were illegally going to rush and peg the Reserve claims on Grasfontein to preserve the public's rights. Other issues contributed to this opposition: resentment was felt at the maladministration of the diggings by the Mines Department, and Native Affairs officials were criticised for not enforcing pass regulations and residential segregation. It was also felt that the police presence of 26 was totally inadequate for the size of the community. These social problems meshed rather explosively with the fear of gravel running short. In November 1926 some observed that Bakers (Elandsputte) would be worked out within the month, and the diggers would have to find new propositions.<sup>38</sup>

With ranks rapidly closing and battle lines being clearly drawn between the 'moneyed elements' holding the Reserve claims and the hastily congregated and cosmopolitan community thrown together in the tin and sacking town, the Pact began to edge itself, rather reluctantly, into the position of mediator in the looming conflict. The Pact proposed that the alluvial diggings be reserved for the 'small man', and that the Reserve claims of the local capitalists be expropriated, because they had flouted the 'spirit of the law', and monopolised 'public property'. There were a variety of reasons why the Pact decided upon this particular strategy, perhaps the most compelling being the need to circumscribe the magnitude of alluvial diamond production in order to shelter the diamond mining industry from the effects of this unregulated diamond production. The Pact had indeed secured a large interest in the diamond mines through the controversial Diamond Control Act of 1925. It is also clear that the diamond magnates — Sir Ernest Oppenheimer and Solly Joel of the Diamond Syndicate in particular — put pressure upon the Pact to limit the production of independently produced alluvial diamonds.<sup>39</sup>



Diggers meeting at Bakersville (c. 1927/28) (Private collection, Tim Clynick)

The resulting diamond legislation, the Precious Stones Bill, had a lengthy and protracted passage through Parliament in 1927. Marginalised small diggers therefore resorted to more direct action to secure gravel. Illegal rushes of company and syndicate ground were organised by these diggers, and some semblance of a popular movement coalesced around two remarkable individuals, A. H. Ireton and W. P. Thom. They became known as the 'Diggers' Advocates' for their frequent testing of the rights of the companies and syndicates to the Reserve claims on the subdivided portions of the farms. The Pact unwittingly fuelled the conflict by not proclaiming any new digging farms between March and August 1927. This was compounded by the collapse of the prices paid for local Lichtenburg stones in mid-1927, and a sharp check in the trajectory of the local economy was noted.<sup>40</sup> Digging operations were shut down, shopkeepers closed up, numbers of the unemployed men, their wives and children, took to sorting bantoms as an informal livelihood, and petty crime associated with illicit diamond buying and liquor dealing increased significantly.<sup>41</sup>

Growing unemployment and the shortage of shallow gravel accelerated the growth of the diggers' movement. This movement had no clear class basis, for its constituency shifted with the availability of new ground. Yet at its base lay this residue of impoverished and marginalised producers, which grew extremely impatient with the failure of the government to cater for their narrow, particular interests. The Diggers' Union of South Africa (DU) arose in late 1927 to attempt to channel this sentiment, by drawing upon these poor diggers' political support. At this juncture the diggers' movement had no fixed organisational structure, no constitution and depended upon the rough and tumble of open-air discussion and public protests for its functioning. Throughout 1927, the DU was overshadowed by the advocates of direct action – like Ireton and Thom – and the situation amongst the marginalised small independent producers was extremely unstable. At the conclusion of 1927, according to Colonel de Beer, officer commanding the Elandsputte SAP, there was a feeling that class warfare could break out at any instant on the diggings, with the marginalised diggers ranged in opposition to the companies, the syndicates and their tenants.<sup>42</sup>

## **The Precious Stones Act, December 1927**

The Precious Stones Act was meant as the Pact's political and social testament to the small diggers, but when the Act was passed, in December 1927, it thrust many of the Afrikaner proletariat on the diggings immediately and traumatically into the ranks of the unemployed. The Afrikaner workers at the base of the diggings' occupational pyramid were thrown out of employment by the provi-

sions of the Act which prevented companies from holding individual claims on a digging, as companies were forced to shut down their operations. The Act also expropriated those Reserve claims 'illegally' gained through subdivision of the farms. As a result, from the end of December 1927, the Welverdiend Diamonds Limited, A&E, and all of the smaller syndicates and companies which had blossomed on their Reserve claims, closed down their activities, 'discharging hundreds of white men and thousands of natives'. The Afrikaner workers on these claims were ironically the first victims of the Pact's legislative programme — an effect which appears to have been overlooked by the legislature. Some 500 to 600 white families were affected, with the closure of Welverdiend Diamonds — 'P Kopje' — alone throwing into the streets 111 white (and 500 black) workers.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the Act outlawed bantam-sorting by these workers, because of the close association between it and illicit diamond buying, thus depriving these families of a temporary livelihood.<sup>44</sup>

For the small, independent digger, as opposed to the wage worker, the Act was also disastrous, albeit unwittingly. Already by November 1927 the shortage of shallow gravel was critical, and there had been a noticeable proliferation of a number of partnerships, shareworking, and even wage work, between diggers of this class, in attempts to pool resources and to cut labour costs.<sup>45</sup> Many of these partnerships and most of the shareworkers approached local diamond buyers and storekeepers for backing who took a percentage of the profits in

*Mrs L Kotze (right) with mother and two grown-up daughters at their diggers' shack built of corrugated iron, canvas and hessian (Private collection, Tim Clynick)*



return for putting up working capital. The Act outlawed this practice, once again because of the fear that this practice provided a conduit for illicitly obtained diamonds, by preventing the lender from holding an interest in the claim. On company ground, where Reserve claims owned by the companies and syndicates were worked on tribute by diggers, wholesale terminations of contracts resulted.<sup>46</sup>

The effect of the Act on the professional digger was not as deleterious as that on the small, independent producer and the wage workers. These professional diggers who had purchased Reserve claims on portions of the farms were unaffected by the Act, which only expropriated those claims held by companies, and not by individuals.<sup>47</sup> Mobility and capital resources allowed this class of diggers some shelter from the immediate effects of the Act.

Following the Act, an immediate increase in the general level of distress on the diggings was noted. The number of paupers on the Mining Commissioner's list increased significantly in these months, to 235 in January 1928, 300 in February, and 530 in March. The former wage workers at 'P Kopje' — Donaldson and Carlis's mine on Welverdiend — constituted 140 of the 530 paupers in March.<sup>48</sup> Early on in that month in 1928 *Die Burger* estimated that 25 per cent of the diggings population 'ontbeer die allernodigste'. This was due, so ran the report, to the growing shortage of ground: 'Ons vra nie onderstand nie,' stated a small digger, '... ons wil grond hê wat ons kan werk.'<sup>49</sup> This shortage of gravel, which was clearly a problem before the Act was passed, was exacerbated by the provisions of the Act which closed down the companies, and expropriated their Reserve claims. Some two-thirds of the diggers prior to the Act had worked on these claims under a multitude of contractual arrangements with the owners. Almost three months were to elapse before the first batch of these expropriated claims were thrown open only to a select group of impoverished diggers who could prove that they had no ground to work, or that they had earned less than £300 in the previous six months.

The small, independent diggers were irate at this enforced period of unemployment. 'Die gevoel,' ran a report on poverty at Welverdiend, 'is oor die algemeen baie verbitterd, want die mense redeneer dat die Regering die delwerye wil doodruk deur die delwers uit te hongers.'<sup>50</sup> F. D. Devine, a professional digger and member of the DU, related a pitiful account of this poverty:

He described pitiful scenes of families living in squalor and misery: emaciated children in rags which would be despised by houseboys, and careworn mothers trying to cook from scraps a frugal meal to enable dejected husbands to wrest precious stones from the earth with inadequate equipment.<sup>51</sup>

Devine attributed the poverty to the shortage of gravel: 'As far as the eye can see,' he wrote, 'the machinery is standing idle,' but still the government did not come to the aid of the thousands of out-of-work diggers.<sup>52</sup> Precise estimates of this unemployment are rare, but the DU estimated in April 1928 that over 8 000 diggers at Lichtenburg were unable to dig because they could not obtain ground. This meant that almost 25 000 white diggers, and dependants 'practically all of whom are unemployed, and many of whom are in abject poverty [were] on the verge of absolute starvation'.<sup>53</sup> The DU was also providing relief to over 700 digger families in April 1928, in addition to the activities of the Mines Department and the Lichtenburg Magistrate.<sup>54</sup>

The shortage of gravel was not the creation of the Mines Department, although the Act had exacerbated the shortage in the short term for the small independent digger. The diggers working for the companies, and on the public areas of the farm had themselves exploited the deposits extensively, whilst the companies and syndicates had also worked out their Reserve claims before the Act became law. In December 1927 it was common knowledge that 'owing to the long period having lapsed since the granting of [the Reserve] claims on [the] farms, all claims of any value in the names of Corporate bodies have been disposed of or worked out'. The government ban on prospecting throughout the Union for the year beginning 31 December 1927, in the long term, and the six-month ban on any new proclamations, put a premium on new gravel, the shortage of which is vital in understanding the context within which the political consciousness of the diggers was moulded.

## **Consciousness and political response amongst the Afrikaner poor**

The case of the small digger was taken up by the DU. As we have seen, the DU was launched on the diggings in August 1927. Its early history is stormy and confusing. It was launched after the statutory diggers' representative body – composed of claimholders only – was abolished because of fears that it would be taken over by radical diggers in mid-1927. The DU was always overshadowed by the advocates of direct action – like Ireton and Thom – before the passage of the Precious Stones Act in December 1927. It was initially supported only by claimholders, the professional diggers, who constituted about 25 per cent of the diggers in November 1927.<sup>55</sup> The DU called simply for the orderly proclamation of more ground, and for 'more government' on the diggings. The message of direct action was far more attractive to the marginalised digger at this time, and the DU languished in the backwaters of local political life, distinguished only by occasions on which their meetings were broken up by more popular leaders. From December 1927, when the Act

was passed and popular anger mounted, the DU was reorganised, a constitution drawn up, branches set up on the diggings, and collections of membership fees began.<sup>56</sup> Its programme now explicitly addressed the interests of the small man, which the Act had ignored.

The new President of the DU, F. J. Rheeders, a former member of the old Orange Free State Volksraad and prominent NP member as well as a well-known farmer digger at Lichtenburg, saw the need for the diggers to organise and speak with one voice: 'If we approach Mr Beyers [the Minister of Mines] as one man,' he stated, 'he must listen to us.' 'Therefore,' he said, 'let us form a big body in order that we may make our influence felt.'<sup>57</sup> Rheeders felt that the NP had been misinformed regarding the 'diggings question' by interested parties and merely needed guidance from an organisation of diggers. The DU called for the immediate proclamation of more ground and the throwing open of the newest and richest alluvial field in the Union — Namaqualand — to the diggers. This explicit support for more ground was the DU's biggest drawcard. The DU was ably assisted in its endeavours to unite the diggers by the incompetence of the Pact government and the ministerial representative, F. W. Beyers, whose record was a comedy of political errors and bad timing. The DU increasingly drew upon the support of a wide range of diggers, for, as an acute observer noted, it was an organisation of producers drawn together by common interests, and 'therefore all diggers were members of the Diggers' Party'.<sup>58</sup>

The DU recruited the marginalised small digger with quiet deliberation. In early February 1928 it set up a 'Poor White's Relief Committee' (RC), with Max Theunissen, a former prospector and shareworker on the A&E's property, as its chairman.<sup>59</sup> The RC aimed to capture the support of the marginalised digger and it demanded relief for these diggers from the government in the form of more ground. Theunissen stated that the increase in poverty in 1928 was structural and not casual, and was exacerbated by the Pact's alluvial policies: '... the position is now assuming such huge proportions that it would call for some drastic action on the part of the authorities, to avert a serious calamity.'<sup>60</sup> White poverty was the most important drawcard of the DU which enabled it to drag itself back into the limelight of popular politics on the diggings in early 1928. The Relief Committee's first communication to the authorities by its chairman and benefactor, Max Theunissen, clearly betrayed this aim: 'I cannot refrain from expressing the view, that apparently the same policy of drift, which was attributed to the Smuts government ... is now being worthily carried on by the present Government.' He pointed out the potential radicalism which an organisation of the poor possessed to counter govern-

ment intransigence: after all is said and done, he noted, of the two evils a man would certainly rather be shot, than be starved, to death'.<sup>61</sup>

The RC and Theunissen (who used that committee to forward his own political ambitions)<sup>62</sup> undoubtedly exaggerated reports of starvation and poverty amongst the diggers as 'a handle against the Government for not throwing open more ground, especially Namaqualand'.<sup>63</sup> The Pact 'had turned off the tap' — by restricting new proclamations, banning prospecting, and finally by declaring Namaqualand out of bounds to individual diggers — and was thus using the power of the law against the unemployed which it had attracted to the diggings.<sup>64</sup>

The DU wanted nothing to do with relief schemes which offered wage work, although the unemployed themselves were not averse to taking this form of relief if circumstances warranted it.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless the DU claimed a membership of 25 per cent of all diggers at Lichtenburg in March 1928, and 40 per cent by May of the same year, and we can surmise a fair degree of support for their plans for 'relief' from these figures. The DU was hugely influential amongst the small diggers, and even Beyers implored the President of the DU to use his influence to encourage diggers to take up relief work at 2s 6d per day.<sup>66</sup>

The question of opening new ground for the diggers was a complex issue for the Pact. The first strand in this was the failure of the expropriated company claims to provide a livelihood to the diggers. The distribution of these claims, on Grasfontein by ballot in March 1928, was disappointing.<sup>67</sup> Of some 4 000 applications, all of whom had no ground, only 1 000 were successful in drawing lots for claims.<sup>68</sup> This, and the unimpressive results obtained from these claims, lent substance to rumours that the Reserve claims on Hendriksdal, Ruigtelaagte and La Rijs Strijd were equally worked out and would not provide a livelihood for the diggers.<sup>69</sup>

The second strand was that of prospecting. The question of allowing prospecting was tied up with that of Namaqualand, for if Beyers 'permitted prospecting to go on in the Western Transvaal he would have to allow it in Namaqualand with the result that diamonds would become practically unsaleable'.<sup>70</sup> The DU was unconvinced by the Minister's logic. First, it claimed that the government's year-long prohibition on prospecting throughout the Union would not affect production because the syndicates and companies which had dug under the guise of prospecting at Lichtenburg had already exhausted the gravel before the regulations were published. The argument about overproduction was thus flawed, and this claim was reinforced by plummeting production figures for the fields from November 1927. When Beyers promptly suspended the publication of these monthly production figures, the DU became deeply suspicious.<sup>71</sup> On

27 March 1928 a telegram was despatched to Roos protesting at the prospecting prohibition and the Precious Stones Act in general by the 'largest ever gathering seen on the fields, exclusive of rushes'.<sup>72</sup> Clearly the government's handling of the shortage of ground was beginning to have unpleasant political consequences for it, and for the local parliamentary NP representative, the prominent Cabinet Minister Tielman Roos.<sup>73</sup>

Because of the shortage of shallow, rich gravel in the Lichtenburg district the DU focused its thoughts of relief on Namaqualand, which 'Providence [had] indicated as a solution to the poor white problem'.<sup>74</sup> But the Pact and the DU had a fundamental disagreement as to how the area would be exploited. The Pact announced that Namaqualand would be reserved 'as a sphere of labour for poor whites', in terms of the Pact's commitment to a 'white labour policy' as enunciated by the Department of Labour.<sup>75</sup>

The DU had a different view. This was best represented by the scheme of M. C. Brink, a DU member, and a small farmer from Coligny.<sup>76</sup> The Namaqualand fields, he felt, should be used as a solution to the poor white question by settling poor diggers there as independent producers; the fields were to be reserved exclusively for the needs of the poor man, who would work there independently under state protection, and not be employed as a relief worker by the state. He was not in favour of the proposed state diggings 'as this would only mean that the poor white would always be a poor white'.<sup>77</sup> Namaqualand belonged to the diggers and should be exploited on a sliding scale of profits for the state.<sup>78</sup> Dr D. P. Steenkamp, the Independent Nationalist candidate who stood for Namaqualand in 1929, also agreed with Brink's plans for the solution of the poor white question. The absorption of poor whites into the railways 'offered little future prospects' for the solution of the 'poor white question' and he preferred the 'American system' whereby poor whites were rehabilitated through back-to-the-land schemes. In Namaqualand this could be achieved by throwing open the state diggings to poor diggers where they could work as producers.<sup>79</sup> Wage labour at 'kaffir rates of pay' was, therefore, not the solution to the poor white question for Steenkamp and Brink.

The DU adopted Brink's scheme as their own and, over time, reformulated and embroidered upon it. The DU leaders, noted a police report, 'confined themselves to whetting the imagination of the diggers with wonderful tales of the richness of the diamond fields of Namaqualand'.<sup>80</sup> These tales included the suggestion that the state should provisionally take over the diamonds produced which would then be 'sold when the time is most opportune'; the state should allow these poor whites to take out £5 000 worth of diamonds, before revoking their licences, for this sum was deemed sufficient to 'put the digger on his feet' and allow him to shake the diggings' dust off his feet. The state

should receive no revenue from the diamonds themselves and it should revoke the 10 per cent export tax on rough diamonds. Trade on the diggings should be entirely in the hands of whites; the state should appoint independent diamond valuers for the diggers; and finally, no Africans should be allowed on the Namaqualand diggings.<sup>81</sup>

Beyers was unconvinced by the DU's alternative scheme and in his abrupt, abrasive manner informed the DU so. The proposals, he said, were impracticable and the Namaqualand diggings would be worked in the interests of the state by poor whites from Namaqualand, who would receive a good wage.<sup>82</sup> This was not acceptable to the majority of diggers: 'We won't have that. All diggers should be allowed to go to Namaqualand. We don't want a State diggings, as we are not going to work for kaffir wages, as they do on the railways,' they complained.<sup>83</sup>

Battle lines were clearly demarcated when the Pact Cabinet officially rejected Brink's scheme on 24 February 1928.<sup>84</sup> The tone of this announcement alienated everyone:

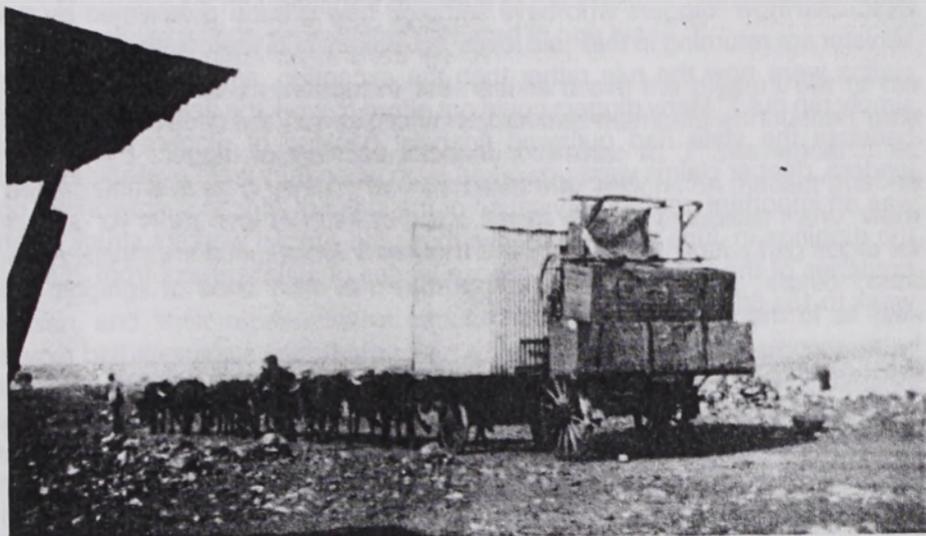
The decision of the Government in regard to the Namaqualand deposits was arrived at after full consideration, including the scheme submitted by poor whites and diggers, and is final. The Minister is, therefore, unable to discuss this matter further with the diggers ...<sup>85</sup>

The tone of this pronouncement was somewhat diluted by the simultaneous proclamation of certain diggings in Lichtenburg as restricted alluvial diggings in terms of the Precious Stones Act. The Pact, however, was clearly determined to work the riches of Namaqualand in the interests of the state and not on behalf of one section of the people.<sup>86</sup>

At the end of March 1928 a 30 per cent drop in the price of Lichtenburg stones was attributed to the sale of diamonds produced by the Namaqualand State Diggings to the Diamond Syndicate:

The Diggers are asking if this is what Mr Beyers calls looking after the interests of the small man. The general feeling amongst the digging population is that the Government's policy is intending to entirely squash the digger and kill the alluvial industry.<sup>87</sup>

There seemed to be many examples of this intention: the barrenness of the new ground given by Beyers to the diggers by the new ballot system, at Grasfontein, at Ruigtelaagte ('given up by prospectors and others as un-payable'), La Rijs Strijd and Hendriksdal ('it has all been worked out ... there is little or no gravel left for new claimholders'); and the fiasco surrounding the publication of the figures of the monthly diamond production.



*Digger leaving the Lichtenburg area with his house (Killie Campbell  
Africana Library, University of Natal)*

These fears were added to by reports of growing poverty: Theunissen of the RC reported '791 applications in one day in early April, and many of the applicants were starving diggers who simply could not earn a livelihood because of the shortage of gravel'.<sup>88</sup> Between February and April the RC received 2 400 applications for food, and 1 954 for medical attention.<sup>89</sup> The essence of the RC's relief programme was simple: 'We want sufficient ground at the earliest possible date for at least 8 000 diggers.'<sup>90</sup> In April Rheeders articulated the substance of this digger ideology: 'We must serve ourselves [because] unless we get what we are entitled to we shall see created in South Africa two classes of people, the masters ["die base"] ... and the hirelings. Surely we cannot tolerate that?'<sup>91</sup> Beyers understood the implications of these demands, whilst disagreeing with them: 'Your scheme amounts to this: That you wish to make a small capitalist of every poor white or unemployed; and, furthermore, the State must be troubled with the administration of their capital ...'<sup>92</sup> What was wrong with that? countered the new President of the DU, A. J. Swanepoel. 'The diggers want to be independent and they want to remain independent. They do not want to work for others.' And, he continued, 'if the Government remained obstinate they would use their organisation to compel

the Government to take note of their grievances and to remedy them ... the ballot box will show.<sup>93</sup>

The shortage of shallow gravel remained acute throughout mid-1928. The *Star* described how 'diggers who have sampled new ground proclaimed by the Minister are returning to their 'old loves' eg. Bakers and Vaalboschputte'. Deep claims were now the rule rather than the exception, as the shallow gravel simply ran out.<sup>94</sup> Many diggers could not afford to work the deeper claims, and because the state had outlawed financial backing of diggers by outside lenders, deeper claims went unworked even when they were available.<sup>95</sup> This was an important contributory cause of the strike of African claimworkers on the diggings in June 1928. Thirty five thousand African workers struck when branches of the DU decided to reduce wages of claimworkers from 25s per week to 15s 6d in order to cut costs.<sup>96</sup>

In August the government decided to ballot the Reserve claims it had expropriated on Welverdiend. The rush for claims was phenomenal and from the Lichtenburg diggings alone 6 078 applications were received, although only 1 000 claims were available for distribution.<sup>97</sup> This indicated the acuteness of the position on the fields. Diggers' grievances were summed up by one digger:

*Africans working on the diggings (Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal)*



Recently I read in the *Star* a report of a speech by General Hertzog, in which he said that when the NP came to power there were over 24 000 poor whites, but today there are practically none. I do not agree with the Minister, as if he visited the diggings in the Western Transvaal he would find those 24 000 poor whites gathered in one place.<sup>98</sup>

Economic need and bread-and-butter issues drove the diggers out of the ranks of the NP. Three DU executive committee members announced their intentions to stand against Roos because of this: A. J. Swanepoel,<sup>99</sup> M. Theunissen, and M. C. Brink. They all based their actions on the fact that 'Mr Beyers, Mr Roos, the Cabinet and the whole of the Nationalist Party' were responsible for the impoverishment of the diggers.<sup>100</sup> 'The time had come for the diggings to send their own representative to parliament,' stated Theunissen, and 'their representative should be a man independent of all parties'.<sup>101</sup> All were dissatisfied at the Pact's relief programmes and all contended that Roos's promise to the unemployed diggers 'was purely a political move to satisfy the party in regard to the promises made in connection with the poor white question'.<sup>102</sup> It is in this context that we must situate the campaign of Tielman Roos, the NP member for Lichtenburg, and Minister in the Pact Cabinet in August 1928, to win back the 'hearts and minds' of the small diggers.<sup>103</sup> On 17 August Roos visited his constituency, and the DU presented him with a 13-point list of demands, all of which he accepted. 'So far as words go,' noted the correspondent, 'Mr Roos capitulated to all the diggers' demands.'<sup>104</sup> He promised to proclaim the remaining portions of Welverdiend, Goedgedacht and Holfontein (in the Krugersdorp District), La Rijs Strijd, Hendriksdal and Ruigtelaagte.<sup>105</sup>

These promises of relief were sufficient for Roos to be given a full vote of confidence from the diggings branches of the NP, and probably resulted in his nomination as official NP candidate by the district committee in late August. Theunissen for one was not impressed by his promises: 'The diggers were bluffed into [voting for Roos] by promises which would never be fulfilled, and by the slaughter of a few fat oxen, which provided a meal for hundreds of hungry diggers, who became Mr Roos's supporters for the day.'<sup>106</sup> 'Not one of Mr Roos's promises has materialised,' he noted in September, 'and as soon as he is nominated they will probably vanish in smoke.'<sup>107</sup>

Roos was as unsuccessful as Beyers in providing long-term relief to the diggers on their terms. The Welverdiend ballot was a failure: only 1 000 out of the 7 000 diggers who applied received a claim; he did not throw open the remaining 19 portions of that farm which belonged to a Lichtenburg syndicate as promised;<sup>108</sup> the proclamations of Hendriksdal and La Rijs Strijd were failures, both farms having few traces of gravel.<sup>109</sup> The Holfontein proclama-

tion of 29 December 1928 failed to satisfy Lichtenburg diggers who were prevented from taking part in the ballot at Holfontein in the Ventersdorp district because of the limitations imposed by the Precious Stones Act on those who could participate in lotteries in different mining districts.<sup>110</sup>

Some diggers were determined not to let their claim to the Namaqualand gravels rest. In late December 1928 and early January 1929 a group of 300 'radical Lichtenburgers', headed by the ubiquitous W. H. Thom, gathered at Port Nolloth on the Namaqualand coast to protest against the inroads made into the rights of independent diggers to dig on Crown land.<sup>111</sup> In protest against the nationalisation of the Namaqualand diamond deposits they threatened to 'rush' the state diggings to peg claims there on the rich deposits. They were not there, Thom explained, to stir up strife but rather to make a living: 'Since they could not do so, it was not surprising that they resorted to other measures.'<sup>112</sup> Theunissen's explanation for the Port Nolloth affair was that the Minister had not fulfilled his promises to give ground to the diggers.<sup>113</sup> Officialdom and government remained unmoved, and when rumours began to circulate that these diggers were preparing to rush the state diggings illegally, police reinforcements were rapidly despatched to Port Nolloth to maintain 'law and order'.

## Conclusion

The Port Nolloth affair, which brought to an end militant digger politics, and the nomination of Swanepoel as the 'diggers' representative' for the NP in the 1929 general election, concluded this brief moment of revolt of the Lichtenburg poor which has formed the substance of this chapter. Clearly class issues were of great importance in the creation and persistence of the 'poor white problem' on the Lichtenburg alluvial diggings. This class dimension was also of great moment to the response of the Pact government to the 'alluvial diamond digging question'. And class issues were clearly central to the political consciousness of the Lichtenburg poor. It is hoped that this chapter has therefore contributed to our understanding of the nature and impact of the 'poor white question' on the politics of the Union during the period of the Pact government.

## Chapter 6

# White railway labour in South Africa, 1873–1924

Gordon Pirie

Poor whites have worked as railway labourers in South Africa for practically the entire history of train transport in the country. Certainly they were very much in evidence before their contribution was extended and formalised under the Pact government's 'civilised labour' initiative of 1924. Notwithstanding their lengthy record of service, strikingly little is known about even how many destitute whites were engaged and how their numbers fluctuated. Similarly, there is scant knowledge about the kinds of labour which whites performed, their wages and their conditions of employment. The development of policy as regards white recruiting is largely unknown as well. Ascertaining something about these elementary details is the task undertaken in this chapter.

Intrepid analysts doubtless will wish to move from the narrative to more profound discussion of the hidden agenda of poor white recruitment, and the implications for working class consciousness and action. Such documentary evidence as there is ought not to be ignored, however. As the following presentation aims to show, it offers interesting insights and intriguing challenges. For example, the written record indicates a diversity of official attitudes to poor white labour, beginning before the turn of the century with a decidedly negative impression of the cost-effectiveness of white workers and an unwillingness to absorb the added expense. This position altered dramatically, coinciding, it appears, with government insistence that the Railways employ impoverished war refugees, and with the Railways' own perception that it could write off the extra cost as part of the expense of searching for and training labourers who could be engaged in superior grades of work. The evidence also points to the existence of a charitable motive in the hiring of at least some poor whites. Other material concerning their subsequent treatment indicates the limits of that philanthropy and raises doubts about the sincerity of government's concern for poor whites and its anxiety about their politically disruptive potential. Printed sources also suggest that poor white labour was not seen simply as a 'back-up' for black labour shortages: hiring and working arrangements were anything but haphazard and *ad hoc*. Generally speaking,

the impression left is that the early employment of poor whites as railway labourers was an infinitely complex phenomenon which does not yield to any straightforward interpretation. What follows is merely a preliminary empirical contribution to a potentially fascinating debate.

## The period 1873–1910

White labour was used from the very outset of large-scale railway construction in the Cape Colony, generally forming between a quarter and a third of the railway labour force. In the first frantic phase of building (1873–1877) a large proportion of white labourers were navvies imported from Europe. They were joined by a smaller number of colonial whites. In 1877 some 3 500 whites in total were employed as railway labourers on Cape Government Railway (CGR) lines. After the initial flurry of construction, a halt was called to importing white labour and untrained and unskilled white colonists were engaged in increasing proportion. This occurred despite their being paid considerably more than black labourers (on the Grahamstown line in 1877 the lowest white wage was 5s per day; average black wages during the year ranged between 2s 9d and 3s 2d). The arrangement suited all colonial interests: white labourers cushioned fluctuations in black labour supply for the railways and, by 'releasing' black labour for other work, helped keep the lid on black wage demands in all economic sectors. Furthermore, railway labour was a channel for giving work to whites who became unemployed and impoverished during drought and depression.<sup>1</sup>

Given these good reasons for engaging whites for railway work, in both the Cape and Natal in the early 1890s official enquiries were made about the prospect of engaging more unskilled white labourers, even to the extent of recruiting them so as to replace blacks. In light of its disappointing experiment with labour substitution, the Natal Government Railways (NGR) was not very keen on further employment of whites. As NGR's General Manager explained, the men who had been hired were socially undesirable characters and were reluctant to work alongside black labourers.<sup>2</sup> Whites, it appeared, could survive the indignity of grinding manual labour on earthworks, but only if they felt they were not doing work ordinarily consigned to black muscle. Matters were no different on the CGR. Mindful of the added expense of white labourers, and being loathe to dismiss black employees of long standing, the CGR's General Manager was disinclined to turn his Railway into an unemployment relief agency. Saying he was 'only too glad to get decent white men ... at reasonable wages',<sup>3</sup> he nonetheless stressed that productivity counted more than pigmentation.

In Natal a harder attitude had emerged toward employing white labour in railway construction and maintenance, in freight sheds, or as porters, pointsmen or gatekeepers. On financial grounds alone, NGR's Labour Superintendent expressed himself 'distinctly adverse' to replacing black labour with white labour. Speaking in the early 1890s, a matter of three years after successful recruitment of African labour from Zululand,<sup>4</sup> he estimated it would cost some £50 000 per annum in extra wages and £20 000 in barracks. The Chief Engineer and the Superintendent of the Locomotive Department likewise spoke out against labour substitution, the former claiming it was 'very doubtful' if whites were the most effective workers. The Superintendent of the NGR's Black Labour Department commented further that any white labourers who would lift a finger in the presence of blacks were simply unaffordable.<sup>5</sup>

In 1899, two years after the Railway administration in the Orange Free State unsuccessfully offered employment to poor whites as railway porters,<sup>6</sup> work was found for war refugees from the Transvaal as relief labour on the CGR's Port Elizabeth–Avontuur line. Even at daily wages in the range 2s 6d to 3s 6d, this gesture was said by the Resident Engineer to double the cost of the works.<sup>7</sup> These whites were lucky. Earlier there had been considerable reluctance among railway engineers to give work to poor whites whose livelihoods had been devastated by the scourges of rinderpest, locusts and drought.<sup>8</sup> Past experience on the Graaff-Reinet line with 'numbers of the poor Dutch', as well as in the East London and Indwe districts, had shown that the men were inept, indifferent to their work, and disliked working among Africans.<sup>9</sup> A government request that about 150 whites from the Barkly West region be given work on the Queenstown–Tarkastad line got an especially chilly reception. In the opinion of the railway engineer at Queenstown, poor whites were undisciplined, indolent and unwilling to work as underlings. Taking into account also that African labour was plentiful and that supervision on light earthworks would be required over an extensive length of track, he declared that he would 'much prefer not having anything to do with the employment of poor whites'.<sup>10</sup>

In the aftermath of the South African War, the subject of white railway labour was revived in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. Reconstruction there exerted rapacious demands on African labour and, as part of its policy not to employ unskilled white labour, the mining industry in particular called on the Central South African Railways (CSAR) to hire more white (and Indian) labour and thereby release Africans for mine work. The attitude of the Railway management, however, was that any such labour substitution could only be temporary: it was estimated that the railway wage bill would be inflated by some £50 000 per annum. In a generally unsympathetic atmosphere, a member of the Inter-Colonial Council's Railway Committee drew attention to the

imperative of keeping white and black labourers separate, to the way in which the CSAR was being bludgeoned into employing workers whom even mining interests were reluctant to hire, and to the outcry which would occur when whites were eventually retrenched in favour of Africans.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the point was made that if the CSAR's complement of African labour was curtailed, supervisory white gangers would be made redundant; indeed, in June and July of 1903, 650 were dismissed.<sup>12</sup>

While the CSAR was being urged to limit recruitment of Africans and to substitute white labour, the organisation had in fact already embarked on two schemes to increase its unskilled white labour force. The first, which formed part of Lord Milner's plan to introduce 'more English blood into the country',<sup>13</sup> involved the importation of about 500 English navvies. At least one firm of engineers and contractors knew of this scheme by early March 1903, several weeks before mining and commercial interests launched their campaign to have the CSAR employ fewer Africans.<sup>14</sup> After considerable recruitment effort and expense, the navy experiment was terminated hastily. In the view of the CSAR's General Manager, not only had the experiment been financially calamitous (using navvies on the Braamfontein–Krugersdorp line had doubled the cost), it had also confirmed that black and white labourers did not work well together and that instead of helping blacks, the practice demeaned white men. The CSAR's Chief Engineer added that it was a myth that navvies did more work and that they were easier to supervise than Africans.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately for poor whites resident in the colonies, the dismissal of foreign navy labour provided them with extra job opportunities.

The second scheme of white labour employment which emerged in the CSAR in 1903 was relief work. Possibly as early as March, the Railways were obliged by government to absorb some 3 000 whites impoverished by war. The men were engaged on earthworks for the Klerksdorp–Fourteen Streams, Kimberley–Bloemfontein, Krugersdorp–Zeerust, Rustenburg, Kroonstad–Bethlehem and Breyten–Ermelo railways.<sup>16</sup> In October 1903 some 200 whites (mostly Boers) were 'intermittently employed' on the Klerksdorp line. As many as 700 had worked simultaneously on the Bloemfontein line. Payment was on a piecework basis, deductions being made for the hire of tents and equipment and for medical services. Those employed in this fashion included 'bywoners' as well as farm owners, the latter using their own ploughs, oxen and scoops to assist them with earthworks.<sup>17</sup>

Financial embarrassment that it was, the employment of navvies seemed to confirm the prejudice that developed in the 1890s against white labour. Indeed, in October 1903, 300 representatives of scientific and technical societies denounced permanent employment of large numbers of unskilled white la-

bourers as unaffordable.<sup>18</sup> Soon, however, the fault was placed at the door of imported labour rather than white labour per se: bungled navy contracts had set a premium on idleness.<sup>19</sup> Once this distinction had been made, white relief labour came to be looked upon more favourably by the CSAR's General Manager and Chief Engineer. This was so even though it cost between two and three times as much as black labour, that is, between £1 500 and £2 000 extra per mile of railway constructed. 'I prefer to work with white labour always,' said the Chief Engineer: 'the class of work ... [is] very superior.'<sup>20</sup>

The desire expressed by some to employ white labourers in preference to blacks extended beyond the humbler category of earthmovers, ballasters and platelayers, and embraced porters, pointsmen and firemen. In 1904, at a time when some 7 000 Indians and 6 000 Africans worked for the NGR, the Natal Legislative Assembly heard objection about whites being excluded from work which it was said they did efficiently 'all the world over in any white man's country'. By all accounts it was particularly galling to have blacks working as station porters, allegedly in double the number necessary. Also offensive was the sight of 'filthy' Indians handling the personal travel garb of women passengers. 'Can we wonder,' it was asked, 'that many valuable things go amissing in our railway carriages when we have Indian porters?' Although a vain effort had once been made to employ whites instead, government declared itself ready to try again 'to render every assistance to the white man'. By 1906 employment of white porters was pronounced a success, 'greatly appreciated by the travelling public' despite an increased wage bill of between £2 000 and £3 000 annually. The matter of white railway labour was not fully resolved however, and in 1907 and 1908 the Natal Legislative Assembly continued to hear argument that it was in the public interest not to employ blacks in tasks which whites could perform: engine cleaners, clerks, train guards and gatekeepers.<sup>21</sup>

While the Natal authorities persisted in their reluctance to hire unskilled white labour,<sup>22</sup> matters began to follow a rather different course in the Transvaal in 1907. Although whites had for several years been employed on new construction projects, it was at Volksrust that poor whites were first engaged to work in a railway depot in posts previously occupied by Africans. The measure was a response to representations from the local Dutch Reformed Church minister about destitute whites in the district. As is so often the case with temporary arrangements, the distinctly charitable one at Volksrust acquired permanence, and was copied at other depots in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. A second phase in the relief employment of whites as railway labourers had begun. Now, as whites took cleaner and easier work in railway yards and were increasingly employed as maintenance crews on existing track, most were engaged as temporary wage labourers; piecework payment applied only to

construction gangs on new track. In order to administer the new arrangements, the CSAR created its own White Labour Department and Inspectorate, a step which suggests that the employment of white labourers came to be viewed very quickly as a long-term project. Whites were not hired spontaneously at wages and conditions negotiated *ad hoc* simply to compensate for black labour unavailability.<sup>23</sup> At the end of 1907 the Railway employed approximately 300 white labourers at rates ranging from 2s 6d to 3s 4d per day.<sup>24</sup>

The CSAR had made significant strides with its so-called 'white labour policy' by the end of 1908. Nearly 1 900 white labourers had been recruited, some two thirds in the Transvaal. Overall, nearly three quarters of the labourers worked on railway line maintenance. Unemployment among whites had been eased, but in the Transvaal alone, 2 000 poor whites remained on the waiting list for Railway work. They doubtless waited eagerly to take the place of blacks who resigned or were dismissed from Railway service; engagement of the 1 900 poor whites had occurred because of vacancies left by 2 800 black labourers. Whether or not this number had been fired or had left Railway service voluntarily, other black people were not appointed to their positions. The morality of the substitution presented no difficulty to the White Labour Inspector who expressed his prejudice unashamedly. Conceding that the families of former black employees might suffer, he nevertheless reported that white women and children deserved more sympathy.<sup>25</sup>

The expendability of trained black railway workers was a crucial matter, and not just in the Transvaal: poor whites were not just 'back-up' labour. In the Cape in 1910 a dozen or so black labourers who had not long been in Railway service were dismissed from the Uitenhage workshops to make way for poor whites. According to government officials, the blacks would suffer no great hardship as they could easily obtain alternative work; woolwashing and agricultural labour received specific mention.<sup>26</sup> However, at a time when the General Manager was investigating the possibility of employing more poor whites, not all CGR staff approved the suggestion that black incumbents be replaced. As regards the locomotive workshops, warning was given that costs and productivity would be adversely affected.<sup>27</sup> And, following efforts to place poor whites at Steynsburg (where, in another charitable gesture, one father of ten was given trial employment in a black gang while his 'underfed' son of 18 was offered work at 1s a day), the station master stated that he was quite content with his three black assistants. In his own words, they were family men, 'respectable, honest and quiet', men who could speak three languages and who were also good shunters. It would be 'a crying shame' he said, 'to turn them away to make room for inexperienced men of any colour'.<sup>28</sup> Evidently poor whites were more acceptable as railway builders, and some were offered

work on the Graaff-Reinet line midway through 1909. By September CGR had employed some 500 white railway labourers.<sup>29</sup>

In the Cape, white labourers on the Graaff-Reinet line were paid 4s 8d per day and had free use of vacant platelayers' cottages. In the Salt River workshops the white labourers earned 2s 4d per day, 2d more than the blacks they replaced. As casual workers they were not entitled to holiday leave, sick pay or family medical benefits. In the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies the wages of the first 2 000 or so white railway labourers were 3s 4d a day. That these payments were far less than the subsistence wages which had been calculated privately and by government as minimal places a question-mark over the sincerity of the poor white programme. It should be noted, however, that the privileges which were granted effectively increased the rates and were a tangible expression of CSAR's concern to attract white labourers, to retain them and to improve their conditions. An amount of £2 was given to each construction gang to enable ploughing of a plot of railside ground; maize seed was distributed free; during winter one free bag of coal was allocated monthly to each labourer; bricks for lining the interior of wood and iron shanties were supplied; labourers were awarded a free second-class rail ticket each year, as well as one free ticket for local travel monthly. At places where houses were available, labourers were accommodated rent free. At Volksrust an evening school was started for labourers, as well as a day school for their children.<sup>30</sup> The benefits stamped the so-called white labour policy as a radical departure from the practices known to the 5 000 or so black labourers who worked for the CSAR.

Even if their privileges made them a labouring aristocracy on the Railways, poor whites were not exactly cosseted and their experiences were not always pleasant or tolerable. For example, there was some resistance from white gangers who either forgot that whites were supposed to be treated better than Africans, or who felt their own jobs were threatened by labourers whose shared skin colour and language appeared to erode the superiority they had previously enjoyed. On the CSAR reports were filed of newly recruited white labourers being bullied, sworn at, and inadequately instructed.<sup>31</sup> Even in the direst circumstances some labourers clung to their self-respect and a proportion of those who left the CSAR did so on account of harsh treatment. Others left because they refused transfer to other districts, because they secured better paid work, or because they were physically unable to withstand the gruelling manual labour. Some were dismissed for idleness and dishonesty, while yet others were discharged or switched from branch to main lines so as to reduce expense.<sup>31</sup>

When the white labour policy became better known, new unskilled recruits received a warmer welcome from their white superiors. Certain problems persisted, however, most notably with housing and pay. As regards accommodation, the point was made year after year that inadequate provision of housing was a powerful brake to further recruitment of white labourers. It was also a common reason for the resignation of those who could no longer afford to rent in the private market and/or those who could not tolerate the SAR's derelict, primitive and overcrowded shelter. In both 1912 and 1913, it was estimated that were it not for a shortage of more than 2 000 housing units countrywide, the Railways could readily appoint an additional 3 000 poor whites in place of blacks. It seemed hardly to help at all that by 1910 more than £10 000 had been spent on white labourers' accommodation, nor that by 1913 the figure had leapt to £90 000, some of it being spent on the purchase of old military quarters.<sup>33</sup>

Wages were every bit as problematic as housing. From the very first, the CSAR's White Labour Inspector recommended increasing the wage of 3s 4d daily to a maximum of 5s daily depending on length of service. As one Bloemfontein resident wrote, failure to pay a living wage made it difficult for poor whites to differentiate themselves from blacks, and impossible to feed and clothe their children. In the end, he warned, they would be driven to stealing, would fill the prisons and would cost the state considerably more than a general wage increase.<sup>34</sup> From the Railways' point of view it was also desirable to nurture a stable workforce: time and money were wasted if poor whites could not be induced to remain in Railway service. Accordingly it was not long before wage scales were revised so as to discourage short service and encourage some degree of permanence. Beginning in April 1910, from a lowered starting wage of 3s daily for one month, white labourers could progress to a ceiling of 5s daily after two years. The package of fringe benefits which white labourers received included sundry train travel concessions, free medical aid and four public holidays annually. The free monthly bag of coal and free ploughing were discontinued. In the view of the CSAR's Chief Engineer, this formalisation of wages and service conditions had become necessary to cope with an anticipated increase of poor whites applying for railway work. It was not that the work itself was popular, but that as railways sprawled across the landscape fragmenting farms and undermining transport riding, men would simply have to take to manual labour on the Railways.<sup>35</sup>

## **The period 1910–1924**

After Union in 1910 and the amalgamation of the three colonial railway organisations into the newly styled South African Railways (SAR), the programme for

employment of poor whites as unskilled workers continued with ministerial approval.<sup>36</sup> In December 1910 the SAR had some 3 400 white labourers on its payroll. A minority of these were employed on new railway construction. The balance (2 000) worked at stations, depots and workshops and in maintenance gangs on lines which were already open to train traffic. Geographically speaking, most (2 300) were employed in the Transvaal, the Orange Free State rating second (850). The porters apart, white labourers had yet to be employed in Natal, a situation which triggered emotional appeals in Parliament for the retrenchment of the Indians who formed the majority (60 per cent) of the workforce.<sup>37</sup>

The SAR's white labour scheme received a boost late in 1911 when improved pay scales were announced. The official explanation was that revision would allow full advantage to be taken of the shortage of African labour to encourage white workers. At the same time, the White Labour Superintendent also highlighted the need to pay more if the Railways were to attract better applicants and stem desertion and resignations. In the Transvaal and Orange Free State the starting wage was raised to 3s 6d and the period of qualification for the maximum wage of 5s was shortened to 13 months. In the Cape, due to an allegedly lower cost of living, daily wages were pegged 6d lower at each service notch.<sup>38</sup>

Having announced improved wages, the SAR sought publicity for its attempt to recruit white men who were 'of good character', physically fit, aged between 18 and 40, and able to use pick, shovel and barrow on earthworks. With the help of magistrates, ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church, field cornets, members of parliament and senate, almost 1 400 applications were soon received, mostly from single men. Some two thirds of the 1 000 unmarried applicants were enrolled. Indicative of the shortage of suitable housing, only one third of the 386 married applicants were offered work. Nearly 400 of the 750 newly hired labourers replaced whites who had been promoted between June 1911 and April 1912 to positions such as learner fireman, learner shunter, cleaners and gangers (in the same interval 346 whites acquired jobs at the expense of blacks who, contrary to the SAR's avowed policy, were deliberately dismissed to create vacancies).<sup>39</sup> This was not the first time that white labourers had been promoted. During the years 1908-1910 there had been some 500 promotions. However, it was only in 1911 that a definite policy was adopted of turning to the white labourer category first when seeking to fill vacancies higher up the job ladder (at Union it also became policy not to elevate black labourers beyond labourer grade).<sup>40</sup> Thereafter promotions were commonplace: by 1913 more than 1 000 poor white labourers had been moved into permanent positions. Although more promotions were made than

before to positions as painters, signal fitters, ticket examiners, messengers and checkers, the categories of fireman, shunter and ganger still accounted for over half.<sup>41</sup> By 1916 more than 3 000 promotions had been made, all of them in turn replaced by fresh white recruits. The plan to use the pool of poor whites as a reservoir from which to recruit labour for superior grades of work had borne some fruit.

As part of its intention to advance white labourers, the SAR began evening classes at major railway centres, namely Johannesburg, Germiston, Pretoria and Cape Town. The intention was eventually to have schools at Volksrust, Waterval Boven, Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp, Kroonstad, Joubertina, Noupoort, Springfontein and East London. Excepting in the Transvaal, provincial administrations helped bear a portion of the costs of Dutch and English instruction in arithmetic, reading, writing, grammar, dictation, composition, railway geography and SAR rules and regulations. In the event, the burden was never crippling. The number of schools operating simultaneously reached a maximum of seven in 1912, in which year a fraction more than 200 labourers were promoted as a direct result of attending classes (more than 300 failed to pass examinations). Lack of enthusiasm among labourers meant that certain schools never opened or that they only functioned sporadically. Classes were terminated because men were 'too old', 'too backward', or 'hopelessly unsuitable for promotion'. At the close of 1915 evening classes were offered only at Cape Town, Germiston and Johannesburg. Of the 425 white labourers who sat examinations, 175 passed, most graduating to superior railway jobs.<sup>42</sup> Although the SAR did not become directly involved in the education of white labourers' children, schooling was problematic, especially in regard to families stationed in remote districts. Where possible, arrangements were made to transfer fathers to work gangs or stations near to schools.<sup>43</sup>

In the early years of Union, the SAR's white labour policy continued to be pursued vigorously and included study of the possibility of increasing the November 1911 total of 500 white labourers in SAR workshops.<sup>44</sup> Applications for railway jobs were plentiful, numbering almost 2 500 in 1913 and 3 000 in 1914. Demand for work far outstripped the number of positions offered, and in both years only one third of the workseekers were placed. White recruitment was slowed by the SAR's reluctance to allow racially integrated work gangs, and even to have a white gang flanked by two black gangs.<sup>45</sup> This meant that whites could generally only be hired in batches, not singly. Mostly, however, the slow rate of white recruitment reflected the shortage of suitable accommodation. As early as 1913 it was estimated that there was work for 5 000 additional whites on track maintenance countrywide, barring the harsh environments of Northern and Western Transvaal, the Karoo and parts of Natal.

Fifteen thousand whites were estimated to be awaiting offers of railway employment. A housing budget exceeding £400 000 was proposed but was never forthcoming. In part the outbreak of war was to blame: despite recommendation in 1913 and 1914 that 340 houses be built, only 140 were completed.<sup>46</sup>

Notwithstanding the SAR's inability to absorb all those who applied for work as white labourers, the thousands of men who were fortunate to obtain work kept the white labour policy respectably successful. December employment totals for the eight years between 1909 and 1916 never dropped below the 1909 figure of just over 3 000, peaking at some 4 600 in 1912, and falling off to 4 100 in 1916. How many of these men had joined SAR for the first time, and how many for a second or subsequent time, is not known. Nor is it known for certain how long most white labourers remained on the railways. As an indication, however (and excluding those who were promoted or transferred, those who died and those who withdrew at the end of an assignment), the white labourers who left the SAR in 1913, 1914 and 1915 totalled approximately 2 700, 2 000 and 1 300 respectively.<sup>47</sup>

As already indicated, the SAR's failure to keep all its recruits hinged in part on inadequate pay; the dilemma was to avoid raising wages so high that the purpose of the poor white policy was defeated by people other than the poorest whites being attracted to Railway service. On the one hand the perennial wage problem was eased by wartime allowances which were intended to compensate in some measure for inflated prices,<sup>48</sup> and by geographical allowances which were aimed at smoothing out regional variations in cost of living – rent and food especially. On the other hand the wage problem was aggravated by reported incidents of construction gang leaders absconding with wages, by the hated system of tool and tent hire, and by the iniquitous arrangement whereby men were not paid for the time and cost incurred in moving camp.<sup>49</sup> And, it was not until 1914 that white labourers were allowed to rail their tools at contractors' reduced rates. The concession hardly harmed the Railways. On the contrary, labourers were ultimately paid out less for the depreciated tools which they returned; they did not drink away their depreciation receipts between assignments; work on new projects was not delayed for want of equipment.<sup>50</sup> Depreciation deductions on rented equipment, tent hire and tool conveyance costs were not the only sources of dissatisfaction. Whites who had laboured on a piecework basis for contractors on the Vierfontein–Bothaville and the Bethal–Volksrust lines grumbled about the charges for water barrels and about the suspect way of estimating volumes of earth moved. They also complained about the lack of work at contract sites and the resultant obligation to purchase their own return train tickets (or walk home), this under a regulation pertaining to men who remained on site less than three months.

Said the *Transvaal Chronicle* in June 1914, sweated labour was rampant. In some cases men were earning net amounts of 3 15s after 46 days work, £1 after 21 days.<sup>51</sup>

The desperate circumstances of some white railway workers on construction projects said very little for the existence of a truly caring state policy, and still less for state paranoia about working class revolt. Not all the SAR's poor whites suffered equally, however. In April 1913 the average daily wage earned by white construction labourers on piecework was said to exceed 8s in the Transvaal, 6s in the Orange Free State and 5s in the Cape. Wages for the majority of poor white railway workers were lower, being more in line with white farm and industrial wages of 3s 6d and 5s per day.<sup>52</sup> In 1912, 51 per cent of the SAR's white labour force earned in excess of 4s 6d daily. Corresponding figures for the ensuing three years were 57, 74 and 70 per cent.<sup>53</sup> Even taking into account the wage increases of May 1917, however, many white wage workers fell short of the 7s daily (inclusive of benefits) which Parliament recommended in 1917. The discrepancy was the subject of a protest meeting called by the Johannesburg branch of the National Union of Railway and Harbour Servants (NURAHS) in 1918. With 1 100 white labourers still renting their own shelter in the private housing market, SAR management quickly agreed to a daily allowance of 1s for married men who, having served for a minimum twelve months, were still without free housing.<sup>54</sup>

For a time the interests of poor whites continued to be paid attention after the white railway labour programme was hived off from the SAR to the Department of Mines and Industries in June 1917. In the view of the government, the Railways still had a role to play in soaking up unemployed whites, including war veterans.<sup>55</sup> The sum spent on housing continued to grow (by February 1918, it reached £150 000).<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, approximating the *annual* number of placements made by government labour exchanges (excluding 1921), the employment figures for March for the period 1917–1922 consistently exceeded 4 000, reaching nearly 4 700 in 1921. By then, the minimum daily wage for a white labourer over the age of 21 had increased to 8s. The free housing privilege had been withdrawn, but in its stead white labourers were placed on the permanent staff with superior medical, superannuation and job termination conditions. Simultaneously, as from November 1920, the SAR once more started an unemployment relief programme at government's behest. This time a portion of the wages paid was recovered from the state's Unemployment Vote. By July 1923, 8 000 men had been engaged for relief works.<sup>57</sup>

In the interim, the wholly SAR-subsidised white labour policy had faltered. Not only was the opinion growing that the SAR's contribution to permanent white upliftment could only ever be slight,<sup>58</sup> but the grim reality of a five-year

operating deficit (and consequent pressure to lower freight rates so as to attract more business) obliged the Railways to enact economy measures. White labourers were transferred from branch to main lines where they could be more productively employed, and those who resigned were not replaced by whites.<sup>59</sup> In some instances transfers were merely a prelude to dismissal under some 'reorganisation' plan. Reports surfaced of blacks being hired in place of whites as gangers, engine cleaners, waiters, cloakroom attendants and parcel office assistants. But a quarter of a century of privilege had made certain grades of work 'white-by-custom', and in 1922 NURAHS castigated the Smuts government for hypocrisy, insensitivity and greed which, in its view, resurrected the 'black peril' and threatened white living standards.<sup>60</sup> The culmination of the fading white labour policy was that as from April 1923, new white recruits were graded as casual labourers, thereby losing leave, medical and train travel privileges. By March 1924 the number of white railway labourers had returned to the 1909 figure of 3 000, a state of affairs which the Pact government moved to correct swiftly in its 'civilised labour' programme.

## Conclusion

Assessment of the Railway poor white policy before 1924 is difficult. This is so even when the policy is considered only on its own terms and its broader ramifications are ignored — for example, its effect on white labour policy generally, and on the formation of the white working class. Assessment is also difficult in the absence of oral testimony and any comparative study of 'civilised labour'. Research into these dimensions of white railway labour is imperative. In the meantime, some general observations may be ventured. Numerically speaking, the poor white railway labourers were far from being a majority (there were 12 500 black railway labourers in 1909, and 24 000 in 1916) and the white labour policy itself was far from absorbing more than a small share of the 27 000 heads of poor white households.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, some officials were pleased with the Railway contribution. The General Manager found something positive to say about the experience up to mid-1914, even though the programme was reckoned to be costing £90 000 per annum more than if black labour were employed, even though an equivalent amount had been spent on housing, and even though the number of whites hired had been only fractionally less than the number of blacks they replaced (higher wages had not been compensated by enhanced productivity). The experiment on unskilled work, he announced, had not been an end in itself: '... the object was to utilize this work as a training ground and to reclaim the best of the labour.' As such, he concluded, the trial had been 'conspicuously successful' and had 'rendered great service to the country'. An official inquiry endorsed this posi-

tive view of the white labour policy on the railways: '... as an experiment ... with the object of giving work to those who have no trade or means of livelihood, and raising many who had entirely lost their self-respect ... it has been an entire success.'<sup>62</sup> The White Labour Superintendent was less enthusiastic, noting in 1915 that 'much more could be done' for poor whites.<sup>63</sup> And, in 1917, the railway engineer at Harrismith went further still, saying that the policy had been of little consequence. Far from disapproving of the scheme, however, he emphasised that it should be put on a more permanent footing and extended for the purpose of 'consolidating the position of the white race'.<sup>64</sup> Others would have shared this opinion. For example, the Johannesburg branch secretary of NURAHs was to complain in 1918 that poor white railway labourers were 'denied the liberty of white existence; to thrive and to progress'.<sup>65</sup>

Precisely how much white advance and prosperity would have satisfied critics of railway 'poor whiteism' is difficult to gauge. Equally, however, it is difficult to gainsay that advantages did accrue to many whites. Disregarding the many thousands of men who found temporary labour on the Railways between 1910 and 1924, 6 000 were promoted to permanent positions where they obtained unprecedented remuneration and security. These individuals (and their families) were all eligible for housing, and this in other than the 959 units which had been constructed specifically for white labourers by 1919.<sup>66</sup> And it bears stressing that apart from work and housing, poor white railway labourers also benefited from the SAR's educational, health care and welfare facilities.<sup>67</sup> In the very nature of the Railways as a geographically diffuse employer, work, housing and other benefits were neither concentrated in any particular place, nor were they confined to urban areas. Railway labour presented itself to the white poor in cities as well as in platteland settlements. In rural districts localised work on the railway supplemented seasonal earnings and postponed the trek to towns. In the same way, Railway provision of work over a wide area diffused the pockets of disgruntled, agitated poor whites in cities and helped defuse any threat they presented to the social order. Poor white railway workers exacted their price economically, but the Railways, and white society at large, frowned more than they protested. It was the poor whites contribution relative to black labourers which was really the point of contention and which had to be resolved if they were to continue in unskilled, menial railway labour after 1924.