

# **RIGHT-WING POLITICS AND RESISTANCE: THE MINE WORKERS' UNION AND TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1964-1997.**

WESSEL VISSER

Department of History, University of Stellenbosch

## **ABSTRACT**

After 1948 the Mine Workers' Union, as the most prominent and vocal advocate of white worker privileges and interests, maintained a symbiotic and fairly harmonious relationship with the National Party government. However, the rapid growth of the South African economy during the 1960s and 1970s, coupled with an increasing shortage of skilled labour, forced the government to yield to the demands of industry to relax the colour bar and job reservation, especially in the mining sector. The government's acceptance of the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations in 1979, i.e. that black trade unions be registered and that statutory job reservation be scrapped, would not only irreparably damage its relationship with the MWU, but eventually also put the union on a path of confrontation and resistance with the NP. In the 1980s the MWU joined a coalition of right-wing parties and other organisations in a desperate but futile attempt to stem the tide of reform initiatives towards establishing a democratic dispensation for South Africa. By 1997, however, the realities of the new South Africa caught up with the racist and out-dated labour strategies of the MWU. The union was thus forced by changed circumstances to transform and re-invent itself as Solidarity in order to survive in the new millennium.

## **Introduction**

The August 2003 issue of *The South African Labour Bulletin* poses the question: what has happened to the white worker? In its introductory remarks the article states that the post-1994 period in South Africa has been a harsh reality check for white workers and especially the Afrikaans-speaking workers of the former Mine Workers' Union, renamed Solidarity in 1997.<sup>1</sup>

However, this paper argues that white mine workers were already confronted with changing realities in the mining industry as early as the mid-1960s. Changing economic circumstances and the changing demographics of its workforce would compel the goldmine industry in particular to alter labour processes on the mines. In their turn, white miners responded by becoming more reactionary and aligning themselves with right-wing political groups in an effort to protect and defend white worker privileges and the job colour bar. Their resistance to the gradual de-racialisation of the South African labour dispensation, especially in the mining industry, culminated in the response of the Mine Workers' Union to the recommendations of the Wiehahn

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<sup>1</sup> See "What has happened to the white worker?", *The South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 27, No. 4, August 2003.

Commission in 1979 and its support of right-wing political resistance to political reform and change in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

### **The symbiotic MWU-NP relationship prior to the Wiehahn recommendations**

#### Relations between the MWU and the government before 1963

The Mine Workers' Union reached one of the peaks of its prominence in the white labour movement during the general strike or Rand Revolt of 1922. The union was founded as the Transvaal Miners' Association in 1902 and renamed the South African Mine Workers' Union, or MWU, in 1913. Under the auspices of the South African Industrial Federation MWU members formed the most prominent part of the violent mass of white workers in their resistance against capital and the state. Their protest was against the Chamber of Mines' decision in 1918 to replace semi-skilled and skilled white labour with cheap black labour as well as against its 1921 decision to lower white wages. But the three-month 1922 strike was eventually suppressed by government forces.<sup>3</sup>

A political consequence of the miners' defeat in 1922 was the fall of the government of Gen. Jan Smuts in the 1924 general election, because the government was held responsible for the violent suppression of the strike. In its place a coalition government, consisting of the National Party (NP) and the South African Labour Party (SALP), came into power and introduced a programme of protective pro-white, or "civilized", labour legislation. The introduction of the Mines and Works Amendment Act (the so-called "Colour Bar" Act) in 1926 was of particular benefit to members of the MWU in that it entrenched white job reservation on the mines. The law protected skilled and semi-skilled white workers by simply reserving the granting of certificates of competency in skilled trades for whites and Coloureds, and excluding Africans and Asians.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the post-1922 period saw the incorporation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of white trade unions within the state structures, thus disarming them as a potential militant, political threat. Within the union structures power passed into the hands of a bureaucracy of permanent and salaried trade union officials.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This paper forms part of a comprehensive research project by the author on the history of the Mine Workers' Union, due for publication in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. AG Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking Witwatersrand, 1922*. RGN, Pretoria, 1982; J Krikler, *The Rand Revolt. The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killings in South Africa*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, Jeppestown, 2005 and N Herd, *1922. The Revolt on the Rand*. Blue Crane Books, Johannesburg, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> JP Brits, "The last years of South African Party rule", in BJ Liebenberg & SB Spies (eds.), *South Africa in the Twentieth Century*, Van Schaik Academic, Pretoria, 1993, pp.154-155,173-175,180-182; FA Johnstone, *Class, race and gold. A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1976, pp.150,156,166-167.

<sup>5</sup> RH Davies, *Capital, state and white labour in South Africa 1900-1960*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1979, pp.179-181,195-198,231.

According to Yudelman, the state embarked upon a programme to subjugate and pacify organised white labour by formally co-opting it into the structures of the state. Thus organised white labour lost its power to use strikes as an effective political and economic weapon, having been depoliticised through incorporation into the political and administrative structures of the state. This was indeed a trade off – white labour accepted collective bargaining and the civilized labour policy in exchange for compliance with state-controlled labour structures. The increased role of the state brought a virtual end to militant white worker resistance and for the next few decades or so the MWU was to become a docile, pro-government union.<sup>6</sup>

After 1936 a period of fierce struggle followed for political control of the MWU executive between Smuts's United Party (UP) and the SALP, on the one hand, and the NP, on the other hand. The twelve-year-long battle for the ideological soul of the MWU came to an end six months after the NP's victory in the 1948 general election. A pro-Afrikaner majority faction in the union, under the tireless guidance and inspiration of Dr Albert Hertzog, the son of former Prime Minister Gen. JBM Hertzog, eventually succeeded in taking control of the MWU executive in November 1948.<sup>7</sup>

After this - and despite some allegations of corruption against the newly elected and staunch pro-NP general secretary Daan Ellis, which could not be proved despite three commissions of enquiry<sup>8</sup> - the executive of the MWU maintained a symbiotic and fairly harmonious relationship with the NP government for quite some time. As one of its most important constituencies, the NP government had the interests of the unskilled and semi-skilled white working class at heart. As in 1924, the MWU's interests were promoted and entrenched by protectionist legislation and the union enjoyed an influential position in NP political circles. Between 1948 and 1978 it was thus not necessary for white unions such as the MWU to exert serious pressure on the NP government. In addition, Daan Ellis was a member of the party's executive in the Transvaal. He had instant and unrivalled access to ministerial – and even the Prime Minister's – offices and maintained a benevolent and friendly relationship with the then Minister of Mines, Dr AJR van Rhyn. A parliamentary mine study group was also formed by MPs from NP-controlled mining constituencies on the Witwatersrand, which served as a lobby for white miners' interests regarding legislation. Various NP publications in this period ensured white workers of the party's sustained support. Until the end of the 1970s white mineworkers enjoyed the protection of this symbiotic relationship.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> D Yudelman, *The emergence of modern South Africa: state, capital and the incorporation of organized labor on the South African gold fields, 1902-1939*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1983, pp.9,114-115,186,208-211,221-233.

<sup>7</sup> See L Naudé, *Dr. A. Hertzog, die Nasionale Party en die Mynwerkers*, NRT, Pretoria, 1969 and L de Kock, "Die Stryd van die Afrikaner in die Suid-Afrikaanse Mynwerkersunie aan die Witwatersrand, 1936-1948", Ongepubliseerde MA-tesis, Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> See WP Visser, "Van MWU tot Solidariteit – Geskiedenis van die Mynwerkersunie, 1902-2002", Ongepubliseerde manuskrip, pp.126-161.

<sup>9</sup> H Giliomee en H Adam, *Afrikanermag: opkoms en toekoms*, UUB, Stellenbosch, 1981, pp.123,143,202; AHJ Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie in die Suid-Afrikaanse

However, from the mid-1960s onwards the NP government began to shift its stance on economic policy, adopting policies that would in future differ considerably from those of previous decades. It was forced to take cognisance of changing economic conditions. As the international gold price and gold production were on the rise (by 1973 the international demand for gold would result in a rise of the gold price to more than \$150 per fine ounce), profits rose dramatically and consequently government revenue from gold and the mining industry remained a crucial source of income in foreign exchange. Therefore, in the face of threatening economic isolation and sanctions by the international community in response to South Africa's apartheid policy, the importance of mining and business interests as important sources of state revenue increased accordingly. From the early 1970s onwards the government increasingly began to take the interests of the private sector and its need of a stable labour force into consideration.

The economic upswing of the 1970s harboured an inherent weakness. The rapid growth of the South African economy in the 1960s and early 1970s created a severe shortage of skilled white workers, thus increasing the importance of skilled labour and decreasing the need for unskilled labour. For instance, between 1971 and 1977 white male workers constituted only one quarter of the increase in the total skilled blue collar labour force. These shortages inhibited productivity and kept South Africa dependent on sophisticated imported machinery, while maintaining a perilously high import account. In essence the shortage of skilled white manpower and the advancement of black workers in semi-skilled and skilled job categories, especially in the mining industry, gradually began to undermine the position of white trade unions as well as their bargaining power in entrenching white job reservation. The growing wage gap between white and black workers was an incentive for mining capital to replace white workers with black workers, which would lead to sustained attempts to undermine the colour bar in the workplace. Existing skilled jobs were fragmented and restructured in order to fill newly created jobs with cheaper African workers. Therefore, in the light of changing economic priorities, the state gradually began to remove the restrictions on black labour. Blacks were also provided with better training facilities, as the shortage of skilled labour made the need to create black job opportunities a priority. This in turn generated greater tensions within the white trade unions, especially the MWU.<sup>10</sup>

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Politiek, 1978-1982", p.30; J Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg: men, mines and the challenge of conflict*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986, pp.317,378; *Die Mynwerker*, 2.4.1980, pp.7-8 (W Kleynhans: Hoe die NP se Arbeidsbeleid verander het).

<sup>10</sup> Giliomee en Adam, *Afrikanermag*, pp.135-136,143,151,202; Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg*, pp.420-421; W Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp.174,178-179; S Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987, p.164; DH Houghton, *The South African Economy*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1978, pp.102,108-113,228-230; M Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid. South Africa, 1910-1986*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1989, pp.7,110,116-117,184,207,213-214,309-310,370; J Nattrass, *The South African Economy. Its Growth and Change*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1988, p.160; NE Wiehahn, *Die Volledige Wiehahn-Verslag*, Lex Patria Uitgewers, Johannesburg en Kaapstad, 1982, pp.716,731.

## The MWU's Time of Troubles, 1964-1967

A dress rehearsal of what was still to come in terms of the MWU's fierce opposition to any attempts to alter labour processes and reduce the entrenched privileges of white job reservation in the mining industry took place in 1964. One year prior to this event Eddie Gründling was elected as the new MWU general secretary in place of the deceased Daan Ellis.<sup>11</sup> Trouble in the ranks of the MWU started when Gründling made a deal on behalf of the union with the Chamber of Mines to implement a monthly wage experiment on twelve goldmines from August 1964 to June 1965 whereby a category of lowly paid white wage earners were reapportioned to implement an improved and fixed monthly wage scale based on 26 working days per month. But the monthly wage experiment would also entail a reorganisation of underground work whereby a number of "scheduled" miners (this term referred to competent white and some competent Coloured miners) in certain job supervision categories could be replaced by competent "non-scheduled" miners or so-called African "boss boys".<sup>12</sup>

There was an immediate outcry from Gründling's opponents in the MWU against the monthly salary experiment. As he did not properly consult the members of his union before signing the deal with the Chamber of Mines, the experiment unleashed a storm of protest that would reach such magnitude that it shook the MWU to its foundations. The fierce opposition to Gründling and the Chamber of Mines' initiative led to great strife, dissension, factionalism, disruption and instability among white miners in general and within the MWU executive in particular, and created its own 'Time of Troubles'. It was clear that the experiment had struck a raw nerve as far as white job reservation and the colour bar in the mining industry were concerned. A rebel faction in the MWU, the so-called Action Committee, was set up to fight the experiment and any easing of the colour bar in the mining industry. The secretary of the Action Committee was Arrie Paulus, who would become the union's general secretary. There were rowdy scenes at shaft heads and angry crowds bore down upon the offices of the MWU, demanding the resignation of Gründling and his executive.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Solidarity Archives, Centurion, Pretoria (hereafter MWU-Argief) Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 23.7.1963, pp.3,5; *Die Mynwerker*, 26.7.1963. p.1 (Nuwe Hoofsekretaris is Gründling).

<sup>12</sup> See South African National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter SAB) K 268, Verslag van Onderzoek insake Proefnemings op sekere Myne, pp. 1,3-9,13,16-21,26-34,42-54 en Rekord van Getuienis gelewer deur AE Gründling, 11.6.1965, pp.2,12,14-15,19-21; Instituut vir Eietydse Geskiedenis, Universiteit van die Vrystaat (hereafter INEG) PV 14, Marais Viljoen-Versameling, Lêer nr.I. A23/1: Memorandum deur TL Gibbs: Reorganisasie van Werk en Verantwoordelikheid op Goudmyne, 24.2.1965, pp.1-3.

<sup>13</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 30.6.1965, pp.9-12; (SAB) K 268, Verslag van die Kommissie van Onderzoek insake Proefmenings op sekere Myne, pp.17,30,42-45,54; A Hepple, *South Africa. A political and economic history*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1966, p.213; MA du Toit, *South African Trade Unions. History, Legislation, Policy*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Johannesburg, 1976, p.68; F Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines 1911-1969*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972, p.115; *The Star*, 30.6.1965 (Rand police out as angry miners meet).

Bowing to this pressure, the government appointed a commission to inquire into the experiment. The commission completed its task quickly and reported in August 1965, recommending the abandonment of the experiment. This the government did at once. Among the implications of the experiment, according to the commission, were the possibilities that Africans would slight the authority of white miners and that explosives might get into the hands of black workers. The commission also thought the experiment would lead to a shrinkage of employment opportunities for whites in the mines. It warned that the granting of higher status to Africans might lead to labour unrest. Therefore the attempt to relax the industrial colour bar was thwarted for the time being.<sup>14</sup>

However, the whole episode with the monthly wage experiment had a very negative sequel for the MWU, regarding the position of Gründling in particular. As was mentioned before, this incident would cause severe tensions, factionalism and disruption within union ranks. Despite the committee of enquiry's recommendations regarding the monthly wage experiment and the government's subsequent acceptance of these recommendations, the Action Committee lobbied relentlessly among shaft heads on various mines for Gründling and his supporters to be ousted from the MWU executive. Wildcat strikes were instigated and by September 1965, for instance, only four of the eleven Free State goldmines were in full production. They even obtained the assistance of one Ras Beyers, an obscure Pretoria advocate who also was an outspoken anti-Semite and had been a member of the fascist *Ossewa Brandwag* movement in his youth.<sup>15</sup>

When the Action Committee's call for an election for a new MWU executive was dismissed and the expulsion of members was mentioned, they threatened that a day-long strike would take place every week. The Minister of Labour, Marais Viljoen, subsequently instructed the Industrial Tribunal to investigate the situation and to make recommendations to terminate the dissatisfaction among MWU members. Despite this move, the Action Committee still insisted on the expulsion of the MWU executive. When there were still no signs of an MWU general election by May 1966, the Action Committee decided on a general strike, which would commence on 20 June 1966 and continue until such an election was agreed to. The Industrial Tribunal reported, however, that the two parties had reached an agreement

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<sup>14</sup> (SAB) K 268, Verslag van die Kommissie van Ondersoek insake Proefnemings op sekere Myne, pp.28-31,36,39,48,51-59,62-63,65; Hepple, *South Africa*, p.213; *Die Mynwerker*, 4.8.1965, p.2 (Proef op Myne gaan gestaak word); *Ibid.*, 18.8.1965, pp.1,2 (Proefneming: Bevinding van Kommissie); *Die Transvaler*, 4.8.1965 (Bantoepröf op Myne gaan gestaak word).

<sup>15</sup> A Sitas, "Rebels without a Pause: The MWU and the Defence of the Colour Bar", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5, 3, October 1979, pp.40,43; Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, p.68; *Sunday Times*, 2.5.1965 (V Graham: Miners Want Beyers In – Grundling Out); *Ibid.*, 5.12.1965 (Rebel miners set for strike); *The Pretoria News*, 6.8.1965 (Mine 'Rebels' move to oust Grundling); *Rand Daily Mail*, 22.11.1965 ('Rebel' leaders' challenge to Grundling); *Sunday Chronicle*, 13.6.1965 (Cheers from 23 for Beyers); *Ibid.*, 4.12.1966 (B Hitchcock: I'm Anti-Imperialist, says Ras Beyers); *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, 4.7.1965 (Sluier gelig oor Dr. Beyers, Advokaat wat Mynwerkers Adviseer); *Die Burger*, 20.9.1965 (Groot Moeilikheid dreig by Goudmyne).

and that the threatened strike would not take place. But allegations by the Action Committee (which had been reinstated after being disbanded subsequent to the investigations of the Tribunal) that the MWU executive was responsible for anomalies in connection with nominations for the election were followed by further strikes. The threat of even more strikes practically forced the Minister of Labour to publish legislation forbidding strikes on the grounds that the domestic affairs of a union could be handled by normal union procedures. The Action Committee then threatened to paralyse the majority of the goldmines. It refused to abandon its strike plans, since it alleged that the Minister of Labour was siding with the Chamber of Mines.<sup>16</sup>

The election of MWU shaft representatives eventually took place on 19 October 1966. The union's new general council was appointed on 7 November, with both the Action Committee and Gründling's group proclaiming victory. However, the climax was reached when, in an unprecedented *coup d'état* by the Action Committee, Gründling was ousted as MWU general secretary on 25 November 1966. It was the Committee's strategy to fill the vacancy with an interim general secretary until such time that they would be in a position to manipulate the MWU constitution to appoint Ras Beyers as the union's new permanent general secretary. Fred Short, a member of the Action Committee, was appointed as interim general secretary in Gründling's place.<sup>17</sup>

But Beyers's baleful influence, which would only accelerate the forces of disruption and destabilization within the MWU, became apparent immediately. Short seemed to be uncertain about his own leadership capabilities and was not fit to be a general secretary. Therefore he leaned heavily on Beyers, who served as his intellectual crutch. For instance, Short was sworn in with a bizarre oath to the effect that he would resist with all his strength "the onslaught of Kaffir, Moor and Indian on the White working community". The ceremony bore Beyers's personal imprint. After Short, he was sworn in under the same oath as the "permanent legal advisor" and "paid official" of the MWU with an exorbitant annual salary. Beyers had a personal and devious ambition to control the MWU, apparently to gain a conservative, reactionary influence over the white working class in order to establish some form of right-wing political following. It became clear that he would henceforth serve as the intellectual leader and would *de facto* be in control of the MWU. The new executive gave him a "free hand" to organise his affairs and also agreed that he could act "supervisory in all instances which he would deem to be in the best interests of the union". He would be consulted on all important decisions "in the interests of the union" and, in the absence of the executive, he could use his own discretion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, pp.68-69.

<sup>17</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 25.11.1966, pp.1-4; Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, pp.68-69; Sitas, "Rebels without a Pause", p.45; *Rand Daily Mail*, 25.11.1966 (D Smith) 'Rebel' Miners Take Over).

<sup>18</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.11.1966, pp.1-5; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 30.11.1966, p.22; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Noodvergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 3.12.1966, p.9; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Bestuurskomitee, 28.11.1966; Wilson, *Labour on the South African Gold Mines*, p.116; Sitas, "Rebels without a Pause", p.46; *The Pretoria News*, 21.11.1966 (Ras

The resolve of the Beyers faction of the Action Committee to control the MWU, however, backfired when Gründling succeeded with a court interdict in December 1966 against the appointment of Short and Beyers on the grounds that Short was a retired union member and Beyers not a *bona fide* member of the MWU. In terms of the MWU constitution, therefore, these appointments were illegal. Short and Beyers were dismissed and instructed not to interfere with the affairs of the union.<sup>19</sup> The successful court interdict against the Beyers faction exacerbated the leadership crisis and would plunge the MWU even further into chaos and disorder, requiring urgent crisis management. After a few emergency meetings another interim general secretary, GP Murray, was appointed to replace Short. As a result of all the administrative chaos and confusion the MWU was obliged at one stage to pay the salaries of the three general secretaries (Gründling, Short and Murray) simultaneously. The absence of a permanent general secretary also had a negative effect on the administration of the MWU. There was no official with the authority to sign cheques and consequently MWU staff could not be paid. The activities of the union came to a temporary standstill.<sup>20</sup>

Dissent on Beyers's position also began to surface in the Action Committee and his influence on the MWU became increasingly controversial. Certain members of the Committee were concerned about the validity of Beyers's appointment on the executive, his position of unchecked power on the executive and his "fantastic" salary. Because of the lack of stable management and purposeful direction, the troubles in the union continued into 1967 against a background of virtual anarchy among miners. Consequently the Free State district executive of the MWU appealed to the Minister of Labour against Beyers's position as the union's legal advisor.<sup>21</sup>

A new phase of promotion for black workers which was announced by the Chamber of Mines did not help matters. White workers immediately expressed fears of losing their jobs because, according to them, half of the shift-bosses would be downgraded to mineworkers and half of the mine captains would, in turn, be downgraded to shift-bosses. White mineworkers would perhaps gain a higher status but would, to all intents and purposes,

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Beyers in New Movement); *Sunday Times*, 27.11.1966 (V Graham: "Supremo" Beyers aims to smash the Broederbond).

<sup>19</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 30.11.1966, p.17; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Noodvergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 3.12.1966, p.1; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Bestuurskomitee, 1.12.1966; p.1; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Noodvergadering van die Algemene Raad, 12.12.1966, pp.3,4,16; Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, p.70; Sitas, "Rebels without a Pause", p.47; *Die Vaderland*, 24.11.1966 (Vakbondbaas betwis sy ontslag deur mynwerkers).

<sup>20</sup> See MWU-Argief, Notules van die Vergaderings van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 30.11.1966 – 21.12.1966; *Ibid.*, Notules van die Vergaderings van die Bestuurskomitee, 30.11.1966 – 3.1.1976; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Noodvergadering van die Algemene Raad, 12.12.1966, pp.1-5,12,15-17,19-20; *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, ongedateerd (MWU verras met twee nuwe aanstellings).

<sup>21</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Noodvergadering van die Algemene Raad, 12.12.1966, pp.20-21; Sitas, "Rebels without a Pause", p.47; *Die Transvaler*, 28.11.1966 (Nòg 'n Stryd teen Beyers); *Ibid.*, 29.11.1966 (OVS-Myners gaan by Min. kla); *Rand Daily Mail*, 29.11.1966 (D Smith: Free State Miners vow Fight to Death).



become supervisors of a selected group of black “boss-boys” who would be allowed to do the work of white workers. The offer of a mediation committee by the Minister of Labour was at first accepted but when the committee was appointed, further dissatisfaction was expressed because certain members of the committee were allegedly opposed to the MWU.

There were continued attempts to make more use of black labour and by April 1967 a new storm was looming, because of new proposals to allow black workers to do more responsible work. This situation forced the hand of the Minister of Labour, who issued a strongly worded press release. The pro-Beyers president of the MWU, Maurice Meiring, and his “henchmen” were regarded as subversive elements who had misused miners’ wage demands and other grievances to incite labour unrest with the “intended purpose” of “breaking” the government. Such illegal actions would no longer be tolerated and the fate of the mineworkers could no longer be allowed to depend on Meiring and his minions. Therefore a lawsuit would be instituted against them. The Minister also declared that the attitude of the government towards the white miners encompassed three aspects, namely that a satisfactory wage regulation for the mineworkers had to come into operation as soon as possible; that the colour bar must be retained in the case of white mineworkers; and that a strong and sound MWU was desirable.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the tide turned against the whole Beyers faction in the MWU. Firstly, Arrie Paulus and other members of the original Action Committee lodged a complaint at the Registrar of Trade Unions against the pro-Beyers executive.<sup>23</sup> Then the disruptive state of affairs in the MWU took a decisive turn with Gründling’s court appeal against his dismissal as general secretary. Although his dismissal was upheld, the court also declared the appointments of Short and Beyers invalid. In addition, Beyers was prohibited from attending any meeting or being co-opted on any structure of the MWU executive in any capacity, or from being appointed in any official position in the union unless its constitution be amended for such purpose.<sup>24</sup>

#### Re-stabilisation and the advent of the Paulus administration

On 27 February 1967 Arrie Paulus, a successful rock breaker in goldmines on the West Rand, was duly elected as the new general secretary of the MWU.<sup>25</sup> Paulus was not in favour of trade unions for black workers as he was of the opinion that such unions “would end up in the hands of left-wing political agitators overnight”. He was in favour of the NP government’s system of

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<sup>22</sup> (INEG) PV 14 Marais Viljoen-Versameling, Lêer nr. I.A23/2: Persverklaring uitgereik deur die Minister van Arbeid, 16.1.1967; *Ibid.*, Toespraak gelewer deur Mnr. Marais Viljoen, Minister van Arbeid, in die Volksraad op 27 Januarie 1967 oor die Mynwerkersaangeleentheid, pp.3-4, Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, p.70; *Rand Daily Mail*, 17.1.1967 (Minister’s warning to strike leaders).

<sup>23</sup> *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, 5.2.1967 (Opsienbare Klagskrif oor MWU ingedien).

<sup>24</sup> *Die Mynwerker*, 25.2.1967, p.12 (Gründling se Aansoek Misluk); *The Cape Times*, 10.2.1967 (Court Rules Against Beyers).

<sup>25</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 24.1.1967, p.34; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Buitengewone Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 2.5.1967, p.1; *Die Mynwerker*, 1.3.1967, p.2 (Veranderinge in bestuur van die MWU) and p.6 (Leader article).

black worker committees to protect the rights of such workers. Racially mixed unions were also not desirable and Paulus would exert himself to serve and protect the interests of all white mineworkers to the best of his ability.<sup>26</sup> During Paulus's tenure the structures of the MWU were not only re-stabilised, but for at least the next decade the union would enjoy a stable and flourishing period. In the same year he brokered a deal with the Chamber of Mines resulting in the successful introduction of a monthly wage scheme for white miners on the MWU's terms. The new wage structures also entailed improved pension, sickness, accident and annual leave benefits for the MWU members.<sup>27</sup>

The 1967 monthly wage agreement was indeed a triumph for white mining unions such as the MWU in the sense that the colour bar remained intact in the mining industry. Economically, the pendulum swung in favour of white miners during the Paulus administration.<sup>28</sup> During the late 1960s and early 1970s the MWU prospered. By 1969 the losses incurred by the union during the troublesome saga stemming from the 1964 monthly wage experiment had been turned into a considerable net profit. And by April 1970 the Chamber of Mines officially recognised the MWU's shaft representatives, while the Chamber also recognised Republic Day as a statutory holiday in 1972. After the gold price began to rise in 1969, MWU members received substantial improvements in their remuneration and fringe benefit packages such as higher salaries, pneumoconiosis compensation, sick leave, death benefits, mine accident compensation, holiday bonuses, medical aid and pension benefits.<sup>29</sup> Thus in 1977 *The Mineworker*, the union's official mouthpiece, could with self-satisfaction declare that in terms of obtaining financial and other fringe benefits, as well as improved working-conditions, the MWU had experienced "ten golden years since 1967."<sup>30</sup>

In 1970 and 1971 the MWU also achieved other "victories" in terms of job reservation. The union protested against a decision by the government that black mineworkers could henceforth do the same mining work in black

<sup>26</sup> JA Grey Coetzee, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, Juta & Company Limited, Cape Town, 1976, pp.212-215; G Leach, *The Afrikaners. Their Last Trek*, Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1989, pp.85-87; Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", p.9; *Die Mynwerker*, 1.3.1967, p.1 (Sal harder werk as ooit, sê nuwe sekretaris).

<sup>27</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Buitengewone Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 2.5.1967, pp.6-9,12; *Die Mynwerker*, 29.3.1967, pp.1,3 (R260 minimum vir Steenkoolwerkers); *Ibid.*, 12.4.1967, p.1 (Steenkoolwerkers kry meer van 1 Mei af); *Ibid.*, 26.4.1967, p.1 (Nuwe Salaris-Ooreenkoms), p.4 (Hierdie Toegewings is gemaak) and (Oortyd en Verlof); *Ibid.*, 24.5.1967, p.1 (2 Verlofskemas); *Ibid.*, 7.6.1967, pp.4,6,8 (Ooreenkoms met Kamer).

<sup>28</sup> Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", p.78.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 29-30.1.1970, pp.8-10; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Jaarlikse Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 27-28.1.1972, p.9; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Jaarlikse Kongres van die Algemene Raad, 22-23.1.1974, pp.6-10; *Die Mynwerker*, 18.2.1970, p.1 (1969 was blomjaar vir MWU); *Ibid.*, 1.4.1970, pp.1,2,6 (Skagvertegenwoordigers voortaan erken); *Ibid.*, 26.1.1972, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Belangrike inligting oor Republiekdag); *Ibid.*, 23.2.1972, p.1,3,4 (Wat die MWU in afgelope jaar vir lede verkry het); *Ibid.*, 19.4.1972, pp.1,3 (PJ Paulus: Myne Gesluit op 31 Mei); *Ibid.*, 15.11.1972, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Pensioen met 12½% op van 1 Jan. '73); *Ibid.*, 19.12.1973, p.12 (Wat in Sewe Jaar van Nuwe Bewind vir MWU-lede verkry is).

<sup>30</sup> *Die Mynwerker*, 16.2.1977, p.3 (10 Goue Jare...en nou: twee take).

homelands which in (white) South Africa was reserved for white mineworkers. The MWU dissociated itself from this decision and refused to co-operate in the training of blacks for this purpose. The Minister of Mines, however, assured a deputation of the MWU that white miners in black homelands would not lose their jobs as a result of the implementation of the black labour policy. In February 1970 the government announced that the Industrial Reconciliation Act of 1956 would no longer be applicable in black homelands. But after pleas by the MWU, which was concerned that in any disputes that might develop between employers and employees in the homelands, union members would no longer be able to appeal to the stipulations of the act, it was enforced once more in these territories.<sup>31</sup> And in Parliament the Minister of Labour repeatedly endorsed Paulus's plea of the early 1970s that white job reservation should be retained. The Minister also agreed with his arguments against equal job opportunities and wage scales for black and white workers (the so-called "rate for the job") as well as his warnings against black penetration of white trade unions.<sup>32</sup>

In 1973 the Chamber of Mines was able to negotiate a deal with the MWU by which, in return for the higher pay and fringe benefits mentioned, the union agreed to delegate certain limited duties to black team leaders on goldmines and collieries, under the supervision of union members.<sup>33</sup> Even though the MWU made concessions regarding limited training of black mineworkers, the union still succeeded in utilising its power and influence to control labour matters in the mining industry to an extent on the basis of its symbiotic relationship with the NP government. But the ever-changing political and economic dynamics of South Africa would soon darken this relationship.

## **The MWU's reaction to the Wiehahn recommendations**

### Prologue to the confrontation of 1979

<sup>31</sup> (INEG) PV 451, JAM Hertzog-Versameling, Lêer nr. 1/266/7/5: Koerantknipsel, 11.10.1970 (Tuislandmyne kan wit werker uit bedryf dwing: MWU); *Die Mynwerker*, 16.9.1970, pp.1,5 (PJ Paulus: Al Weer: "Advancement of the African"); *Ibid.*, 14.10.1970, pp.1,2 (PJ Paulus: Ons Betreuer Besluit oor Opleiding van Bantoe-Myners); *Ibid.*, 28.10.1970, pp.1-2 (PJ Paulus: Brief van Minister van Mynwese en Arrie Paulus se Antwoord); *Ibid.*, 11.11.1970, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Beleid van die Regering in die Bantoegebiede); *Ibid.*, 9.12.1970, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Training: Bantu Miners); *Ibid.*, 2.6.1971, p.1 (MWU kan weer namens lede optree in Bantoegebiede); *Ibid.*, 16.11.1971, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Herstel van Wet verseker Gemoedsrus); *Ibid.*, 3.11.1971, p.2 (PJ Paulus: Opleiding van Bantoes Versekering gegee deur Rustenburg se L.V.); Du Toit, *South African Trade Unions*, pp.71,137; Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.117.

<sup>32</sup> See Republiek van Suid-Afrika, *Debatte van die Volksraad*, Deel 27, 5 Mei – 21 Junie 1969, Nasionale Drukkery, Elsievier, 1969, pp.6520-6521; *Die Mynwerker*, 29.4.1970, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Stop Infiltrasie in Mynbedryf); *Ibid.*, 24.6.1970, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Blanke sal nie verdring word); *Ibid.*, 5.8.1970, p.1 (PJ Paulus: 'n Beroep op die Minister van Arbeid); *Ibid.*, 22.9.1971, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Arrie Paulus praat met Tom Murray, Grobbelaar en Kie); *Ibid.*, 1.12.1971, pp.1,4,5 (PJ Paulus: Ons standpunt oor die bevordering van die Bantoe); *Ibid.*, 12.7.1972, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Toenemende gevare gaan blanke werkers bedreig); *Ibid.*, 4.10.1972, pp.1-2 (PJ Paulus: Bantoe Vakbonde: Werkers Moet Protesteer); *Ibid.*, 29.11.1972, p.9 (Werkreservering is noodsaaklik vir Arbeidsvrede en behoud van Blanke Werker, sê Minister); *Ibid.*, 20.12.1972, p.11 (Sê net vir ons as Blankes afgedruk word vra Regering); *Ibid.*, 24.10.1973, p.5 (Marais Viljoen: "Werkreservering bly...en geen Bantoe-vakbonde").

<sup>33</sup> Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg*, p.461.

According to Beinart, the mid-1970s represented a turning point in the political and economic history of South Africa. In the labour sector the 1970s were characterised by the black labour force's violent and militant opposition against the NP government's apartheid policies. During 1970, 1973 and 1975 strike incidents occurred among black workers. The unexpected mass Durban strikes from January to March 1973 in particular, which involved an estimated 61 000 black workers, underlined the failure of the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 to regulate black labour relations and to serve as a viable alternative to black trade unions. Eventually these strikes came to be seen as a watershed event in the history of labour relations in South Africa. For the government it became clear that labour reform was urgently required, also because of white manpower shortages. The interests of black workers would have to be accommodated in the labour relations system. Already in June 1973 the government passed the Black Labour Relations Regulation Act, which legalised black workers' right to strike under certain conditions.

Apart from labour unrest, factors such as the international oil crisis, growing unemployment, inflation and a world-wide recession also contributed to the country's inability to maintain the same high growth rate as it had in the 1960s. These factors, as well as ever-increasing international criticism against apartheid, further encouraged black discontent. And to top it all, political frustration erupted among black youths in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. After Soweto the Afrikaner establishment lost its self-confidence and its prevailing political ideas began to dry up. After 1976 the control exerted by the NP and its related Afrikaner cultural support groups over Afrikaner ideas and identity, and over other groups as well, began to wane.

It also became clear that the provisions of the Black Labour Relations Regulation Act had not solved the problem of black worker militancy. Black unrest resulted in an outflow of capital as well as a decrease in the influx of immigrants and a decline in business confidence. South Africa was threatened more and more with sanctions and disinvestment. Multinational companies operating in South Africa were increasingly forced, as a result of racially mixed employment practices such as the American Sullivan Code, to employ blacks in labour sectors which were, strictly speaking, regarded as areas delimited for white job reservation. Apartheid, which became the focus of an international moral crusade, thus caused political and economic instability that was detrimental to maintaining orderliness in the labour sector. The sum total of all these factors contributed to a declining growth rate and forced the NP government to reconsider its policies. Business interests were involved more fully in government commissions and advisory councils set up to investigate key economic issues.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Beinart, *South Africa in the Twentieth Century*, pp.172,179-180,243-248; S Bendix, *Industrial Relations in the new South Africa*, Juta & Co, Ltd, Kenwyn, 1996, pp.92-94; BJ Liebenberg, "Apartheid at the Crossroads", in Liebenberg and Spies, *South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, pp.443-445, 461-464; H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003, pp.551-552,571-575,578-583,586-587,589-593,597-604,608; H Kenney, *Power, Pride & Prejudice. The Years of Afrikaner Nationalist Rule in South Africa*, Jonathan Ball

In June 1977 the government appointed a commission of enquiry into labour legislation under the chairmanship of Prof. Nick Wiehahn of the University of South Africa. The Wiehahn Commission, as it became known, was to examine all laws administered by the Department of Labour and the whole system of labour relations in South Africa. It had to make recommendations that would ensure future industrial peace.<sup>35</sup> Among the commission's most striking recommendations, which the government eventually accepted and implemented, were the registration of black trade unions and the abolition of statutory job reservation.<sup>36</sup>

Having enjoyed state protection for such a long time, members of the MWU were totally unprepared for socio-economic reforms and black advancement, which they regarded as a direct threat to their position. Many white workers resented the desegregation of public amenities on the mines as well as the possibility of working under black supervision. There were also fears of being replaced by black miners or fears that their wage levels could be undercut by cheaper black labour. At the same time the number of white workers dwindled in relation to the South African labour force as a whole and their scarcity value as skilled labour decreased as their bargaining power declined. Their industrial and political power to influence labour legislation and policy diminished accordingly.<sup>37</sup>

For various reasons, in terms of the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations the MWU found itself in a vulnerable position. The union's inflexible attitude towards the preservation of job reservation was increasingly undermined by various other artisans' and officials' unions in the mining industry. Therefore, in terms of its bargaining position for white workers, the MWU became more and more isolated. An important reason for the artisan unions' compliance in the moves to relax the colour bar was that their position as technically and well-qualified artisans was better protected against black encroachment than those of white miners. Such qualifications enabled them to move freely between various industries. But white miners' positions were the first occupational entry levels to which black mineworkers could be advanced. A white miner's job was regarded as an occupation rather than a craft, therefore their skills were in general not marketable in other industries. The miners' fears that they could be replaced and that their high earnings depended upon barring black competition were therefore rational. Their strong bargaining position and relatively high earnings depended on statutory

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Publishers, Johannesburg, 1991, pp.242-245,260,267-269; Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.33-36.

<sup>35</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.149-150.

<sup>36</sup> NE Wiehahn, "Industrial relations in South Africa: a changing scene", in DJ van Vuuren *et al.* (eds.), *Change in South Africa*, Butterworth, Durban, 1983, pp.186-189; Bendix, *Industrial Relations in the new South Africa*, pp.302-307.

<sup>37</sup> H Giliomee, "Afrikaner Politics 1977-87: from Afrikaner Nationalist Rule to Central State Hegemony", in JD Brewer (ed.), *Can South Africa Survive? Five Minutes to Midnight*, The Macmillan Press Ltd, Basingstoke and London, 1989, pp.118-119; J van Rooyen, *Hard Right. The New White Power in South Africa*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London and New York, 1994, p.31; A Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa. The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 1990, p.324.

job reservation, which could be rapidly eroded if they lost their occupational monopoly in the mining industry. As white workers' numbers constituted a declining percentage of the total South African labour force, so their industrial and political power declined accordingly. They often had to face this loss of control over a changing labour situation at the negotiating table in the light of the *fait accompli* of black advancement.

A second reason for the MWU's vulnerable position concerned its relationship with the NP government. The tradition of unrivalled access to, and firm alliance with, the governing party led to the MWU relying on political support rather than on labour organisation to protect and advance their position. But unions' political access, even to Cabinet Ministers when they were dissatisfied with legislation regarding the mining industry, began to wane as NP politicians became less attentive to every complaint of a labour force whose influence was dwindling.<sup>38</sup> Thus, according to Barnard, the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission and the government's subsequent acceptance of its recommendations were the most important factors in the eventual rupture of the ties between the MWU and the NP. Whereas the formerly militant clashes between the state and the union had ended in bloody violence and loss of life, the MWU of the late 1970s resorted to confrontational political resistance and protest in its disputes with the NP government. For the conservative element in the MWU the economic and constitutional reform initiatives by the NP government were a matter of great concern. As a consequence, the union reacted vehemently to the Wiehahn report and recommendations, with its implications for white labour, and soon the battle-lines for the MWU's next campaign to try and obstruct these reforms on all levels would be drawn.

Personality clashes also played an important role in the breakdown of the relationship between white mining labour and the government. During Fanie Botha's term as Minister of Labour (a post that was later renamed Minister of Manpower) the previously cordial relations between the Department of Labour and the MWU degenerated to a level of mutual distrust. Between Botha and Paulus there was a feeling of mutual aversion.<sup>39</sup> The MWU's rhetoric also became more extreme and militant. As far as Paulus was concerned, the status quo of the Mines and Works Act with regard to job reservation should remain unaltered, as it was perceived to be the only protection afforded the white labour minority against "black oppression". He claimed that, as "foreigners" in white South Africa, blacks could not claim trade union recognition, but should exercise their labour and political rights in the homelands. Paulus predicted that if blacks were appointed over MWU members in the mining industry South Africa "would know no industrial peace" and that such advancement of black labourers would lead to "friction and

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<sup>38</sup> Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, pp.207,210-214,309; Giliomee en Adam, *Afrikanermag*, pp.202-203; DF Hamilton, *The Role of the Mine Workers' Union in the gold mining industry (a present and future perspective)*, Unpublished MBL thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1977, pp.92,94; Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", p.116; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.163-164,166.

<sup>39</sup> Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.32,34-35, 114.

labour unrest” as union members “would definitely not work under a non-white”.<sup>40</sup>

The MWU’s actions before and after the publication of Part One of the Wiehahn report was an indication of how deep the rift between the union and the NP government had already become. For instance, at a public meeting in the mining town of Carletonville in November 1978 about 500 white mineworkers walked out of a speech by Fanie Botha after he had been heckled and a motion of no confidence had been put as a result of the abolition of job reservation.<sup>41</sup> Paulus threatened in no uncertain terms that the MWU would “never” tolerate labour equality in the mining industry or accept that “blacks would be allowed to take bread from the mouth of a white, even if it meant that the 1922 strike would have to be repeated and brother had to fight against brother”. The MWU and the white miners would “never” allow job integration and would not “give an inch” on this principle. The union would see to it that the jobs of the white mineworkers remain in white hands. Black workers were considered to be “guest labourers” in South Africa, and between them and the white workers there would always be separation.<sup>42</sup> Everything pointed to a clash over labour policy between the MWU and the government of PW Botha that would also involve employers in the mining industry.

### The mining strike of 1979

The MWU threw down the gauntlet on the eve of the release of Part 1 of the Wiehahn recommendations, when a strike by union members was called on an obscure copper mine in O’Okiep, Namaqualand. The strike, which commenced on 5 March 1979, was organised to oppose the appointment of three Coloured artisans in jobs reserved for whites under the mining regulations of the Mines and Works Act. It soon escalated into a nationwide strike involving 9 000 white miners on 70 mines. The strike, however, collapsed after a week, when the Chamber of Mines threatened that the temporary suspension of the strikers would become permanent, with the loss of all benefits. According to Cooper, the strike served as a warning to the government not to tamper with mining regulations regarding job reservation in its zeal to introduce labour reform. The MWU also tried to demonstrate that the white miners were indispensable in the mining industry and that

<sup>40</sup> (SAB) K364, Vol.24, Agendas en Notules, Lêer no. AK2/2/6/1, Notule van die derde vergadering van die Du Toit Subkomitee, 7.2.1978, pp.93-95,104,106-108,113; *Ibid.*, Vol.33, Vertoë en Kommentaar deur Vakverenigings, Lêer no. AK6/3/1/1/4, Vol.II: Memorandum in verband met Arbeidswetgewing, 1.12.1977, pp.1-2,4,8; MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 30-31.1.1979, p.10; JA Jacobsz, “Die Amptelike Standpunt van die Mynwerkersunie en die Standpunt van die Mynwerkersunie-lede ten opsigte van Werkreservering”, Unpublished Industrial Psychology Honours thesis, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1980, pp.10,12-13,20; Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.35,47,79.

<sup>41</sup> Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, p.34; *Die Transvaler*, 24.11.1978 (J van Loggerenberg: Warm aand vir min. Fanie); *The Citizen*, 24.11.1978, pp.1-2 (L du Plessis: 500 Miners demo against Fanie).

<sup>42</sup> Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.45,57; *Die Mynwerker*, 7.3.1979, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Min Fanie Botha: Sê aan Werkers of die Berig waar is!), p.3 (Swart vakbonde gaan erken word berig Die Vaderland) and p.6 (“MWU sal nooit brood uit wit monde laat neem”); *Hoofstad*, 13.2.1979, p.3 (Geen gelykheid in myne, sê Arrie Paulus).

production would be seriously affected without them. The 1979 strike was the last desperate but futile attempt by white miners to thwart labour reform and to preserve a labour dispensation based on apartheid legislation.<sup>43</sup>

Although the gist of the recommendations of Part 1 of the Wiehahn Commission was anticipated by the MWU, its endorsement by the government still came as a shock. Suddenly white workers would no longer be able to rely on state protection of their jobs.<sup>44</sup> Paulus vilified and lambasted the Wiehahn report as “suicide” for the white worker of South Africa and regarded its recommendations as “the greatest act of treason against the white workers of South Africa since [the strike of] 1922”. Fanie Botha was accused of breaking his promises to consult with white workers before considering any changes to labour legislation.<sup>45</sup>

Part 6 of the Wiehahn report was released in November 1980 and dealt specifically with legislation regarding labour relations in the mining industry. It confirmed the MWU’s “worst fears”, as Cor de Jager, the president, put it. The term “scheduled person” in the wording of the 1965 Mines and Works Act was replaced with “competent person”, thus implying that black miners would in future also be able to obtain blasting tickets.<sup>46</sup> The doleful mood which prevailed in the MWU after the release of Part 6 of the Wiehahn report was reflected in De Jager’s sombre 1982 presidential address to the union’s general council. However, compared with its reaction to the release of Part 1, the MWU’s response to Part 6 was surprisingly devoid of militant rhetoric. Paulus and De Jager repeated their old accusations that the NP was no friend of the white worker any longer and that it was willing to violate established labour policy to gain favour with “moneyed interests” and with blacks. This “sell-out” of white labour would “inevitably” lead to black demands for desegregated neighbourhoods and facilities, and a one-man-one-vote franchise system.<sup>47</sup> But despite the MWU’s lament that the Wiehahn recommendations abolished job reservation, Lipton, Lang, Friedman and Hamilton concur that, because of its pervasive influence in the mining industry

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<sup>43</sup> C Cooper, “The Mineworkers’ Strike”, in *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5, 3 (October 1979), pp.2,4,6-18,20-25; Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.79,83-84,114,117; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.164-165,177; Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg*, p.469.

<sup>44</sup> Giliomee en Adam, *Afrikanermag*, p.203; Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.322.

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. *Die Mynwerker*, 16.5.1979, pp.1-2 (PJ Paulus: Die Grootste Verraad teenoor Blanke Mynwerkers!); *Ibid.*, 30.5.1979, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Min. Fanie Botha het geen Simpatie met Mynwerkers); *Ibid.*, 19.9.1979, pp.1-3 (PJ Paulus: Paulus antwoord Volksraadslid oor Wiehahn-verslag); *Ibid.*, 20.2.1980, pp.3-4 (Nas. Party loop nie meer pad van Blanke werker); *Ibid.*, 5.3.1980, pp.4-6 (Hoe Nasionale Party se Arbeidsbeleid volmaak bollemakiesie geslaan het); *Ibid.*, 19.3.1980, p.7 (Hoe NP se Arbeidsbeleid verander het); *Ibid.*, 2.4.1980, pp.7-8 (Hoe NP se arbeidsbeleid verander het); *Ibid.*, 16.4.1980, pp.7-8 (Hoe N.P. se arbeidsbeleid verander het); *Ibid.*, 30.4.1980, pp.7-8 (Hoe die N.P. van beleid verander het); *Ibid.*, 20.8.1980, p.3 (PJ Paulus: Byna elke NP-beleidspunt van 1948 is nou oorboord; *Oggendblad*, 17.5.1979, p.3 (Myn-unie verwerp Wiehahn-verslag).

<sup>46</sup> NE Wiehahn, *Die volledige Wiehahn-verslag*, Lex Patria, Johannesburg en Kaapstad, 1982; Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg*, p.471; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p.173

<sup>47</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 26-27.1.1982, pp.2-3; *Die Mynwerker*, 27.1.1982, pp.1,3 (Een Minuut Voor Twaalf – Sê Mnr Cor de Jager); *The Citizen*, 27.1.1982 (M Cohen: Labour laws attacked by trade unionist); *Rand Daily Mail*, 27.1.1982 (S Friedman: MWU defiant over job bars); *The Natal Mercury*, 1.28.1982, p.20 (Song of Prejudice).



and the government's wariness of this situation, the union succeeded in keeping the colour bar intact on the mines until as late as 1987.<sup>48</sup>

### **Right-wing labour strategies and politics**

As labour reforms became a *fait accompli* and it became clear that the government's political reform initiatives would eventually lead to the demise of apartheid and the end of white rule in South Africa, white workers reacted in a number of ways. As early as 1973 Paulus expressed the ideal of consolidating the white labour force in order to resist the abolition of job reservation and to bargain for white workers' rights more effectively. He strove to create a "white force" or power base that could "fight" for the "survival" of the white worker. This could also serve as a strategy against the "threat" of black advancement.<sup>49</sup>

As the most prominent and dynamic right-wing union, the MWU thus took the initiative to establish such organisation. But in its endeavour to build a white trade union alliance against a non-racial labour dispensation, the MWU made many enemies. Using the MWU's official organ, Paulus drew a distinction between conservative unions, which openly advocated white workers' rights, and moderate unions. He severely criticised the moderate unions which signed the so-called SEIFSA agreement (Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa) as it was regarded as a method of circumventing the colour bar in the mining industry. Signatories to the SEIFSA agreement undertook to do away with discriminatory practices in favour of equal jobs and training for blacks. Paulus's uncompromising stance even created dissension in the South African Confederation of Labour Associations (SACLA), an all-white labour confederation of which the MWU was a member. Several SACLA member unions, such as the Metal Workers' Union, dissociated themselves from Paulus's views and supported the new labour legislation proposed by the Wiehahn Commission. Paulus's dissenting views eventually caused the SACLA's influence on the South African labour scene to wane almost to insignificance. Most moderate unions disaffiliated from SACLA in the early 1980s as a result of the dominant anti-black outlook that prevailed in the organisation.<sup>50</sup>

In an effort to counter the influence of moderate white artisan unions in the mining industry and to lure their members away, the MWU began to expound the idea that, by opening their ranks to black workers, these unions had "betrayed" the white worker. Therefore the MWU was the only trade union that truly catered for the interests of the white worker. In the light of the Wiehahn recommendations that trade union registration should be liberalised,

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<sup>48</sup> Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, pp.63,208; Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg*, p.471; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.167,173; Hamilton, "The Role of the Mine Workers' Union", pp.28,79.

<sup>49</sup> *Die Mynwerker*, 28.2.1973, p.6 (Aanslag op die Blanke Werker se Brood is aan die gang, sê Paulus); *Die Transvaler*, 10.1.1973 (Baasskap vir die MWU voorspel).

<sup>50</sup> Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.51-56,58-59, 63-64,114-115; Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, pp.198-199,205; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.163,165-166,175.

the MWU also attempted to extend its traditional scope beyond the mining industry. The union began to recruit steelworkers at Iscor plants and electricity workers at Escom power stations and coal mines. In its recruitment propaganda the MWU was portrayed as “a sanctuary for the white worker”. The scope of recruitment was eventually extended to include about 200 job categories in mining and other industries in the greater Gauteng region alone.<sup>51</sup>

A second tactic that the MWU implemented in its strategy to oppose the encroachment upon job reservation was to align itself more closely with right-wing political parties such as Dr Albert Hertzog’s *Herstigte Nasionale Party* (HNP) and, after 1982, with the Conservative Party (CP) under Dr Andries Treurnicht. According to Barnard, the political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour reform was the loss of political support from the MWU and white workers. The character of the NP in the era of the Wiehahn Commission was quite different from that of the “people’s party” in the 1940s, when party policy was defined by ordinary members at party congresses. In 1948 white working-class support was crucial in the NP’s election victory. But by the 1970s the party was controlled by an Afrikaner elite consisting of a growing urban, professional middle class, who were more concerned about their own material needs and comforts than altruistic about people’s ideas and the necessity of sacrifice. As their identification with the Afrikaner people as an ethnic group began to weaken, their identification with a multiracial South African state began to grow. These factors contributed to the NP’s increasing estrangement from, and neglect of, its Afrikaner working-class base.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, after the release of the Wiehahn recommendations, the estrangement between the MWU and the NP government became complete and irreversible. Despite the political neutrality explicitly stipulated by its constitution, in practice the MWU gave moral and electoral support to the HNP in the by-elections of 1979 and the general election of 1981. Election meetings by government spokespersons were disrupted by extremist white miners. Although the NP retained the mining seat of Randfontein in the by-election of 1979, the election results indicated a marked swing to the right in what was regarded as a strong anti-government protest against the Wiehahn recommendations. In the mining constituency of Rustenburg, the home of MWU president Cor de Jager, the electoral swing towards the right was even more marked and the NP won the seat by only a small majority of 846 votes

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<sup>51</sup> Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.52,56-61,64; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p.176; *Die Mynwerker*, 2.8.1978, p.6 (PJ Paulus: Yskor belet verspreiding van “Mynwerker” op sy terrein); *Ibid.*, 13.9.1978, p.4 (Wat ons aanbied aan blanke werkers wat by MWU beskerming soek); *Ibid.*, 11.10.1978, pp.1,3 (Ons roep alle blanke werkers op Vanderbijlpark); *Ibid.*, 22.11.1978, p.1 (1000 Staalwerkers gereed om by MWU aan te sluit); *Ibid.*, 7.2.1979, p.3 (Alle Blanke Werkers moet lid van een Vakbond wees); *Ibid.*, 15.7.1981, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Bekommerde werkers soek hulp by MWU); *Ibid.*, 6.7.1983, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Mynwerkersunie ‘n toevlugsoord vir blanke werkers); *Beeld*, 29.1.1981, p.5 (MWU werf wyd vir een groot vakbond); *Ibid.*, 4.2.1981, p.4 (Paulus soek steun vir sy vakbond); *Financial Mail*, 6.2.1981 (White Workers Solidarity?).

<sup>52</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.544,598,607,609; D O’Meara, *Forty lost years: the apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*, Ravan Press, Randburg, 1996, p.165; Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, p.30; Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, p.118.

over the HNP. And in the 1981 general elections Dr Jager stood as an HNP candidate in the mining constituency of Carletonville. The HNP vowed to protect the interests of the white worker but, surprisingly, lost to the NP again as a result of internal strife and an ineffective election campaign and strategy.<sup>53</sup>

The clearest indication of the MWU's anti-government political position was the moral support the union's leadership gave to the Conservative Party (CP) since its founding in 1982. The CP was founded in reaction to the NP's liberal reformist policies with regard to the racial issue in South Africa. By 1982 the establishment press began to associate the MWU as the focal point for right-wing trade union consolidation and by 1983 the union began to associate itself more openly and palpably with the politics of the right-wing opposition. In the light of the HNP's failure to attract substantial right-wing electoral support in order to win seats in the elections of 1979 and 1981, the CP began to draw considerable white labour support.

Soon after the inception of the "Botha-Wiehahn labour policy" Paulus indicated that the MWU agreed with Treurnicht's criticism of it and that they supported the CP leader's point of view. As the CP promised, if it should come to power, to restore and maintain statutory job reservation for white workers at a time of growing economic insecurity and increasing white unemployment, the attitude of white unions such as the MWU towards the NP chilled even further and even turned to open hostility as the right wing accused the government of betraying white labour. Therefore it came as no surprise when Paulus was approached to contest the Carletonville seat for the CP in the general election of 1987. Although he won by a narrow margin of only 98 votes, this constituted a further massive swing towards the right in mining constituencies, as had occurred in 1979 and 1981. Paulus succeeded in turning the NP's majority of 3 000 votes in the previous general election into a CP gain.<sup>54</sup>

Although the CP made spectacular gains in the 1987 general election by winning 22 seats or 60% of the vote cast to become the official opposition in its first attempt at electoral politics, the party was unable to make any further substantial advances. In 1992 the CP lost a crucial referendum called by the NP government for the electorate to endorse its political reform programme, which would eventually culminate in a democratically elected majority black

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<sup>53</sup> Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.65-66,78-80,92-94,98-100,104,114; Yudelman, *The emergence of modern South Africa*, pp.264,269; O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.165; A Ries & E Dommissie, *Broedertwis: die verhaal van die 1982-skeuring in die Nasionale Party*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1982, pp.83,96.

<sup>54</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 24.1.1983, p.2; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.1.1987, p.11; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.6.1987, p.13; Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.118-120; Ries & Dommissie, *Broedertwis*, pp.96,108-187; H Zille, "The right wing in South African politics", in PL Berger and B Godsell (eds.), *A Future South Africa. Visions, Strategies and Realities*, Human & Rousseau/Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1988, p.83; J Grobbelaar, *et al*, *Vir Volk en Vaderland. A Guide to the White Right*, Indicator SA Issue Focus, University of Natal, Durban, August 1989, pp.15-16; Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.69,172-173; *Die Mynwerker*, 27.4.1983, p.1 (PJ Paulus: Die waarheid).

government. The defeat left the CP in a much weaker position and was a turning-point in its electoral aspirations. But these setbacks would only prompt the marginalised and frustrated right wing and white workers to revert to more extremist and violent tactics in an effort to thwart the NP's political reform programme and put pressure on the government to concede to their key demand of Afrikaner self-determination.<sup>55</sup>

It thus became clear that a political solution - such as in the case of the 1924 general election, when white workers contributed to the fall of the Smuts government in retaliation for its bloody suppression of the 1922 strike - was not possible after 1987 in the light of the altered labour situation and white political dissension. In addition, Peet Ungerer, Paulus's successor as MWU general secretary, correctly interpreted the political implications for white labour when President FW de Klerk announced in Parliament in 1990 that all anti-apartheid political organisations and exiles were to be unbanned, and all political prisoners liberated. A whites-only general election, in which workers could express a protest vote against the labour reforms that ended white labour security, would never again be held in South Africa. Thus the MWU adapted its strategy again. Henceforth it would strive towards creating a "white super-union", as it was called. It was argued that in the absence of effective white political power under black majority rule after 1994, there should be at least one strong labour organisation to cater for the political, economic and cultural needs of the Afrikaner working class and to enhance their bargaining power.<sup>56</sup>

In order to implement its adapted strategy, the MWU adopted a two-pronged approach. Firstly, the union initiated a vigorous recruitment drive to extend its scope to workers in the steel, chemical, distribution and other miscellaneous industries. On the one hand, the promotion of a super white union was met with great enthusiasm by white workers, especially workers whose own unions had become multiracial. By 1992 the MWU's membership had increased to 44 000 to make it the largest white trade union in South Africa, and by 1994 membership had risen even further to 52 000. On the other hand, the MWU's successful campaign to enlarge its membership led to friction and animosity with the Iron and Steel Union, which – as its biggest rival for new members – began to lose large numbers to the MWU.<sup>57</sup>

The second leg of its new approach inevitably forced the MWU back into the fold of right-wing politics. In reaction to the defeat of the "No" vote campaign

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<sup>55</sup> Zille, "The right wing in South Africa", p.55; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, p.66; Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.149-155; H Adam and K Moodley, *The Negotiated Revolution. Society and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1993, pp.152-153; M Schönteich and H Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland. The Security Threat posed by the White Right*, Institute for Security Studies Monograph Series, No 81, Pretoria, 2003, pp.20-22-23.

<sup>56</sup> *Die Mynwerker*, November/Desember 1990, p.1 (Volstroom na een, wit vakbond); W Ungerer, "My siening van die MWU", MWU Memorandum, Carletonville, 2001, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> See MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 27.11.1991, p.12; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 18.12.1991, p.5; *MWU-Nuus*, Julie 1992, p.8 (F Buys: The sleeping giant); *Ibid.*, Maart/April 1994, p.2 (F Buys: MWU steeds die grootste blanke vakbond).

during the 1992 referendum, the MWU, in collaboration with other right-wing organisations, decided on an all-embracing strategy of resistance and obstruction to any reform initiatives by the government. This strategy entailed non-violent mass mobilisation, strikes and protests by white workers. Thus the focus shifted from attempts to halt reforms by bringing a right-wing government to power through electoral means, towards exercising pressure on the NP and the ANC to recognise Afrikaner claims to political self-determination and to pay attention to white worker grievances and interests. In May 1993 the MWU was a founder member of the *Afrikaner Volksfront* (later renamed the Freedom Front). The *Afrikaner Volksfront* (AVF) aimed at forging right-wing movements together into an effective alliance to promote the idea of an Afrikaner *volkstaat*. Altogether 98 forms of resistance, referred to as the (biblical) “Ten Plagues”, were considered by the AVF. These included mass civil disobedience, deliberately engineered power failures, industrial sabotage, the non-payment of taxes, a unilateral referendum among Afrikaners, the forming of an alternative government and, ultimately, securing a *volkstaat* through violent secession.<sup>58</sup>

From a perusal of the contents of *MWU News*, the union’s new official mouthpiece, it seems clear that in the realignment of its position towards right-wing protest movements, the MWU became more reactionary and adopted a laager mentality. It began to focus on right-wing Afrikaner causes such as Radio Pretoria, the protection of the Afrikaans language in the workplace and so-called *volkseie* (people’s own) schools and sports. *MWU News* also carried advertisements for right-wing business ventures. The desegregation of neighbourhoods and public facilities, as well as the implementation of affirmative action in the workplace, were severely criticised. It was the intention of the MWU executive to rekindle a “culture of protest” among its members, which was absent in the white labour force in the post-apartheid political dispensation. MWU mass action, protest marches and strikes were launched against Telkom, Escom, Iscor and the mining industry on issues such as the withdrawal of certain workers’ benefits as a result of affirmative action, wage demands, discrimination and violence against white workers, black advancement and the promotion of equal opportunities in the workplace.<sup>59</sup>

Individual MWU members also became involved in violent protests and acts of violence and sabotage committed by the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB). Especially white miners played a significant role in supplying explosives to the far right. For instance, “Anfex”, an explosive used exclusively by the mining industry, was used in Limpopo Province school bombings in December 1991. In another case a white miner and AWB member, Hendrik Steyn, was arrested and charged with the possession of explosives and being involved in an explosion at the Welkom offices of the

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<sup>58</sup> Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.71-72, *et seq.*; Schönteich and Boshoff, ‘Volk’, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.24-26.

<sup>59</sup> See MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 18.12.1995, p.25; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.6.1996, p.30 and *MWU Nuus*, 1991-1997.

(black) National Union of Mineworkers on the Free State goldfields, although he was later released.<sup>60</sup>

Because the AWB also focused on, among other groups, Afrikaner blue-collar workers as a source of recruitment for its power base, it initially enjoyed great influence and even had branches in MWU districts. A number of AWB officers came from MWU ranks, such as Dries Kriel, the union's organiser in the colliery town of Witbank. In this capacity Kriel also recruited white miners for the AWB. Kriel himself was arrested in 1992 for his involvement in explosions at the Hillview School and COSATU House in Pretoria as well as post offices at Centurion and Krugersdorp. By the early 1990s the AWB had as many as 3 000 white miners as members in the goldfields district of Welkom in the Free State alone.<sup>61</sup> Krappies Cronjé, a prominent MWU organiser, was also involved in the AWB's infamous invasion and disruption of the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park in 1993 in protest against the CODESA multi-party negotiations for a democratic constitution.<sup>62</sup> According to Peet Ungerer, the AWB even tried, although unsuccessfully, to infiltrate and take over the MWU executive.<sup>63</sup>

The AWB threatened that they, in collaboration with white workers, could paralyse the economy through one-day strikes as well as engage in industrial sabotage at strategic installations such as electricity and nuclear plants, water boards and airports. According to one report, right-wing workers at an electricity plant came very close in September 1993 to cutting off the greater part of South Africa's electricity supply, but refrained from doing so for "humanitarian" reasons.<sup>64</sup> However, by 1994 the tide began to turn against right-wing extremism. In what was to be a turning point for the white right, the AVF unsuccessfully attempted to support the ailing homeland government of Bophuthatswana in March 1994, on the eve of South Africa's first democratic election. ANC supporters in Bophuthatswana protested the "homeland" government's decision not to take part in the forthcoming general election. Fearing that he would lose control over his "country", the president of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope, asked the AVF for assistance. Unfortunately for Mangope and the AVF, some 500 unruly AWB members also entered the Bantustan uninvited and botched up the whole operation. AWB elements went on the rampage, firing at Bophuthatswana Defence Force (BDF) troops and civilians in Mmabatho, the capital. As a result of the AWB's actions, even Mangope loyalists turned against the "white invaders"

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<sup>60</sup> "South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand", *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.6; A Kemp, *Victory or Violence. The Story of the AWB*, Forma Publishers, Pretoria, 1990, pp.176-180.

<sup>61</sup> K Smit, *Die Wel en Weë van die AWB*, Konfetti Bemaking, n.p., 1996, pp.210,255,283; *Die Mynwerker*, June 1990, p.1; *Die Burger*, 16.1.1992, p.2; *Beeld*, 16.1.1992, p.1; *Ibid.*, 27.8.1992, p.2.

<sup>62</sup> Smit, *Die Wel en Weë van die AWB*, p.340; Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.95,173.

<sup>63</sup> Private interview with Mr Peet Ungerer, Westonaria, 2.7.2001.

<sup>64</sup> Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.112,173; Giliomee, "Afrikaner Politics 1977-87", p.120; "Short-term Forecast: 3-6 Months", *Longreach Report*, 18.2.1992, p.18; "South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand", *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.5.

and large sections of the BDF threatened to mutiny. Mangope was thus obliged to order the withdrawal of the AVF from Bophuthatswana.<sup>65</sup>

The events in Bophuthatswana were to be the white right's undoing. In the post-apartheid period the right wing became more divided than ever and its support throughout the country ebbed substantially. Most right-wing whites, disillusioned by the political impotence of right-wing organisations and leaders, withdrew from political activity.<sup>66</sup> By 1997 the MWU also had an extremely negative and stereotyped image in progressive labour circles. It was the image of a backward, racist and brutal organisation that was nothing but an anachronism from the old South Africa. Thus Karl von Holdt, former editor of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, scornfully depicted the office interior of an MWU organiser in Witbank:

*The office...was filled with icons of apartheid, and of a white man's biography in a white man's country: a photograph of the architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, a large model of a boer ox-wagon on a table; on the wall several brass images of wild animals, and one [brass image] of two hands meeting in prayer; on another table a small replica R1 military rifle with a plaque inscribed with the words "Border Duty"...And almost explicit of all, a poster referring to an informal discourse usually omitted from the formal language of apartheid, but underpinning it: it depicted a row of figures starting with a baboon on all fours, then a stooped cave man, followed by a somewhat less stooped "kaffir", and finally an erect white man. This poster, in the office of a white man...[who] was now an official of the MWU, indicates the kind of racism experienced in work relations between black and white.*<sup>67</sup>

Even an Afrikaner establishment paper such as *Die Burger* jokingly referred to the MWU as a "bitter-mouthed" reactionary institution dominated by members of the CP, the HNP and the AWB.<sup>68</sup> From 1994 to 1997 the MWU stagnated. Its right-wing image was politically incorrect and it was perceived to be only for blue-collar mineworkers. The public viewed the MWU negatively and the union moved from being a national role-player to being a marginalised shop-floor union. In addition, many of its members were retrenched or disaffected. It became clear that in the light of the radically altered political and economic realities of South Africa after 1994, the MWU had reached a crossroads. To avoid further stagnation and to remain a significant player in the shrinking labour market of the post-apartheid economy, the union had to choose

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<sup>65</sup> Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.26-27; G van der Westhuizen en L Barnard, "Die slag van Mmabatho": Die einde van regse weerstand teen die nuwe Suid-Afrika? Deel I: Die val van Lucas Mangope se tuislandregering in Bophuthatswana", *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis*, 31 (2), September 2006, p.177.

<sup>66</sup> Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.6,27-33,79; Van Rooyen, *Hard right*, pp.115-116.

<sup>67</sup> K von Holdt, *Transition from below. Forging trade unionism and workplace change in South Africa*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2003, pp.230-231.

<sup>68</sup> *Die Burger*, 24.7.2004, p.16 ("Dawie": ANC moet kennis neem van armes se frustrasie).

between a complete rethinking of its vision, strategies and structures – reinventing itself, as it were – or drifting into a *cul-de-sac*.<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion: The MWU's volte-face**

In July 1997 Flip Buys succeeded Ungerer as the MWU's general secretary. An academically trained intellectual, Buys was characteristic of a new generation of white-collar trade union officials who had to function in a totally changed labour milieu. The old practice, where blue-collar union leaders were forged by years of practical experience on the factory floor or in the mine stopes, was simply no longer adequate to meet the complexities and demands of modern trade union management. The radical changes which occurred in South African trade unionism towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demanded new skills in labour and strategic management. According to Buys, union organisations were forced to review how they operated because of the changing structure of the labour market.

Buys had a sober and realistic grasp of the realities of post-apartheid South Africa, distinguished by new labour legislation such as the Labour Relations Act and the Employment Equity Act. In terms of the new labour dispensation the union was in a crisis, and in order for it to survive, a drastic and profound change of policy was necessary. The number of white-collar workers was beginning to exceed the number of blue-collar workers, and the labour scene was rapidly changing from one consisting of industrially skilled workers to one dominated by so-called knowledge workers. For Buys it became clear that the MWU would have to plan and think anew in terms of strategic labour relations and management, and that new expertise would have to be imported into the union. Thus the MWU would have to make a paradigm shift in its philosophy regarding labour. Buys's realisation that the CP lacked a realistic alternative for South Africa's racial problems was the turning point in his political thinking. His change of heart could also be regarded as a desire to move from a position of being an "oppressor" in apartheid South Africa to being a non-victim and a contributor rather than a loser in the new political and economic environment.<sup>70</sup>

To comply with the new South African constitution, in which racial discrimination was prohibited, the MWU's own constitution had to be adjusted accordingly. The word "white" was scrapped from the constitution as no institution could restrict membership to a specific race any longer. In future, the MWU would have to maintain its predominantly Afrikaans character while remaining free from any inclination towards racial preference.<sup>71</sup> In its new approach to contentious issues the MWU preferred to use constitutional

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<sup>69</sup> L. Backer, "Revive and reinvent. MWU-Solidarity's plans for growth", in *South African Labour Bulletin*, 25 (4), August 2001, p.68.

<sup>70</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Algemene Raad, 27-28.1.1998, pp.7,18; Private interview with Mr Flip Buys, Pretoria, 1.7.2001.

<sup>71</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 17.12.1997, p.28; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.8.1998, p.8; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 28.10.1998, pp.3-7,12; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 25.11.1998, pp.3-4; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 26.5.1999, pp.5-7,9.



methods to combat, for instance, the neglect of Afrikaans as a language of communication in the workplace. After resorting to the courts, the MWU was successful in forcing Escom, Telkom, Transnet, the Post Office and the Department of Public Works to revise their language policies. Unlike the 1980s, when the union was aligned with right-wing political groups, it had repositioned itself completely outside of party politics and followed “mainstream policies” instead.<sup>72</sup>

On 27 February 2001 the MWU was officially changed to MWU-Solidarity, when four other unions merged with the original MWU.<sup>73</sup> And in September 2002 MWU-Solidarity was finally renamed Solidarity. It was argued that the union now catered for all trades and that other workers and unions would feel more comfortable about signing up under the new union name.<sup>74</sup> By 2002, five years after the implementation of its new restructuring plan, Solidarity was a totally reinvented, dynamic and transformed labour movement with federal characteristics, adequately equipped and geared to address the demands and challenges that organised labour would have to face in the new millennium. Before 1997 the MWU was a relatively unknown institution outside the sphere of labour. At best its public image was that of a reactionary, racist and obstructionist remnant of a previous era, which stubbornly tried to resist becoming a part of post-apartheid South African society. In contrast, Solidarity became a prominent national role player in many spheres. The union had shaken off its reactionary right-wing image and adopted a centre-right position. Since 1997 its numbers have risen dramatically, from 63 000 in 2000 to more than 130 000 by 2005, when 6% of the membership was female.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps one of the key salient features of the reinvention of the MWU as Solidarity is the fact that the union has largely been able to shed the negative, racist image that organised white labour had acquired in apartheid South Africa. From a position of resorting to right-wing politics and white labour as a resistance force, as represented by Solidarity, it was able to transform successfully to the demands of a non-racial, democratic post-apartheid labour dispensation.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 23.2.2000, p.11; *Ibid.*, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 30.8.2000, p.33; *Rapport*, 25 Februarie 2001, pp.7-8 (ZB du Toit: Nuwe Solidariteit: vakbond vir minderhede).

<sup>73</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 27.2.2001, p.5; *Rapport*, 4.3.2001, p.4 (Nuwe era vir SA georganiseerde arbeidswêreld); *Ibid.*, 25.2.2001, p.8 (ZB du Toit: Nuwe Solidariteit – vakbond vir minderhede); *The Citizen*, 26.2.2001, p.5 (MWU to launch body with 4 other unions); *Business Day*, 28.2.2001, p.4 (I Louw: Five trade unions merge to form new labour movement).

<sup>74</sup> MWU-Argief, Notule van die Vergadering van die Uitvoerende Bestuur, 25.9.2002, p.4.

<sup>75</sup> Backer, “Revive and Reinvent”, pp.70-71; M Cant & R Machado, *Marketing success stories*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p.43.

<sup>76</sup> For a detailed description and analysis of the transformation of the MWU into Solidarity see WP Visser, “From MWU to Solidarity – a trade union reinventing itself”, in *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 30 (2), 2006, pp.28-38.