

LABOUR AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT – A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW*

Wessel Visser

University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The (white) right-wing of the South African labour movement originated from a working class historically divided along the lines of colour and skills and from a political tradition in Afrikaner politics based on nationalism and the ideal of a sovereign Afrikaner *volkstaat* (people's state). In its efforts to resist labour (and later also political) reforms, which would eventually lead to the formation of a new democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, the right-wing labour movement resorted to various tactics. These tactics included the formation of overarching (white) trade unions joining forces with right-wing political parties, demonstrations and strikes, which at times became violent, and even acts of sabotage in a vain effort to thwart the realization of inevitable change in the South African labour and political landscape. The right-wing aimed either at reversing the dismantling of the structures of apartheid through democratic means by gaining a political majority during elections, or alternatively, creating a separate Afrikaner *volkstaat* that would employ only *volkseie* (people's own) (white) labour.

1. Introduction: The difficulty of conceptualising “labour” and “right-wing” in South Africa

In the South African context the terms “labour movement” and “right wing” can be confusing and open to misinterpretation if construed as self-evidently related to one another. Therefore these problematic concepts require qualification. Firstly, the notion of a South African labour movement should be understood as dichotomous. Since their inception in the 1880s the South African gold mining and secondary industries lacked skilled and technical expertise and consequently such expertise had to be recruited from the industrial centres of Europe, America and Australia. In order to attract and retain the required skills in the relatively primitive and pioneering conditions of the Witwatersrand, the fledgling and burgeoning industrial heartland in the interior of South Africa with Johannesburg as its centre of gravity, these (white) immigrants were paid high wages and accorded a privileged status. These privileges of foreign skilled labour were extended to include unskilled and semi-skilled white workers such as indigenous Afrikaners.

However, due to the nature of deep-level mining and the low average mineral content of the ore, South African minerals could only be produced profitably at low production costs by creating and containing a vast supply of cheap available labour. Thus, the proletarianisation of South Africa's black labour

* This paper was published in *ITH-Tagungsberichte 41, Labour and Right-Wing Extremism*, Akademische Verlaganstalt, Leipzig, 2007. pp.125-148.

force was initiated. Consequently, white workers became an elitist “labour aristocracy” regardless of their skills, and correspondingly, black workers formed a pool of unskilled, cheap labour. The South African working class therefore came to be made up of two groups of workers subject to quite different relations of production with the property-owning class namely a group of exploitable non-white workers and a group of politically free white workers. Thus the South African labour movement emerged from a racial division of labour along colour lines – on the one hand, a small white labour force, and on the other, a vast emergent black proletariat.¹ Throughout most of the twentieth century a close relationship prevailed between white labour and apartheid.²

A second problematic concept in a South African context with regard to the conference theme is the concept of “right wing”. The “right wing” is a blanket political term which covers a wide range of individuals, organisations, beliefs and attitudes with different policies and strategies. Therefore the white working class constitutes only one component of what is perceived as the South African right wing. The “white right-wing” is a wider social movement. The movement and the ideology that underpin it can, in turn, be fully understood only in the wider historical context of politics in South Africa, particularly white Afrikaner politics.

Right-wingers often used the concept of class as an example of a separate group, and although race and class are often coterminous and mutually reinforcing in South Africa, this was not the case as far as white workers were concerned. They identified overwhelmingly with their “national group”, the Afrikaners, within which they were outnumbered by other classes with different “class interests” rather than with a broad inclusive South African working class which cut across nationalist boundaries. All right-wing groups were (and still are), in varying degrees, prepared to assimilate people of a different language, tradition, religion and culture. However, no right-wing organisation was prepared to compromise on the assimilation of other “races”, even if a group met all the other criteria of a common “nationhood”. While many conservatives used the word “white” interchangeably with “Afrikaner”, some extra-parliamentary organisations have showed a trend towards a more exclusive definition. They actively promoted the concept of the (Afrikaner) *Boerevolk* (Boer nation) that is entitled to a *volkstaat* (nation state).³

¹ WP Visser, “White Labour Aristocracy and Black Proletariat. The Origins and Deployment of South Africa’s Racially Divided Working Class”, *ITH-Tagungsberichte* 34, *Die Arbeiterbewegung – Ein gescheitertes Projekt der Moderne?*, 35 Linzer Konferenz, 14. bis 18. September 1999, Akademische Verlaganstalt, Wien, 2000, pp.220-222.

² J van Rooyen, *Hard Right. The New White Power in South Africa*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London and New York, 1994, p.29.

³ 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, pp.56,63-64; J Grobbelaar *et al.*, *Vir Volk en Vaderland. A Guide to the White Right*, Indicator SA Issue Focus, University of Natal, Durban, August 1989, p.29; 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, p.11.

According to Van Rooyen by 1994 the right wing did not represent an ethnic group *per se*, as its support was limited to only about half of all Afrikaners. Nor was its support limited to Afrikaners only, as it enjoyed considerable support among English-speaking conservatives as well. However, the white right wing might be defined as a segment within the white racial group driven by the forces of Afrikaner nationalism, with the goal of self-determination and racial exclusiveness, and with a distinct ideological leaning towards political conservatism.⁴ This nationalism was rooted in the belief that Afrikaners, together with some other white South Africans, formed a distinct and separate nation. The right wing held that any nation, large or small, has an unassailable right to “self-determination” and to have its own country as its fatherland. According to this view, a nation that does not have its own territorial base is scaled down to the status of a group, and in the case of the Afrikaners specifically, a minority group. Thus the establishment of a country which is indisputably their own was the major political objective of the right.⁵

Schönteich and Boshoff also state that generally, and notwithstanding some notable exceptions, the Afrikaner or white right was as opposed to integrating with, and being dominated by, black people as it was opposed to integrating with other white ethnic groups that had not been assimilated into the Afrikaner nation and culture. In principle, therefore, the Afrikaner right feared domination by white English speakers as much as by black people. In practice, however, many on the Afrikaner right expressed their views less in ethnocentric and more in racist terms, and much of its discourse was based on the presumption of white superiority.⁶

Generally the right wing represented the downwardly mobile sectors of the white population: white mine and industrial workers, farmers deprived of their state subsidies, and the lowest echelons of the Afrikaner civil service, who were very concerned about Africanization. Although political attitudes and identities cannot be crudely reduced to material considerations, there was a strong correlation between socio-economic conditions and political outlook, which proved to be an important stimulus in the growth of the South African right wing.⁷ Within the context of the conference theme, therefore, this article concentrates on the white, predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, labour movement as a fraction of the South African right wing.

2. A historical overview of the evolution of the South African right wing

⁴ J van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, p.63.

⁵ Zille, “The right wing in South African politics”, pp.63,70.

⁶ Schönteich and Boshoff, ‘Volk’, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.10,17,18.

⁷ H Adam and K Moodley, *The Negotiated Revolution. Society and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1993, p.150.

Towards the end of the twentieth century and especially towards the final dismantling of apartheid, the organisations of the right were determined to resist the process of change, either by capturing power in time to reverse the process, or at least by building a support base so formidable that no attempted political solution could be implemented without their consent. In time, therefore, the right wing became strong opponents of the South African government.⁸

As mentioned before, the emergence of the extreme right must be understood against the background of the rise and spread of Afrikaner nationalism, and the divisions that have plagued Afrikanerdom for the past century. Moreover, throughout their history Afrikaner nationalists tended to believe that the only way to confirm and protect the status and identity of the Afrikaners, and to prevent them from being dominated by other ethnic groups or races, was to exercise power through self-determination in an ethnically homogenous territory. After the Anglo-Boer War British rule was imposed on the two former Boer republics in South Africa and, in due course, on the newly formed Union of South Africa (established in 1910). The aggressive post-war policy of anglicisation, and the resultant impoverishment and loss of political freedom, left an indelible mark on the national consciousness of the Afrikaner. The political alliances and government policies which were implemented were perceived in certain more conservative white circles as setting Afrikaner against Afrikaner.

The perception of their being second-class citizens boosted Afrikaner nationalism and led to ethnic mobilisation and the formation of the pro-Afrikaner National Party (NP) of General JBM Hertzog in 1914. By the 1920s the problem of poverty took on new dimensions in the cities as most of the newly urbanised Afrikaners lacked an industrial and vocational education, and ended up as unskilled labourers without much hope of promotion. Between 30 and 50 percent of all Afrikaners were classified as “poor whites” during the 1920s, amounting at least 300 000 people by 1932. In the cities Afrikaners had to contend with the superior status of their recent enemies, the English, whose culture and economic strength seemed overwhelming.

It should also be mentioned that pro-Afrikaner worker organisations and, later, trade unions were formed by Afrikaner cultural entrepreneurs such as Dr Albert Hertzog, the son of General JBM Hertzog. In 1939 the then Prime Minister, General Smuts, decided to enter the Second World War, once more on the side of Britain. This resulted in many of the old anti-British and anti-imperialist feelings being rekindled among Afrikaner nationalists, who again refused to fight on the side of Britain. Initially Afrikaner nationalists were themselves divided mainly between the NP, on the one hand, and the fascist paramilitary *Ossewa Brandwag* (OB) (Ox-wagon Sentinel), on the other. The OB espoused a local version of National Socialism with a strong Christian flavour and attempted to disrupt South Africa’s war effort through acts of intimidation, sabotage and assassination. Initially the OB enjoyed considerable support among Afrikaners, with almost half a million members at

⁸ Zille, “The right wing in South African politics”, p.56.

its peak, but when Germany's defeat appeared to be inevitable, the OB's popularity began to wane and many of its members placed their loyalty firmly behind DF Malan's National Party.

Especially under the leadership of Prime Minister HF Verwoerd exclusivist Afrikaner nationalism grew and flourished. Moreover, in the Verwoerdian era Afrikaner nationalist ideology and its expression in apartheid policy were further developed and strengthened by the NP.⁹ However, two decades after the NP's 1948 election victory the first cracks began to appear in the apparently monolithic phalanx of its Afrikaner institutional base, due to strains and tensions within the *volk*. In 1969 the first formal split took place in the ranks of the NP when four sitting NP Members of Parliament under the leadership of Dr Albert Hertzog left the party and formed the *Herstigte Nasionale Party* (HNP) (Reconstituted National Party).

The split came about as a result of disagreements on how *verlig* (outward-looking and enlightened) the policy of the NP should become. Those who left the party to form the HNP argued that tried and tested government policy should be continued and that the government itself should remain more *verkramp* (conservative and inward-looking). The debate revolved, at a deeper level, around strategies aimed at sustaining the material interests and, ultimately, the survival of the white Afrikaner *volk*. Thus, a primary argument, which had become a *leitmotif* of the white right-wing movement, emphasised that the strength and success of Afrikaner nationalism lay within the *volk*, within the racial and ethnic boundaries of this social entity. The *verkramp*te view was thus inward- and backward-looking, and essentially aimed at maintaining the *status quo*: the Verwoerdian version of apartheid. The *verlig*te alternative, though clearly targeted at securing the continued dominance of white, especially Afrikaner, power and its interests in the country, was more assimilative and open in approach.

The Prime Minister at the time, John Vorster, was seen as symbolizing the liberalisation of Afrikaner nationalism and thereby as having initiated the dismantling of the Afrikaner *volk* and the concomitant impoverishment of its people. A general election was called in 1970 in which all four HNP Members of Parliament lost their seats. HNP members were effectively excluded from the institutionalised activities of the *volk* and relegated to the fringes of the Afrikaners' social entity.¹⁰

HNP membership was largely restricted to the dwindling remnants of the disillusioned and alienated white working class and to groups of farmers from

⁹ S Bekker and J Grobbelaar, "The white rightwing movement in South Africa: before and after the May 1987 election", in DJ van Vuuren *et al.* (eds.), *South African Election 1987. Context, Process and Prospect*, Owen Burgess Publishers, Pinetown, 1987, pp.68-69; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, pp.29-31; Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.13-15; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.7-16.

¹⁰ Bekker and Grobbelaar, "The white rightwing movement in South Africa", pp.70-71; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.17-20,74; Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.15,18.

which the NP, as the political vehicle of Afrikaner nationalism, had drawn its support in earlier decades. These groups were dropped from the government's protection and patronage during the 1970s. Trade union support for the right-wing sentiment, for example, included Gert Beetge, general secretary of the *Blanke Bouwerkersunie*, who joined the HNP, and Arrie Paulus, general secretary of the white Mineworkers' Union, who supported the party on a number of occasions (see also sections 3 and 4).¹¹

In response to the NP government's political and labour reforms the Conservative Party (CP) was formed in 1982 under the leadership of Dr Andries Treurnicht, when he and seventeen other NP Members of Parliament broke from the ruling NP. The reason they gave for the break was the proposed introduction by the government of the Tricameral Parliament in which representation in separate chambers was accorded to Indian and "coloured" South Africans. This policy shift went too far for the conservative right in the NP, especially as the principle of white (and essentially Afrikaner) exclusivity in the political domain had been fundamentally compromised. At a deeper level this compromise, it was believed, would have a profoundly negative effect on Afrikaner interests and the very survival of the *volk* as a minority group within the country.

The CP's initial constitutional policy was one of partition, which largely implied a return to the more "stable and prosperous" times of Verwoerdian apartheid in the 1960s, when the "true" NP maintained a pure policy of separate development. Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, the CP's policies began moving closer to the concept of Afrikaner self-determination in a smaller white Afrikaner homeland. Geographical partition was linked to Afrikaner prosperity and peace. The rationale behind this thinking was that South Africans were divided into different peoples, each of which was culturally and ethnically distinct, and that whites, and Afrikaners in particular, had the right to place the interests of their *volk* first.

Underpinning this message of partition as the only acceptable political solution for South Africa was the organisational strategy of ethnic mobilisation that the CP, together with other right-wing organisations, had developed such as the establishment of new right-wing Afrikaner cultural and intellectual organisations parallel to, and in competition with, older bodies which remained loyal to the NP government. The formation of the CP was a watershed in white, and especially Afrikaner, politics. The CP and its supporting right-wing cultural and intellectual organisations considered the electoral defeat of the NP to be their primary objective. After 1982, therefore, the white right became a significant electoral force, at times seriously obstructing the government's reform programme which sought at first to reform, and then to dismantle, the country's apartheid policy.¹²

¹¹ Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, p.24; Zille, "The right wing in South African politics", p.57; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.18,75.

¹² Bekker and Grobbelaar, "The white rightwing movement in South Africa", pp.71-74; Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, p.19; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, pp.13-14.

The CP's support was concentrated mainly in rural and urban working-class constituencies, in the latter instance especially in the lower echelons of the civil service. The party considered the public service, comprised of 40 per cent of all economically active Afrikaners during the 1980s, to be its greatest actual and potential source of support. During the election campaigns of the 1980s the CP accused the governing NP of having "sold out" the white voter to a future black majority government. It blamed the NP for the continuing impoverishment of the "ordinary" white man, the mismanagement of the economy, and the resultant falling living standards of white South Africans in general and of civil servants in particular. In line with its principles, the CP's formal policy on trade unions proposed that they should be located within each discrete people's homeland. Thus, only white trade unions would be allowed in (white) South Africa and all other trade unions would be disbanded there. The CP right-wingers regarded the ever-strengthening muscle of the black trade union movement in "white" South Africa since the 1970s with growing concern.¹³

One of the most prominent movements among the variety of more extreme organisations, and which completely dominated the South African right wing, was the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) (Afrikaner Resistance Movement). This fascist, militant extra-parliamentary and paramilitary organisation was founded in 1973 by seven right-wingers under the leadership of Eugène Terre'Blanche, an ex-policeman who would become a charismatic Afrikaner demagogue. Sources estimate that the total membership, which varied from week to week, never exceeded 14 900. "Active sympathizers" numbered close to 150 000 and the movement probably also had a tacit following of about 300 000 right-wingers.¹⁴ Although the AWB was also registered as a political party, the *Blanke Volkstaatsparty* (White Nation-state Party), it did not operate as a political party.¹⁵

The AWB emblem – three black sevens in a white circle surrounded by a red background – was very controversial, given its similarity with the Nazi swastika. Racism was an integral part of the AWB's philosophy. The movement's ideology was based on the belief that whites were superior to blacks and the (Afrikaner) *Boer* culture and nation were sacred. Romantic, racist and sensational as it was, the military rhetoric of Terre'Blanche had wide-spread appeal for right-wing Afrikaners in the former Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces of South Africa. The AWB drew its support from the same lower echelons of Afrikaner society as the HNP and the CP: the disillusioned and alienated white urban working class in the mining industry,

¹³ Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, pp.11-12,15; Zille, "The right wing in South African politics", p.57; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.32,69.

¹⁴ A Kemp, *Victory of Violence. The Story of the AWB*, Forma Publishers, Pretoria, 1990, pp.5,150; A Beyers en P Kotzé, *Opmars van die AWB*, Oranjewerkers Promosies (Edms) Bpk, Morgenzon, n.d., pp.25,33; "South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand", *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.5.

¹⁵ Zille, "The right wing in South African politics", p.60.

private and parastatal industries, low-rank civil servants, as well as groups of right-wing farmers. The AWB claimed that its main purpose was “to ensure the survival of the “Afrikaner Boer nation free in its own country” and “to establish a free, Christian, republican Afrikaner Boer Nation-state”, seceded from the Republic of South Africa on the grounds of the nation’s “inalienable right” to the (former pre-Anglo-Boer War) Boer republics.

The AWB was not averse to the use of violence and violent rhetoric to further its aims. With his demagogic oratory at mass meetings Terre’Blanche openly challenged and threatened the authority of the government and the AWB probably had the potential to provide the right-wing movement with both the vehicle and the opportunity for extra-constitutional political action in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the 1980s the AWB began actively to recruit men who had completed their military service with the aim of establishing paramilitary commando units such as the *Brandwag* (The Sentry), the *Stormvalke* (Storm Falcons), the *Blitsvalke* (Lightning Falcons), the *Witwagte* (White Watch), the *Ystergarde* (White Brigade), the *Wenkommando* (Victory Commando) and Aquila. The members of these units were encouraged to carry their own firearms. The main purpose of the *Brandwag*, for instance, was to crush a possible black uprising, if government forces were unable or unwilling to do so. This was because the NP government was perceived as being too weak and vacillating to take decisive action against “*swart gevaar*” (black peril).

The press began to link the AWB with acts of vigilantism. In the early 1980s members of the movement were convicted of terrorism for illegally possessing explosives and arms, and conspiring to blow up the multiracial casino resort Sun City, a multiracial hotel in Pretoria and government structures in Cape Town. AWB leader, Eugène Terre’Blanche, was arrested on charges of malicious damage to property and *crimen injuria* and later convicted of the illegal possession of arms and ammunition, and received a suspended sentence. In the late 1980s the AWB successfully clashed with and disrupted meetings of NP Ministers, who were seen as having betrayed the Verwoerdian ideal, throughout the rural former Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces. These incidents were a harbinger of more violent acts to come from the side of the AWB in the run-up to the country’s 1994 election.¹⁶

During an AWB mass meeting in 1988 Terre’Blanche made it clear to his right-wing audience that there was no place for moderation in South African politics. When the “black revolution” “exploded, they would have only two choices: either the AWB, who would be in the forefront of the Afrikaner *volk*’s counter-revolution, or the “communist-inspired” African National Congress (ANC).¹⁷ According to Van Rooyen the increase both in numbers of extremist

¹⁶ Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.92-95,175-176,195; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, pp.40-41,46-48; Bekker and Grobbelaar, “The white rightwing movement in South Africa”, p.76-77; Zille, “The right wing in South African politics”, pp.59-61; Schönteich and Boshoff, ‘*Volk*’, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.18-19,21; “South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand”, *Africa Confidential*, 33, 6 (20 March 1992), p.5.

¹⁷ Beyers en Kotzé, *Opmars van die AWB*, pp.65,92-93,127,138-139.

right-wing organisations and in the intensity of violence which was to follow could be explained in two ways. Firstly, it was a direct result of the perception among the right that the demise of white *baasskap* (domination over blacks) was a foregone conclusion and that parliamentary and non-violent resistance would not prevent this; secondly, increasing right-wing violence was merely one element of an increasingly violent society.

Extremist right-wing groups were responsible for more than 50 acts of terror during the course of 1990, which represented 15 per cent of all acts of violence committed during that year, and this figure increased dramatically in the following three years. The AWB focused on organised public protests which frequently ended up in violence. These included an attack by 40 AWB members on a group of black children in the Transvaal town of Louis Trichardt in November 1990; the attack on black squatters near the town of Ventersdorp, which led to a running battle between the police and the AWB in May 1991 and the attempt by the AWB in August 1991 to disrupt a meeting held by State President FW de Klerk in Ventersdorp (Eugène Terre'Blanche's home town), which resulted in three of its members being killed. During January 1994 there were 30 acts of sabotage against the ANC in the Northwest Province and the Free State, while 41 bombs exploded in what is now the Northwest Province during the first week of February.¹⁸ In the run-up to South Africa's first democratic election in April 1994 AWB members set off a series of bomb blasts, targeted mainly at taxi ranks, bus stops and terminuses where black people usually congregated, and at polling stations, ANC and NP offices, and the Johannesburg International Airport, killing about two dozen people and injuring some 200.¹⁹

Thus a distinction can be made between three categories of the South African white right with which various elements of the white labour movement would ally themselves. First, there was the moderate or pragmatic right, which favoured an autonomous, non-racial Afrikaner region within a united but federal South Africa. Secondly, the traditional right wanted to re-implement apartheid and, failing this, establish a sovereign white homeland loosely linked to a South African confederation. Thirdly, there was the radical or extreme right, which operated mostly outside the confines of institutional politics, openly propagated racism or white supremacy, and had no misgivings about using violence.²⁰

3. A brief overview of the evolution of the white Afrikaner-orientated labour movement

¹⁸ Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.194-197; G van der Westhuizen en L Barnard, "Die slag van Mmabatho": Die einde van regse weestand 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. 163. See also *Longreach Report*, December 1990, p.14.

¹⁹ Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, p.28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11. See also J Booyse, "The extremist right – joke or threat?", *South African Foundation Review*, September 1990, p.7.

As was mentioned in the introduction, the South African white labour movement originated from a working class initially made up of skilled artisans from the industrial centres of Europe, America and Australia - imported at the time of the discovery of minerals in the interior of the country towards the end of the nineteenth century – as well as of unskilled and semi-skilled indigenous Afrikaners.²¹

The Industrial Conciliation Act, which was passed in March 1924, shortly before the defeat of General Smuts's SAP government, provided a major impetus to the tendency towards the separationist or exclusionist characteristics of white labour's activities and must therefore be accounted as one of the major factors giving rise to South Africa's discriminatory labour movement. The omission of pass-bearing blacks from the definition of "employee" meant that the provisions of the Act did not apply to them. Thus began a dual system of labour relations in South Africa. White workers were increasingly drawn into a protected position in the capitalist system, while black workers remained excluded from political and economic power.²²

By the early 1930s Afrikaners had joined trade unions in large numbers, as well as being prominent in unemployment protests. The NP-South African Labour Party Pact government that came to power in 1924 responded with a so-called "civilised labour policy". Those "poor whites" who found jobs as a result could be in no doubt that they depended directly upon the state for employment, and any trade union strategy was bound to take account of this. Based on the white labourist traditions set by the pioneer British-orientated white working class, an Afrikaner labour movement thus began to emerge. It was also influenced by the Christian nationalism offered by the NP in an effort to wean them from the "fearful alternative" of the "dangers" of class consciousness. Christian national trade union ideology included two integral aspects: racial segregation and anti-communism. Segregation gave an immediate guarantee of protected employment for the mass of unskilled Afrikaners who would otherwise be forced to compete with more "economical" black labour. Anti-communism formed an inevitable component of Christian nationalism in the face of the competition from class-based organisations for the allegiance of Afrikaner workers.

On the state-owned railways the "civilised labour policy" was designed to maintain a racially hierarchical division of labour. Thousands of unskilled, barely literate "poor whites" were recruited into the railway service, which, together with other state employers, had acted to provide relief for unskilled unemployed whites. Given their structural position, the appropriate form of

²¹ WH Andrews, *Class Struggles in South Africa*, Stewart Printing Co., Cape Town, 1941, p.12; EN Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy. A History of White Workers in the Transvaal and the General Strike of 1913*, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1976, p.447.

²² J Lever, "Capital and Labour in South Africa: The Passage of the Industrial Conciliation Act, 1924", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 3, 10 (December 1977), p.27; M Finnemore and R van Rensburg, *Contemporary Labour Relations*, LexisNexis Butterworths, Durban, Second Edition, 2002, pp.25-26.

trade unionism for this group of workers was right-wing, racially exclusive, state-orientated company unionism. In 1934 the Afrikaner-orientated *Spoorbond* (Railway League) was established. The majority of its members were newly proletarianised and unskilled, and they perceived themselves to be threatened by cheaper African labour. Thus the *Spoorbond* supported the “civilised labour policy” and agitated for the replacement of black workers by whites.

In 1936 the (South African) Iron and Steel Trades Association (ISTA) was founded with a predominantly Afrikaner membership. From a small nucleus of 300 members in 1936, the union had grown to become one of the largest white unions, with a membership of over 38 000 in 1976. In 1949 the *Blanke Bouwerkersunie* (White Building Workers’ Union) was established. These efforts were also actively supported by Dr Albert Hertzog who would later found the HNP. And in 1953 a leather workers’ union was founded for white members only.²³ These white unions, as well as other white conservative unions representing mining, railway, building and municipal workers, were constituted of the less privileged sectors of the white community. These unions looked to the state to guarantee and to protect privileged employment for their white members.²⁴

4. White worker and right-wing reaction to labour and political reforms

The Mine Workers’ Union can, in all probability, be regarded as the most renowned and prominent white labour union of twentieth-century South Africa. It was originally founded in Johannesburg as the Transvaal Miners’ Association (TMA) on 22 June 1902²⁵ and came increasingly to rely upon the use of job colour bars to maintain the white miners’ privileged position.²⁶ When mining capitalists threatened to remove these job colour bars, the union became prominent for its militant stance in the great industrial strikes of 1907, 1913, 1914 and 1922. After the 1913 strike the TMA was renamed the (South African) Mine Workers’ Union (MWU).²⁷

²³ J Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-55. The rise and fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp.11,69-70,75,77-79,84,86,158; R Davies *et al.*, *The Struggle for South Africa. A Reference Guide to Movements, Organizations and Institutions*, Vol. Two, Zed Books Ltd., London, 1984, pp.248-249,255-256,263-265.

²⁴ Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation*, pp.156,179; Finnemore and Van Rensburg, *Contemporary Labour Relations*, p.28; S Bendix, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, Juta & Co, Ltd, Kenwyn, Third Edition, 1996, pp.90,99,103,201,230. See also HR Griffiths and RA Jones, *South African Labour Economics*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Johannesburg, 1980, pp.221,240.

²⁵ D Ticktin, “The Origins of the South African Labour Party, 1888-1910”, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1973, pp.113-114.

²⁶ Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa*, p.13.

²⁷ E Gitsham and JF Trembath, *A First Account of Labour Organisation in South Africa*, E.P. & Commercial Printing Co., Ltd., Durban, 1926, pp.28,66; RK Cope, *Comrade Bill. The Life and*

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 thousands of loyal English-speaking white miners joined the British war effort as volunteers. It created job opportunities in the mines for Afrikaner workers who were not loyal to Britain's cause in the war. Thus the white labour force on the Witwatersrand became Afrikanerised and by 1916 the ratio of Afrikaners to immigrant workers on the mines was 75% to 25%.²⁸ With their growing class consciousness, Afrikaner miners were rapidly becoming a power base in the mining industry. As was the case with white English-speaking miners, Afrikaner miners became thoroughly radicalized by fear that the mine owners would undercut them with cheaper black labour or using even larger teams of black miners under their supervision. According to Giliomee, mineworkers were the most militant section of the Afrikaner working class and they would soon prove to be the most radical force the mines had ever employed.²⁹

A political consequence of the miners' defeat during the 1922 strike was the fall of the Smuts government in the 1924 general election. The Pact government introduced the Mines and Works Amendment Act (the so-called "Colour Bar" Act) in 1926, which was of particular benefit to members of the MWU to the extent that it entrenched white job reservation on the mines.³⁰

After the rapid economic growth of the 1960s, white workers were unable to satisfy the economy's need for skilled labour. Between 1971 and 1977 white males contributed only a quarter of the increase in skilled employed blue-collar labour. For instance, the percentage of whites in medium-level manpower had dropped from 82 per cent in 1960 to 65 per cent in 1981. This skilled labour shortage, together with spiralling strikes by black workers and overseas pressure, forced the government to embark on a series of labour reforms. It removed the restrictions on the training of blacks and on black participation in collective bargaining, and set up a common industrial relations system. Thus began a process of the steady erosion of undiluted white supremacy and white prosperity in the work place which would widen the political cleavages in white society and strengthen the right wing of the white labour movement.

Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers' Leader, Stewart Printing Co., Cape Town, 1943, pp.89,110-111; IL Walker and B Weinbren, *2000 Casualties. A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa*, SATUC, Johannesburg, 1961, pp.22,42; Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy*, pp.152,226,252.

²⁸ E Stals (red.), *Afrikaners in die Goudstad. Deel I 1886-1924*, HAUM, Kaapstad, 1978, pp.36,40,86; D Ticktin, "The War Issue and the Collapse of the South African Labour Party", *South African Historical Journal*, 1 (November 1969), p.60.

²⁹ H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003, pp.329,332.

³⁰ BJ Liebenberg and SB Spies (eds.), *South Africa in the 20th Century*, JL van Schaik Academic, Pretoria, 1993, pp.154-155,173-175,180-182; FA Johnstone, *Race, Class and Gold. A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1976, pp.150,156,166-167.

In the early 1970s the state and the private sector began to narrow the large disparities between white and black wages, and the government also committed itself to eventually eliminating racial discrimination in public sector salaries. During this considerable redistribution, white incomes declined. Thus, the NP government began to move away from apartheid as the final answer to South Africa's political crisis and began to accept forms of racial integration and big business as possible partners in combating the security threats of mass unemployment and acute poverty in the black homelands. This situation set the stage for a sharp white political backlash, which exposed the deep divisions in Afrikaner nationalist ranks. Since the late 1970s the right-wing press and white trade unions such as the MWU had been engaged in a vociferous campaign against redistribution. The right-wing press also argued that the NP government was "deliberately" selling out white civil servants in the low and middle salary categories. A large section of white workers saw these reforms as a direct threat to their traditional privileged position and for the first time since the early 1920s serious class divisions began to open up within the white group.³¹

What can be regarded as a watershed event in the history of the black labour movement, and which also heralded the renaissance of black trade union organisation in South Africa, was the mass Durban strikes of 1973. These widespread strikes over low wages, mounting unemployment and poverty involved an estimated 60 000 to 100 000 black employees. Industry was brought to a near standstill. The work stoppages signalled the start of the evolution of a profound consciousness of power among the black working masses and the unprecedented growth of a new wave of black trade unionism.³² Thus by 1976 it had become obvious that the government had not solved the problem of black worker militancy. Pressured by the political consequences of the 1976 Soweto student uprisings, combined with the threat of sanctions and disinvestment, the government in 1977 appointed a commission of enquiry into labour legislation, commonly known as the Wiehahn Commission. The commission's most striking recommendations, which the government eventually accepted and implemented, were (among

³¹ 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.111-118; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.20,31,34.

³² P van Niekerk, "The Trade Union Movement in the Politics of Resistance in South Africa", in S Johnson (ed.), *South Africa. No Turning Back*, The Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1988, p.154; D Macshane et al., *Power! Black Workers, Their Unions and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1984, pp.16-17,20-23; Bendix, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, p.300; D Ncube, *The Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unionism*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1985, pp.114,143; L Luckhardt and B Wall, *Organise or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, pp.447-453; Griffiths and Jones, *South African Labour Economics*, pp.223-226.

others) the registration of black trade unions and the abolition of statutory job reservation.³³

Having enjoyed state protection for such a long time, the white unions such as the MWU were totally unprepared for socio-economic reforms and black advancement, which they regarded as a direct threat to their position. White workers felt the pinch of a loss of real income and especially white miners harboured fears of being replaced by black miners or of their wage levels being undercut by cheaper black labour. As the number of white workers dwindled in relation to the South African labour force as a whole, and therefore also its scarcity value as skilled labour, their industrial and political power to influence labour legislation and policy dwindled accordingly.³⁴

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 previous militant clashes between the state and the union ended in bloody violence and the loss of life, the MWU of the late 1970s resorted to confrontational political resistance and protest in its disputes with the NP government. The union's rhetoric also became more extreme and militant. Arrie Paulus, the MWU general secretary, 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 labour unrest".³⁵ In March 1979 Paulus threatened that any abolition of job reservation on the mines could lead to a repetition of the 1922 industrial conflict. He boldly stated that the MWU "would never allow labour equality in the mining industry or would allow any black worker to deprive a white miner of his bread, even if it meant a repetition of the 1922 strike and a battle of (white) brother against brother". The MWU would "never" agree to job integration.³⁶

The MWU threw down the gauntlet on the eve of the release of Part One 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

³³ 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; MacShane, *Power!*, pp.55-56; Bendix, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, pp.302-307.

³⁴ Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, p.31; Giliomee, "Afrikaner Politics 1977-87", pp.118-119.

³⁵ AHJ Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek, 1978-1982", Unpublished MA thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1991, pp.35,47,79; 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. See also Giliomee, "Afrikaner Politics 1977-87", pp.119-120.

³⁶ Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.45,57; *Die Mynwerker*, 7.3.1979, pp.1,3,6.

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. The 1979 strike was a futile demonstration by the MWU that the white miners were indispensable in the mining industry and that production would be seriously affected without them.³⁷

Although the gist of the Wiehahn recommendations 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.³⁸ Paulus vilified and lambasted the Wiehahn report and regarded its recommendations as “the greatest act of treason against the white workers of South Africa since [the strike of] 1922”.³⁹ Thus, when the 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 the most prominent and dynamic right-wing union, the MWU took the initiative to consolidate the ranks of white labour by creating a “white force” or power base in order to resist the abolition of job reservation and to bargain for white workers’ rights more effectively. In 1990 Peet Ungerer, Paulus’s successor, attempted, with limited success, to create a united trade union for all white workers – a super white union as it was called – by initiating a vigorous recruitment drive in order to bolster and expand the MWU’s membership and to muster reactionary white worker power against the perceived progression towards less racially exclusivist practices.⁴⁰

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 parties such as the HNP; the political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour and political reforms was the loss of political support from white workers. After the release of the Wiehahn recommendations, the estrangement between the MWU and the NP government became complete and irreversible. The MWU gave the HNP moral and electoral support in the by-elections of 1979 and the general election of 1981. Extremist white miners disrupted electoral meetings by government spokespersons and in the

³⁷ Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.79,83-84,114,117; C Cooper, “The Mineworkers’ Strike”, in *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5, 3 (October 1979), pp.2,4,6-18,20-25; S Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987, pp.164-165,177; J Lang, *Bullion Johannesburg. Men, Mines and the Challenge of Conflict*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986, p.469.

³⁸ H Giliomee and H Adam, *Afrikanermag. Opkoms en Toekoms*, UUB, Stellenbosch, 1981, p.203; M Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid. South Africa, 1910-1986*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1989, p.322.

³⁹ See *Die Mynwerker*, 16.5.1979, pp.1-2 and 11.7.1979, p.1.

⁴⁰ Barnard, “Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie”, pp.45,49-50,52,58,66,115; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p.176; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.172-173; Bendix, *Industrial Relations in South Africa*, p.230; *Die Mynwerker*, 7.2.1979; *Ibid.*, 11.2.1981, p.1; *Ibid.*, January 1990, p.1; *Ibid.*, July 1990, pp.1,3; *Ibid.*, November/December 1990, p.1.

general election of 1981 the MWU president, Cor de Jager, stood as HNP candidate in the mining constituency of Carletonville. However, although the HNP vowed to protect the interests of the white workers, the party's candidates lost both election campaigns. The party developed a "loser" and "lower-class" stigma and failed fully to understand the changed material and structural conditions of the country, especially the new materialism and middle-class ethic which had developed within Afrikanerdom. There was little material reason or incentive for defection by white workers to the HNP. The party did not possess the political power, as did the NP, to enhance their living standards.⁴¹

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, it came as no surprise when the CP began to draw considerable white labour support after its inception in 1982. Where the CP promised, should it 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 turned to hostility as the right wing accused the government of betraying white labour. And in the general election of 1987 Paulus, the former MWU general secretary, successfully contested the Carletonville seat for the CP.⁴²

However, although the CP made spectacular gains in the 1987 general election by winning 22 seats or 60 per cent of the vote cast to become the official opposition at its first attempt, 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 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

⁴¹ Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.35,65-66,78-80,92-94,114; Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, pp.166-168,175; Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.323; Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, p.269; Bekker and Grobbelaar, "The white rightwing movement in South Africa", pp.66,71; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, p.24; Giliomee, "Afrikaner Politics 1977-87", pp.117,120-121; D O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years. The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*, Ravan Press, Randburg, 1996, pp.165,310; *Die Mynwerker*, 13.6.1979, pp.1-2,6; *Ibid.*, 22.8.1979, pp.1-2.

⁴² Barnard, "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie", pp.118-119; Zille, "The right wing in South African politics", p.83; Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, pp.15-16; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.69,172-173; A Ries en E Dommissie, *Broedertwis. Die Verhaal van die 1982-skeuring in die Nasionale Party*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1982, pp.96,108-187; *Die Mynwerker*, 1.7.1981, p.1; *Ibid.*, August 1989, p.1; *Ibid.*, January 1990, pp.1,3; *Ibid.*, July 1990, pp.1,3; *Ibid.*, November/December 1990, p.1; MWU Executive Council Minutes, 26.1.1987, p.11 and 26.6.1987, p.13.

reform programme and put pressure on the government to concede to their key demand of Afrikaner self-determination.⁴³

In reaction to the defeat of the “No” vote campaign during the 1992 referendum, the MWU, in conjunction 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 mobilization, strikes and protests by white workers. Thus the focus shifted from efforts to halt reforms by bringing a right-wing government to power through electoral means, towards exercising pressure on the NP and the ANC to recognize 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* (AVF) (Afrikaner People’s Front), which was later renamed the Freedom Front.

The AVF was established under the leadership of ex-chief of the South African Defence Force (SADF), General Constand Viljoen. The fact that, in addition to Viljoen, the AVF was also led by a number of former SADF and police force generals, gave new impetus and scope to the prospect of violent resistance by the white right. This organisation aimed at forging right-wing movements together into an effective alliance to further 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.

For instance, in 1993 the AVF organized a mass meeting which was attended by approximately 5000 supporters at the government’s administrative headquarters at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, to issue an ultimatum to the government to open talks on Afrikaner self-determination within six months or face armed rebellion. In the event of an ANC takeover of the whole South Africa the AVF planned, with the help of sympathetic SADF and police units, to proclaim and defend an independent Afrikaner state in parts of the former Transvaal and Free State. Members of the AVF engaged in acts of sabotage in various parts of the South Africa to put pressure on the country’s constitutional negotiators to comply with the white right’s demands for territorial autonomy. In 1994 a state of emergency was declared in the North West Province to counter an elaborate AVF-sponsored plan to establish an independent *Boerestaat* (Boer state) focused on some 50 towns, most of which were already controlled by right-wing councils and some had awarded the AWB and other right-wing organisations the “freedom of the town”.⁴⁴

⁴³ Zille, “The right wing in South Africa”, p.55; Bekker and Grobbelaar, *Vir Volk en Vaderland*, p.66; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.149-155; Adam and Moodley, *The Negotiated Revolution*, pp.152-153; Schönteich and Boshoff, ‘Volk’, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.20,22-23.

⁴⁴ Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.71-72,91,112-114,154-155,170-173,187-188,192-193; Schönteich and Boshoff, ‘Volk’, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.24-26; Van der Westhuizen en Barnard, “Die ‘Slag van Mmabatho’”, pp.163-164.

In the realignment of its position towards right-wing protest movements, the MWU, for instance, also became more reactionary and adopted a laager mentality. The union began to focus on right-wing Afrikaner causes. It was the intention of the MWU executive to rekindle a “culture of protest” amongst its members, which was absent in white labour ranks in the post-apartheid political dispensation. MWU mass action, protest marches and strikes were launched against parastatals in communications, electricity and the steel industry, as well as the mining industry, on issues such as the withdrawal of certain white 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.⁴⁵

Also the AWB became involved in violent protests and acts of violence in the early 1990s. 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 (black) National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) on the Free State goldfields, although he was released eventually.⁴⁶

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 3000 miners as members in the goldfields district of Welkom in the Free State alone.⁴⁷ 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 new democratic constitution.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See *MWU News*, 1991-1997; MWU Executive Council Minutes, 18.12.1995, p.25 and 26.6.1996, p.30.

⁴⁶ “South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand”, *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.6; Kemp, *Victory or Violence*, pp.176-180.

⁴⁷ K Smit, *Die Wel en Weë van die AWB*, Konfetti Bemarking, 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.

⁴⁸ Smit, *Die Wel en Weë van die AWB*, p.340; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.95,173.

AWB influence among, and involvement with, white workers was also stimulated by the worsening safety situation on mines and factories in the early 1990s, when whites were assaulted by blacks. After a race incident on the Highveld Steel plant at Witbank in 1993 between MWU members and black members of the National Union of Metal Workers involving an assault case, about 70 armed AWB members gave “protection” to the MWU members on the premises. The AWB only withdrew after having reached an agreement with the plant’s management that the MWU members would receive police protection.⁴⁹ According to Peet Ungerer, the AWB even tried, although unsuccessfully, to infiltrate and take over the MWU executive.⁵⁰

The AWB threatened that they, in conjunction 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 power 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. In the run-up to South Africa’s first democratic general election in April 1994, and in the light of the assassination of Chris Hani, the black leader of the South African Communist Party, in April 1993 by two right-wing CP supporters, South Africa’s security and stability was indeed hanging in the balance.⁵¹

However, at that stage the tide began to turn against right-wing extremism. Due to negative publicity of Terre’Blanche’s womanising and alcoholism, his buffoonery and arrest on charges of malicious damage to property, assaults on black employees and *crimen injuria*, the AWB became a laughing stock. Militant AWB members began to leave the movement, because they realized that their leader’s revolutionary zeal extended little further than hollow rhetoric and empty bravado.⁵²

Poor leadership and personality clashes further weakened the right wing.⁵³ In what was to be a turning point for the white right, the AVF unsuccessfully attempted to support the ailing Bantustan government of Bophuthatswana in March 1994. ANC supporters in Bophuthatswana protested the “homeland”

⁴⁹ K von Holdt, *Transition from Below. Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2003, p.230; Smit, *Die Wel en Weë van die AWB*, p.344; W Matlala, “Black and white at Highveld Steel”, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 17, 5 (September/October 1993), p.10.

⁵⁰ Private interview with Mr Peet Ungerer, 2.7.2001.

⁵¹ 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; Van der Westhuizen en Barnard, “Die ‘Slag van Mmabatho’”, p.163.

⁵² Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, p.94; “South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand”, *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.5.

⁵³ “South Africa II: Bitter-enders prepare for the last stand”, *Africa Confidential*, 33,6 (20 March 1992), p.5.

government's decision not to take part in the forthcoming democratic general election. The protests escalated into strike action, rioting and widespread looting. Fearing that he would lose control over his "country", the president of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope, asked Constand Viljoen for assistance. In response, Viljoen mobilised some 1 500 AVF members who assembled outside of the Bophuthatswana capital of Mmabatho, where they were issued with Bophuthatswana Defence Force (BDF) rifles. At the same time about 500 unruly AWB members also entered the Bantustan and some of them went on the rampage, firing at BDF troops and civilians in Mmabatho. As a result of the AWB's actions, even Mangope loyalists turned against the "white invaders" and large sections of the BDF threatened to mutiny. Mangope ordered Viljoen to withdraw his supporters from Bophuthatswana, a request with which Viljoen complied.

In response to the AWB's actions the BDF fired on an AWB vehicle critically injuring some of its occupants and bringing it to a standstill. In front of rolling television cameras the wounded AWB occupants were executed at point-blank range by a black member of the BDF. The events in Bophuthatswana were to be the white right's undoing. The execution event arguably dealt a decisive blow to the morale of the rank and file of the white right throughout the country. The perception the extreme right had cultivated, that it was invincible, was shattered. The fact that the AWB entered Bophuthatswana separately from the AVF members mobilized by Viljoen, and refused to fall under his command, also revealed fundamental weaknesses and divisions in the white right's military preparedness for armed resistance.⁵⁴

For Viljoen and his followers the events in Bophuthatswana were also a turning point. He felt that sections of the white right were too undisciplined, and the right wing too divided, to shape it into a credible and effective fighting force. As a result Viljoen abandoned his plan of violent resistance to establish an Afrikaner *volkstaat* by force of arms. The AVF came forward with a new plan for a *volkstaat* based on a territory consisting of only 14 per cent of South Africa's land mass, with only limited autonomy. With only a few weeks to go before the historical 1994 general election, Viljoen and his supporters formed a new moderate right-wing party, the Freedom Front. The Freedom Front took part in the April election hoping to achieve Afrikaner self-determination through a democratic process, but ultimately did not succeed in persuading the new ANC government to consent to the creation of an Afrikaner *volkstaat*.

In the post-apartheid period after 1994 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. Some tried to withdraw from the realities of the new South Africa by moving into gated communities. In the June 1999 general election the combined vote of the white right crumbled to 174 000, or only 1 per cent of the total number of votes cast. Right-wing political parties such as the CP began to slide into political

⁵⁴ Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.26-27; Van der Westhuizen en Barnard, "Die 'Slag van Mmabatho'", p.177.

oblivion.⁵⁵ After 1997 even the conservative, hard-right MWU underwent a complete change of heart by rethinking its vision, strategies and structures. In 2002 the union was renamed Solidarity. Solidarity became 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 and a post-apartheid South Africa.⁵⁶

5. Right-wing extremism – a present and future prognosis

A few isolated but significant violent incidents after 1994 revealed that there was still some activity on the fringes of the white right. The most significant of these have been the actions of the so-called *Boeremag* (Boer Force). Just after midnight on 30 October 2002 a number of bomb blasts rocketed Soweto, South Africa's largest black township, damaging commuter railway lines and a mosque. A hitherto unknown organisation, the *Boeremag*, claimed responsibility for the bombings. During 2002 almost two dozen alleged *Boeremag* members, including serving military officers, were arrested and charged with terrorism-related offences, sabotage and high treason; their court case is pending. Apparently they also planned to bomb multiracial sport and cultural events.

The police revealed that there were about 100 key *Boeremag* members in the country, many of whom had access to defence force weapons. The profile of the suspects also indicated a move-away from the lower middle-class and working-class elements of the late twentieth century in the ranks of right-wing extremists. Most of them were young and, unlike the typical right-wing saboteurs of the early 1990s, they were not predominantly farmers, blue-collar mineworkers or socially marginalised individuals. Many of them appeared to be middle-class family men, businessmen and some held senior positions in the South African National Defence Force. These hardcore right-wingers were tenaciously devoted to creating an independent Afrikaner state.

Schönteich and Boshoff argue that a number of powerful bombs, strategically placed, could cause considerable harm to South Africa's fragile economy. Alternatively, the assassination of a handful of cabinet ministers and popular black political or religious leaders could take the country to the brink of a race war. However, they are also of the opinion that at present right-wingers, the bulk of the almost one million people who voted against majority rule in a unitary state in 1992, do not pose a security threat to the new South Africa. It is unlikely that the extreme white right such as the *Boeremag* can attract

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.6,27-33,79; Van Rooyen, *Hard Right*, pp.115-116.

⁵⁶ See WP Visser, "From MWU to Solidarity – A Trade Union Reinventing Itself", Paper presented to the 86th Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Social Science Association, San Antonio, Texas, USA, 12-15 April 2006.

sufficient popular support, and develop the organizational capacity, to execute a *coup d'état*.⁵⁷

oOo

Biographical note

Dr Wessel Visser is a senior lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He specializes in labour history, in particular South African labour, socialist, communist and trade union history. His current research project is the history of the South African Mine Workers' Union.

⁵⁷ Schönteich and Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.5-6,56-57,64,73-74,79,91. See also *Die Burger*, 30.10.2003, p.1; *Ibid.*, 1.11.2003, p.4; *Ibid.*, 31.1.2004, p.2.