

TIME TRAVEL BACKGROUND & SCENARIO

WEDNESDAY, 3 NOVEMBER 2011
PILGRIM'S REST

THE 1922 MINER'S STRIKE AT PILGRIM'S REST BACKGROUND

The 1922 miners' strike was a major event in South Africa's history. Official records list the number of people killed during the strike as 129 soldiers and policemen, 43 civilians and 39 miners. One of the reasons why the 1922 strike, also known as the Rand Revolt, still echoes in South African history is the discordant slogan it adopted: "Workers of the World unite and fight for a White South Africa". The strike was strongly influenced by the 1917 Russian Revolution and occurred less than a year after the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa. The white miners constituted a privileged labour force - the collective earnings of 21 000 whites was double that of the 180 000 black miners in 1921 - and the purpose of the strike was to defend their privileged position.



Although the white miners at Pilgrim's Rest joined the strike in sympathy with their counterparts in the rest of the country, Pilgrim's Rest did not turn into a war zone as was experienced on the Witwatersrand. The striking white miners at Pilgrim's Rest decided to put their efforts together and to construct a large swimming pool next to the Blyde River during the three months of the strike. (A section of this original swimming pool is still preserved in the Pilgrim's Rest Caravan Park). Pilgrim's Rest was spared the anxieties and losses of a general strike such as was experienced by the Witwatersrand mines, but the General Mine Manger of the TGME mentioned that the

situation at Pilgrim's Rest was very critical during the three months of strike. Agitators were active throughout the Pilgrim's Rest district, but white miners eventually were forced to co-operate in the reduction of working costs.

The black mine workers were of course very dissatisfied with the strike. They lost their income and their small, small steps towards having at least some qualified jobs. Instead the strikers claimed a more strict use of the colour bar and an even more segregated and racist society. Clashes between armed black and white miners did occur on the Witwatersrand. At Pilgrim's Rest no such clashes are known, but mining activity virtually came to a standstill during the strike.

Most of the black miners stayed on small farms in the surrounding area on the company's land. Other workers lived in compounds that the TGME provided as housing for the black workers.

The housing compounds at Pilgrim's Rest differed vastly from the compounds on the Witwatersrand and Kimberley, where workers were forced to stay in segregated, single sex compounds or hostels, with one controlled entrance. But that did not mean that life was much better for the black workers in Pilgrim's Rest. The conditions were harsh and the mining company controlled the labour force very strict. The black TGME workers only earned half the salary of the workers in the Rand. If you did not attend work one day or even deserted you would be severely punished.



Almost half of the 3000 workers in Pilgrim's Rest were under 18. The company needed small boys to work in the very narrow stopes of the mine, many boys started to work in the age of 13 or 14.

The Central Compound at Pilgrim's Rest consisted of 60 *Rondawel* type huts, a house for the *Induna*, communal ablution blocks and kitchen facilities. Life was less regulated in the compounds compared to the Rand. For instance the Company policy allowed wives to visit and stay with their husbands in the huts. Married couples could also build huts for themselves on the company property, seen as a favour but also a way to tie up the labourers. The access to women and beer in the compounds added further luster to the mines at Pilgrim's Rest, especially for the growing numbers miners from Mozambique and Malawi. While many of these foreign miners used Pilgrim's Rest as a staging post to the Rand, others stayed more or less permanently in TGME's compounds.

Women who did not have any money, thronged to the compounds. Many of these impoverished women brewed beer which they hid in adjacent forests and sold to the miners and others engaged in quasi- or open prostitution.

From around 1916 the conditions for TGME and mining became less favourable. The company tried to cut their costs in many ways. Some semi-skilled jobs were given to low-paid black workers and more young boys, with low wages, were employed.

The salaries were not raised at all in spite of an increasing inflation. The Spanish flu in 1918, that effected Pilgrim's Rest very hard and many people died, also became a big problem for the company.

Between 1918 and 1920 the dissatisfaction and frustration among the black workers in Pilgrim's Rest and in other mining districts increased more and more. In 1920, 71 000 black miners went on a general strike. In some districts the strike lasted only a couple of days, in other districts up to three months. Even after the strike, the dissatisfaction among the black workers continued.

Scenario, the first day of the strike at Pilgrim's Rest 1922

Pilgrim's Rest is a town and estate totally dominated by the mining company TGME. The company has created a town for the white workers and an area around the town, an estate, where some black workers stay. Migrant workers from (mostly) Mocambique, but also Malawi and Swaziland live in the compounds. It's a fully segregated town. The company and its General Manager (Mr Barry) decide everything. This is far from the government arms, and the company makes their own rules and laws.



Many of the black workers live on small farms in the surrounding area. They are allowed to stay there with their families if they pay a rent and work 180 days a year in the mines. If you don't come to work (even for one day), the Company's police force will pick you up, flog you or even burn your house. The estate manager Bob Gardner, known as "Boss Bob", has become known for his brutality.

The mine stopes are small and narrow so the company needs young boys to work in the dark and narrow stopes, boys from the age of thirteen and fourteen. There are many (hundreds) of young boys in the mines.



In the compounds you can hear several languages, there are people from different cultures and traditions living in close proximity. Some of the migrant workers see Pilgrim's Rest as a temporary place, looking for better work on the Johannesburg mines, or a place to make some money and then go back home. It's not easy to live together with others if you have different backgrounds. Some of the men have their "wives" in the compounds. Other women are also around. Some workers, not living too far away, stay in the compounds during the week. Also many young boy workers from the surrounding area stay here in the week, in their own huts.

The conditions in Pilgrim's Rest are harsh and the salary is only half of what is paid at Witwatersrand. The farm tenant system makes the black workers totally dependant on the company. Some say it is almost like slavery. It is very difficult

to move even if you want to and you have to have a pass. Deserters are severely punished. At the same time a small farm makes it possible for the families to grow some vegetables and maize. There have been rumours for a long time of a strike by the white miners at the Witwatersrand, Pilgrim's Rest and other mining districts. They want to keep their privileges, better jobs, higher salaries, the colour bar and a segregated society.

What would a strike mean to the black workers? If there are no white miners, foremen or mine captains at work, the mines will be closed. Will we be locked out? It would be a disaster if there is no work and no salary. Because no income means no food. Some of the migrant miners have a 6, 12 or 18 months contract and plan to go home after the contract is finished with some money to leave to their families. What will happen now?



People in the compounds are dissatisfied, angry and frustrated: Can those privileged people really go on strike? We have proved during the Great War that we are skilled enough to do the better jobs? Just give us some training and we can also be foremen! Many in the compound are arguing and shouting: Away with the colour bar!

There is also dissatisfaction with the salaries. A white worker is paid more than ten times as much as a black worker. Why? And now they are striking to keep their privileges, higher salaries and better jobs. Many in the compounds say that it is completely foolish. The slogan "Workers of the World Fight for a white South Africa" blatantly promotes racism. Why are they fighting for a segregated society?

Somebody has heard that the whites in Pilgrim's Rest are going to build a swimming pool while on strike. They live in better houses and now they will even have a swimming pool.

There is a lot of tension in the air. This is a critical time. People hear rumours about demonstrations by the whites in Witwatersrand and maybe also counter-demonstrations by the blacks. What are we going to do in Pilgrim's Rest? Also demonstrate? Or just leave for the homesteads? -- it does not matter if it's close by or far away. Maybe a change in the mines could mean a change in the segregated society? Or is that just a dream? On 11 January 1922 the people in the compounds wake up as usual. Will the *Induna* and the "Boss Boy" give information and confirm whether the rumours about a strike are true or not?

Key Questions

Power or no power

• What is it like to be a worker **totally dependant** on the company, sometimes feeling almost like a slave? How can I have at least some independence, how can I keep my pride and dignity? What is it like to be a **migrant worker**, far away from home, having lost your roots and family? What is it like to live together in the compounds, when you don't understand each other; to live together with cultural and other differences?

• **Privileges, segregation and racism.** Do we accept that the white workers want to keep their privileges? Why are we treated as a lower class and not considered equal? Do we accept the colour bar and a fully segregated town?

• **What are our demands, what will be our actions?**

Roles

The participant men are the black mine workers in the compounds, the women are their wives or other women around. Everybody keep their age and gender.

- The *Induna* (black employee in charge of the compound)
- "Boss Bob", white compound manager
- A black miner from the Witwatersrand arrives at the compound with news.

Activities

- Wake up
- Prepare the morning coffee, discuss the strike
- Play traditional board games, soccer, tug-of war & discussions
- Working in the vegetable gardens and discuss the strike issues
- Do the laundry, make pots & discuss
- Gum boot dancing & discuss
- Copping wood & discuss
- Singing while working

Time plan

- 09:00 Introduction. Distribution of roles, props, rules
- 10:00 Time Travel starts. Activities
- 11:45 Time Travel ends. Short reflection

