

Bain, J. T. (1860–1919)

Lucien van der Walt

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Born in Dundee, Scotland to a working-class family in 1860, J. T. Bain (James Thomas Bain, Jimmy Bain) served in the British army in South Africa and India, before returning to Scotland. There he learned socialism from Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, and John Ruskin, and trained as a fitter, moving to the Transvaal in 1890. He formed the Witwatersrand Mine Employees' and Mechanics' Union in 1892, better known as the Labor Union, and pioneered socialist ideas,

distributing the *Clarion* to miners, and publishing the *Johannesburg Witness* in 1898 and 1899, the first socialist paper in South Africa. Bain's politics were a mixture of segregation and socialism: the Labor Union, for example, supported the color bar, and Bain worked as a spy for Paul Kruger's Transvaal government. Bain fought for the Transvaal in the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899 –1902), and was captured by the British, narrowly escaping execution for treason when it was discovered that he had Transvaal citizenship. After the war, Bain helped revive the unions, initiated a local Independent Labor Party, and worked with Archie Crawford, the two men leading a march of several hundred people from Johannesburg to Pretoria on May 1, 1907 to demand the government employ white labor at fair wages. The delegation was rebuffed, the movement collapsed, and Bain became involved in the founding of the South African Labor Party (SALP) in 1909. His relations with Crawford soured around this time. Bain secured a job on the railways in Johannesburg, stood unsuccessfully for the SALP in the 1910 general elections, and worked as an organizer for the Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions, formed in 1911.

Bain played a central role in the 1913 general strike, during which he advised workers to come armed, and briefly adopted the syndicalist view that it might be necessary for the strikers to take over, and run, the mines. Prominent in the 1914 general strike, he was deported to Britain for his troubles, along with Crawford and others. In 1919 workers at the Johannesburg power station struck against retrenchments, and, at the urging of Bain, established a Board of Control to administer the municipal workshops and services from the council chamber. It ran the light, power, and tram services for several days, before the municipality conceded the strikers' demands. Bain died later that year, a venerated and complex figure.

References and Suggested Readings

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