

One cause or many?: M.K Gandhi and the motivations of the 1913 Natal Strikes

By

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Not much is written of Gandhi's time in South Africa after the passive resistance campaign of 1908. As a result historians of South Africa, with the exception of Maureen Swan<sup>1</sup>, have left out what was probably the most important moment in Gandhi's political career in South Africa - the 1913 Natal strikes. The strikes marked the first time a protest had taken place among indentured Indians on a mass scale. Moreover Gandhi, for the first time, was able to claim to have won all of his demands in a campaign. And, of course, the strikes were the moment when he, for the first time, was able to draw on a larger pool of constituents by attracting ex-indentured Indians. From the point of view of Gandhi's participation in these events perhaps the most striking factor was that it was the first time that Gandhi called on the indentured and ex-indentured Indians to partake in any of his political campaigns. This was in stark contrast to his earlier forms of political campaigning which only extended to the merchant Indian classes. 1913 was also the year in which Gandhi first involved women in his activism and they came to play a crucial role in the campaign.<sup>2</sup> These innovations on the part of Gandhi, and the nature of this, the last of his South African campaigns, will form the core analysis of the paper. Due to the lack of secondary material on this period in Gandhi's life a detailed narrative of the events is required as a first step towards understanding the nature of the events that occurred in October 1913. This paper hopes to try and narrate some of those events closely as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1906 and 1910 there was a marked a change in Gandhi's political career. He had previously sought to engage the state through petitions and letters but in 1906 he launched the Satyagraha campaign. This campaign was received favourably by the Indian traders or

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<sup>1</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 239-258

Thanks to Nafisa, Prinisha, Surya and Stephen as well my supervisors Keith and Vukile for putting up with nagging and questions. I would like to thank Richard for all his support and endless editing.

<sup>2</sup> I do not go into detail about the role of women in the strikes in this paper. I have thus far found a fair amount of primary sources on women's role in this campaign but have not sufficiently developed that area of my work to make any meaningful contributions.

<sup>3</sup> This narration of events in this paper is not complete as this is this part of my research is still in its early days.

the merchant classes<sup>4</sup> and various organisations and individuals joined, including Abdul Gani the chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association, Yusuf Ismail Mian the chairman of the Transvaal Indian Association, later called the Transvaal Indian Congress, and Ahmad Muhammad Cachalia, a wealthy business man. The Satyagraha movement quickly picked up momentum, as Gandhi launched a campaign against the registration of merchant Indians, through fingerprinting.<sup>5</sup> Gandhi called on all merchant Indians to boycott registration. This call was heeded, and the majority of the merchant Indian population boycotted the initial registration phase. It was at this point that many people were arrested including Gandhi. The support Gandhi built up for this campaign was overwhelming. However, things began to go badly wrong for Gandhi once he backtracked on opposition to fingerprinting. In a personal negotiation with General Smuts, Gandhi agreed that the merchant Indian class would volunteer to have their finger prints taken.<sup>6</sup>

The actions taken by Gandhi on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1908, led to many of his supporters in Transvaal losing faith in him and his method of political resistance. Moreover many people were imprisoned, hundreds deported to India and those that remained faced large financial losses from the months of campaigning. As a result, according to C.G. Henning, Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was left with no more than one hundred members.<sup>7</sup> The lack of support from a large constituency meant that Gandhi's protests against the state once again reverted to personal negotiations. Gandhi effectively retired to his newly opened Tolstoy farm. It was from Tolstoy that Gandhi interacted with the state via petitions, letters and newspaper articles.<sup>8</sup> The issue of the Immigration Bills passed in 1911, 1912 and 1913 which curtailed the movement of Indians to the Orange Free State, Transvaal and the Cape

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this paper the terms merchant Indian classes or Indian traders will be used to denote the Indians that arrived in South Africa as passenger Indians to open up various business. The colonial- born or ex-indentured Indians refers to Indians that were born in the colony of Natal from indentured Indian families. By 1913 the ex-indentured population was fairly large and rapidly growing.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this see Keith Breckenridge, *Fingers and thumbs: Gandhi, Smuts and the origins of Satyagraha*, presented on the 22 October 2008, The History and African Studies Seminar <http://www.history.ukzn.ac.za/node/1010>

<sup>6</sup> Keith Breckenridge, *Fingers and thumbs: Gandhi, Smuts and the origins of Satyagraha*, pg. 1 (presented on the 22 October 2008, The History and African Studies Seminar) <http://www.history.ukzn.ac.za/node/1010>

<sup>7</sup> C.G. Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal 1860-1917* (Promilla & Co: India, 1993) pg. 171

<sup>8</sup> M. Swan. Gandhi, *The South African Experience* (Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1985) pg. 225

was a key concern for Gandhi.<sup>9</sup> At this point, Gandhi still considered his constituency to be the merchant classes and he continued to lobby on their behalf until 1912.

However, the arrival of Mr. Gokhale in South Africa changed not only the focus of Gandhi's politics but also the people he sought to represent. Gokhale was an important member of the Indian Congress in India. Gandhi appointed himself Gokhale's secretary and this experience proved to be inspirational. Gokhale, unlike Gandhi, was interested in all classes of the Indian community in South Africa. Gandhi learned from Gokhale how to take seriously the issues of Indians across class. Gokhale went on a country wide tour listening to merchant Indians, ex-indentured Indians, and indentured Indians. To his mind the most pressing issue was the *3 Pound Tax* that was imposed on indentured Indians in 1895. Effectively, this meant that any ex-indentured Indians in Natal had to pay an amount of 3 pounds per person annually to remain in the colony of Natal after their period of indenture was over. The tax also extended to the children of indentured or ex-indenture Indians. If the individual or families could not afford the 3 pounds they could either go back to India, or re-indenture.<sup>10</sup> This harsh law meant that those Indians that did not return to India either had to re-indentured, and those that did not were heavily in debt; either from owing the state money large amounts of unpaid taxes or by borrowing money to pay the tax. Appalled by the poor conditions the *3 Pound Tax* imposed onto ex-indentured Indians, and the fact that, it made it very difficult to leave indenture, Gokhale announced that he would take up this issue with the senior members of the Government of South Africa. Before Gokhale left for India in 1912 he extracted a promise from the South African government that the *3 pound Tax* would be repealed.

In 1913 a year after Gokhale's departure the tax was still being imposed. It was during this time that Gandhi became more vocal in his opposition to the *3 Pound Tax*. He began by writing several letters to the press, demanding the state hold firm to its promise to

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<sup>9</sup> Although the Immigrations Bill applied to all Indians it mainly affected the merchant classes and increasingly ex-indentured Indians as indentured Indians were bound to their workplace.

<sup>10</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Objectionable Tax* in the Indian Opinion, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1913

Gokhale, and repeal the tax.

We learn from an authoritative source that, owing to the exigencies of the political situation, the Government do not intend to introduce this session a Bill to repeal the £3 tax required, under Act 17 of 1895, of ex-indentured Indians who remain free in Natal at the expiry of their contracts. The news will come as a shock and a bitter disappointment not only to those immediately affected, but to the entire Indian community, who rightly regard the impost as a tax upon its honour and social integrity. Because General Botha and General Hertzog are engaged in a party quarrel, the business of the whole country must come to a standstill. General Botha has adopted the attitude that he is fighting his opponent in the interests of the Empire. He does not seem to realize the inconsistency of that attitude with his inability to keep his unwritten pledge to the Hon. Mr. Gokhale to repeal this tax at an early date.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, to writing publically about the tax, Gandhi aligned himself to new movements in the Transvaal. He formed particularly close links with the Colonial Born Indian Association and he also developed a close relationship with Thambi Naidoo, from the Johannesburg Tamil Benefit Association. It was at this point that Gandhi began to realise that mobilization around the *3 Pound Tax* would muster support from various sectors of society. It was clear that the fast growing ex-indentured population who suffered the most under this tax would welcome a passive resistance campaign.

We are sure that, if many from the community fight against it, the tax will be repealed forthwith. If only a few do so, there is likely to be delay. But the repeal of the tax is certain. The campaign that is now coming is such

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<sup>11</sup> M.K. Gandhi, 3 Pound Tax Dissapointment, Collected Works of Gandhi Vol. 13: 12 March 1913 – 25 December 1913

that it should be easy for all Indians to join it with zest. So far we could ask nothing of the thousands of ex-indentured Indians. Now, they too can join the fight with all their heart.<sup>12</sup>

The new support base would revive the waning passive resistance campaign launched mainly by Satyagrahi women<sup>13</sup> against the Marriage Laws. The Marriage Law passed in March 1913 stated that all marriages conducted by Hindu or Muslim rites would not be legal.<sup>14</sup> The lack of support for Gandhi in the Transvaal meant that even a passive resistance campaign against such a discriminatory act as the Marriage Laws could not get the support of merchant Indians. As a result, the campaign was ineffective with only a few women and men heeding the call to protest.

By September of 1913 Gandhi, along with his remaining supporters moved back to Natal. The hope was that by highlighting the issue of the *3 Pound Tax* Gandhi could guarantee the support of the ex-indentured population. It is important to note here that Gandhi did not view the campaign in Natal against the *3 Pound Tax* as a new campaign. Rather he hoped to attach this campaign to the already existing campaign against the Marriage Laws.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the *3 Pound Tax* Gandhi added the Immigration Bills to the list of targets. He hoped to create a campaign that would appeal to all sectors of the Indian population and according to Mr. Kallenbach, a friend and close working associate of Gandhi's would bring out supporters from the indentured and ex-indentured communities.

Mr. Gandhi intended to make use of indentured Indians in the strike for the sole purpose of having the *3 Pound Tax* withdrawn.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Objectionable Tax* in the Indian Opinion, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1913

<sup>13</sup> Many Satyagrahi women decided to agitate against the Marriage Law. Many were arrested and imprisoned for three months at Volkrust. Amongst the women arrested was Gandhi's wife Kasturba. Unfortunately the details of this campaign could not be discussed in this paper but I will be in later work.

<sup>14</sup> Author Unknown, *The position of Indian wives* in the Indian 8<sup>th</sup> Opinion October 1913

<sup>15</sup> Author Unknown *The Passive Resistance Movement: A Fiasco Meeting* in the African Chronicle 18 October 1913

<sup>16</sup> Author Unknown *Progress of the Strike* in the African Chronicle 25<sup>th</sup> October 1913

However, on his arrival in Durban neither Gandhi, nor his campaign was welcomed. Gandhi's new found interest in the *3 Pound Tax* was met with scepticism, especially in light of the fact that many ex-indentured association had taken up the issue years ago. For one, Mr. P.S. Aiyar of the African Chronicle took up a campaign against the *3 Pound Tax* in 1912.<sup>17</sup>

In 1908 The Natal Indian Patriotic Union made opposition to the tax a key resolution in of their association.

That this meeting deplores the hardship and suffering to which our Country men are subjected owing to the severe enforcement of the provisions of Section 17 of 1895, and that is consequence of poor and indigent men and women being inflicted with imprisonment for failure to pay the Annual payment of THREE POUNDS, this meeting begs that Natal Government with a view to ameliorate the conditions of those who are affected by the aforesaid Act.<sup>18</sup>

The first meeting Gandhi attended on his return to Durban was on Sunday, 12 October 1913 at 2pm, at the Union Theatre, Victoria Street. The meeting was attended by various organisations, political parties and the general public. It was popularly referred to as the South African Indian Conference. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Marriage Law and to allow Gandhi a chance to speak about his new passive resistance campaign. As Gandhi had not being in Natal for many years many people either did not support him or were suspicious of his motives. When Gandhi addressed the crowd he asked that everyone who believed in him should support his campaign against the *3 Pound Tax*. After his address, several questions were put to Gandhi which he answered, often through loud boos

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<sup>17</sup> C.G. Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal 1860-1917* (Promilla & Co: India, 1993) pg. 171

<sup>18</sup> Depot: NAB, Source: CSO, Type: LEER, Vol. No: 1861, Reference: 1908/5212, Minute Paper From Whom: Chairman, Natal Indian Patriotic Union 24/08/1908 Subject: Forward copies of resolutions passed at a Mass Meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup>

and heckling.

Mr. Pather asked if Mr. Gandhi was willing to abide by the South African Indian Conference now being held. Mr. Gandhi replied: "If it is not in conflict with conscience"

Mr. Pather further asked if it were necessary for them to have paid European workers. There were no European workers, said Mr. Gandhi. Was Mr. Polack appointed to go to England asked Mr. Pather. The reply was that Mr. Polak went by Mr. Gokhale's invitation.

In reply to further questions Mr. Gandhi said that he bore no animosity towards any Indian in South Africa or India.

Was the compromise between Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Smuts carried out?

"No," replied Mr. Gandhi "most emphatically No."<sup>19</sup>

In addition to Mr. Pather's questions, Gandhi was taken to task for previously not supporting the *3 Pound Tax* campaign.

We are really sorry that Mr. Gandhi with all his faults should have been subjected to the severe heckling he had the misfortune to undergo the other day but his reply to Dada Osman's questions as to why he not support Mr. P.S. Aiyar in his *3 Pound Tax* campaigns and as to why he did not give preference to Indian assistance to that of Europeans does not reflect great credit to Mr. Gandhi's good taste and diplomacy.<sup>20</sup>

Gandhi's response to this question led to further heckling and boos. Due to all the disturbances the meeting had to be called to a close without any resolutions being reached. It was adjourned to the following Sunday. At the close of the meeting it was safe to deduce

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<sup>19</sup> Author Unknown *The Passive Resistance Movement: A Fiasco Meeting* in the African Chronicle 18 October 1913

<sup>20</sup> Author Unknown *The Passive Resistance Movement: A Fiasco Meeting* in the African Chronicle 18 October 1913



that Gandhi had not convinced most attendees of the legitimacy of his Campaign. Despite the lack of support for the campaign, and despite agreeing to abide by the consensus of the meeting, Gandhi's followers began to initiate the campaign the very next day.

According to Swan, the first meeting to discuss the strike was held on Monday 13 of October in Newcastle, one day after Gandhi's failed meeting in Durban. Gandhi was represented at the Newcastle meeting by Thambi Naidoo, the President of the Johannesburg Tamil Benefit Society. Thambi Naidoo's wife was also present along with several female relatives. It was reported in the *Indian Opinion* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1913 that the meeting was "extraordinarily enthusiastic."<sup>21</sup> However, the same article does not mention whether any plans to strike in the next few days were discussed.<sup>22</sup>

Actions that would lead to the strike began on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1913 when, according to Mr. Thambi Naidoo's account published in the *Indian Opinion*, a meeting in a railway Barracks was stopped.

Yesterday (the 14<sup>th</sup> instant) we went to the Railway barracks. Just as we were explaining the position of the people, someone went and fetched the Station-master who came straight to me and asked me what I was doing there. I told him that I had there to advise my people to strike work, pending the removal of the *3 Pound Tax*. He then told me that I had not right there and that he was going to charge me with inciting to cause disturbance. He said the same thing Messrs. Bhawani Dayal and Ramnaran. We said that he quite welcome to do so. The poor ladies tried their utmost to get arrested but they could not succeed. They forced their way into the barracks and called upon all women and men to come out. Thinking if they

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<sup>21</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 249

<sup>22</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 249

did so, they would also be arrested.<sup>23</sup>

Later that day, Thambi Naidoo, Bhawani Dayal and Ramnaran were sentenced to a fine of 2 pounds each. They all rejected the fine and said they would not pay, the magistrate let them go despite their refusal to pay. After their hearing the three men went straight to the Fairleigh colliery to discuss the strike the next day. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1913, seventy eight Indian workers went on strike at the Fairleigh collieries.<sup>24</sup> By Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> of October the strike had spread to other collieries in the area. It is important to note that both Gandhi and his followers were at this point only concerned with the prospect of indentured Indians employed by mines striking. They did not seem to consider including plantation workers or other farm workers in the strike. The reasoning behind this is unclear, but it could have been because the mines were close to the border with the Transvaal as it was Gandhi's intention that the strikers march across the border into the Transvaal. This would then mean that the strikers were acting illegally according to the Immigrants Bill and Gandhi hoped that this would also bring attention to the Bill.

On Sunday 19 October, another meeting was held in Durban to discuss whether or not there would be support for Gandhi's campaign. From the account of the meeting given in the *African Chronicle*, it would seem that the people who attended the meeting had no clue that the strike had begun in Newcastle. However, like the previous week, instead of a discussion on the strike much of the meeting was taken up with grievances against Gandhi. Many of the grievances against Gandhi were made by the Natal Indian Congress and ended in a shouting match between Natal Indian Congress members and Gandhi supporters. According to the report in the *African Chronicle*, the treatment of Gandhi by certain members of the Natal Indian Congress was in such bad taste that many neutral people in the discussion joined the Gandhi supporters. With the shouting match under way Gandhi

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<sup>23</sup> Author Unknown, *Indians on Strike* in the Indian Opinion 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1913

<sup>24</sup> There are contradictory accounts of how the strike began on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> but some sources attribute it to women saying they were the first to go on strike. I will have to do further investigation on this matter to come to any solid conclusion.

walked out of the meeting going to Mr. Rustomjee's house.<sup>25</sup>

It was at Mr. Rustomjee's house that Gandhi formed a new party in opposition to the Natal Indian Congress. The party was named the Natal Indian Association.<sup>26</sup> This new party immediately received the support of the ex-indentured community as the main agenda of this new movement was the repeal of the *3 Pound Tax*. This uneasy agreement between Gandhi and the ex-indentured Indians was a marriage of convenience on both sides. Gandhi would be able to garner support from a new and fast growing constituency, while the ex-indentured Indians could attach their cause to an already well known name. The aim of the party would be to launch a campaign against the *3 Pound Tax*, the Marriage Law and the Immigration Bill. However, the key item of concern, according to Gandhi, was the opposition to the *3 Pound Tax*.<sup>27</sup>

It was after this point that the strike intensified with 400 hundred Indian mine labourers going on strike by Monday 20<sup>th</sup> October 1913. Gandhi arrived in Newcastle on Monday to begin preparation for a march into the Transvaal. By Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> of October nine mines were affected by the strike, namely Newcastle, Fairleigh, Ballangeich, Cambrian, Durban Navigation, Glencoe, Natal Navigation, Hatting Spruit, St. George's and Ramsay.<sup>28</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October Gandhi sent out a wire message from Newcastle stating that:

...that the Indians have struck on more mines, and that many have been arrested, and that they are advising the strikers to leave the mines and court arrest; ailing that, they march on Volksrust—a movement which may be anticipated at any minute.<sup>29</sup>

The response of the colliery owners to the strike was to ask the government to send in

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<sup>25</sup> Mr. Rustomjee was an old friend and supporter of Gandhi.

<sup>26</sup> Author Unknown *Natal Indian Congress* in the African Chronicle 25<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>27</sup> Author Unknown *Natal Indian Congress* in the African Chronicle 25<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>28</sup> Author Unknown, *Progress of the Strike* in the Indian Opinion 29<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>29</sup> Author Unknown, *Progress of the Strike* in the Indian Opinion 29<sup>th</sup> October 1913

additional police to the area and to stop the sale of liquor to Indians. However, the government did not respond positively to this request as they deemed the number of police in the area to be sufficient. The canteens selling alcohol to the Indians also remained opened.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the above request the Coal Miners Association also called on the Government to review the *3 Pound Tax*. In the Association's view the tax had failed in its intentions and therefore should be repealed so that workers would go back to work.<sup>31</sup>

The government continued its policy of non negotiation, and on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October Gandhi led 200 strikers along with their family to the border of Transvaal. By the next day Thambi Naidoo led another party of 300 striking workers. By the 6<sup>th</sup> of November more than four thousand strikers and their families were on their way to the Transvaal.<sup>32</sup>

It was Gandhi's hope that the government would arrest the marchers as soon as they entered the Transvaal. This did not happen. Although a few protestors, including Gandhi, were arrested and re-arrested at various times during the march the government did not arrest a large number of marchers. This put a strain on the finances of the campaign. The more people that were able to continue marching meant more people to feed and support. As Swan points out, Smuts was all too aware of the difficulties this campaign would provide for Gandhi.

Mr. Gandhi appeared to be in a position of much difficulty. Like Frankenstein he found his monster an uncomfortable creation and he would be glad to be relieved of further responsibility for its support.<sup>33</sup>

The lack of financial support meant that food and support for the march was hard to access. The marchers began to rely on the goodwill of people they encountered along the way. The

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<sup>30</sup> Author Unknown, *Progress of the Strike* in the Indian Opinion 29<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>31</sup> Author Unknown, *Progress of the Strike* in the Indian Opinion 29<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>32</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 250

<sup>33</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 252

loss of the Indian merchant classes who previously supported passive campaigns financial, by and large withdrew financial support to Gandhi. This meant that Gandhi had to look elsewhere for finance. Mr. Gokhale had contributed one thousand pounds to the 1913 strikes. Gandhi estimated that it would only last five days as the strike was costing two hundred and fifty pounds a day. During the march to the border Gandhi was arrested and released four times, along with several other marchers. Once the marchers reached Balfour by the 10<sup>th</sup> of November the government finally made a decision. Marchers were given an ultimatum to either take the trains provided back to Natal or get arrested. They all chose to get arrested.<sup>34</sup>

While Gandhi and his supporters in northern Natal were involved in the miners' strike a protest of a different sort was happening on the sugar estates on the north and south coast of Natal. The earliest reports of the strike in the new papers begin around the 8<sup>th</sup> of November. However, a report by William Campbell, manager of Blackburn Estates, dates the strike beginning on 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1913.

According to this report the coastal strike began at the neighbouring Umhloti Estate on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. The protestors from Umhloti Estate then tried to cut across the Blackburn Estate to march into Verulam. Campbell was able to have the men returned to the adjoining estate but claims to have "heard rumours of unrest there until Thursday the 6<sup>th</sup> when we heard they struck work."<sup>35</sup> On Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, police were sent to the Umhloti Estate to arrest the ringleaders of the protest. They were prevented from doing so as they were outnumbered. At the same time a group of indentured Indian workers launched a protest from the Avoca Plantation a few kilometres outside of central Durban. According to the African Chronicle, indentured workers were protesting for better work conditions. The group of one hundred and fifty Indian women and men left the estate carrying with them

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/passive-resistance/1913.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, Marshall /Papers Type KCM ... File 003 Letters 1901-1913 1 file (4 items) Available at KCAL

hoes, cane knives and pots to go to the protectorate's office to make their demands.

They laid their complaints before the Protector of Indian Immigrants, alleging that they had to work 12 hours a day, whereas their contract stipulated for only nine hours. Allegations of ill-treatment were also made. The Protector, having heard their complaints, and promised redress, the Indians proceeded to Field Street.<sup>36</sup>

On hearing about the marchers' presence in Field Street Mr. Polak, Gandhi's assistant, went to meet with them. Mr. Polak along with Gandhi and his other assistants were surprised by the news of this protest. It was assumed by Gandhi and his supporters that they would be leading the strike by plantation workers<sup>37</sup> if there was to be one. In fact, as Swan points out Gandhi and his followers were taken completely by surprise by the protests of indentured workers on plantations.

Gandhi and an exhausted leadership struggled to maintain the solidarity of the strikers under increasingly unfavourable circumstances in northern Natal, the success of the strike was ensured by its spread to the coastal sugar districts.<sup>38</sup>

It is unclear if Mr. Polak mentioned the *3 Pound Tax* to the plantation labourers, but he promised to investigate their grievances on their behalf. This is one of the first reports of protest coming from indentured Indians on sugar plantations. It seems that the protests, in its initial phase at least, was not related to the strike opposing the *3 Pound Tax* but was a protest about labour conditions on plantations.

By Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup> of November many strikers, along with their families, left the Umhloti Estate and headed for Verulam with the intention of finally reaching Durban. On Monday

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<sup>36</sup> Author Unknown *Avoca Indians Marched into Durban* in the African Chronicle 8<sup>th</sup> November 1913

<sup>37</sup> Author Unknown *Progress of Passive Resistance* in the African Chronicle 25<sup>th</sup> October 1913

<sup>38</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 252

the 10<sup>th</sup> of November the police managed to arrest the men identified as the ringleaders. The arrests of these men did not pacify the situation as many more workers from the Tongaat Estate and the La Merci Estate joined the protest in Verulam. On the evening of Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> many of the protestors tried to enter the jail to free those that were arrested.<sup>39</sup> The protestors remained in Verulam and refused to return to their plantations and by Wednesday their numbers swelled to one thousand five hundred. It was then, according to *Indian Opinion*, that:

... on Wednesday last, it was thought desirable to remove the body of 1500 strikers which had gathered at Verulam, the police, who claim to carried out this movement successfully, were assisted very materially by Mr, Sorabji Rustomjee and other members of the Natal Indian Association who addressed the people and advised them to return to their various estates where it was understood, they would receive food and shelter.<sup>40</sup>

Although the strikers were returned to their various estates they were still striking. Despite the dispersal of the crowd from Verulam the strike still continued to grow. By Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup> of November the workers on the Blackburn Estate went on strike.<sup>41</sup> The uncomfortable negotiations on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> did last long. Once again on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November up to a thousand strikers assembled in Verulam. This time the Estate owners requested that General Lukin send in South African Mounted Rifles to help disperse the crowds. This was done and by Saturday afternoon everyone was sent back to their estates.<sup>42</sup>

According to Swan the protestors on the plantation did not have any clear demands and their behavior was not organized. She argues that it was a spontaneous uprising tagging

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<sup>39</sup> Campbell, Marshall /Papers Type KCM ... File 003 Letters 1901-1913 1 file (4 items) Available at KCAL

<sup>40</sup> Author Unknown, *March on the North Coast* in the *Indian Opinion* 19<sup>th</sup> November 1913

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, Marshall /Papers Type KCM ... File 003 Letters 1901-1913 1 file (4 items) Available at KCAL

<sup>42</sup> Campbell, Marshall /Papers Type KCM ... File 003 Letters 1901-1913 1 file (4 items) Available at KCAL

onto an already existing strike<sup>43</sup> and suggests that it was violent from the start. From the evidence I have gathered so far it seems that the protests were not spontaneous and were not without any clear purpose. Moreover from the account Campbell offers of the strike on the plantations it was only on Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup> of November that the workers began to show signs of violence. This could have been in retaliation against the suspension of rations by the estates.

The supply of rations had been stopped at Mount Edgecombe Mr. Campbell said the strikers were quite orderly and respectful to him and they made it clear to that they did not want to harm the owners in any way and that they had no grievances against them. Up to the time of stopping of rations by the employers around Verulam, continues the report, the Indians declared that their quarrel was with the government, and not with the employers, and it must be said that the coolies have been very considerate with the employers, for it was their evident intention to cause as little damage and loss to them as possible. But now, by stopping rations, the Indians will probably declare that their employers have joined issue with the Government against them.<sup>44</sup>

Although the first signs of violence began on Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup> of November it was more about violence against property rather than individuals. However, rations were provided once again and over the next ten days an uneasy truce was evident in the various coastal plantations. Some workers continued to strike but most workers by the 24<sup>th</sup> were back at work. The 25<sup>th</sup> of November was the day the uneasy truce was broken and by the end of the day 5 labourers were killed and 29 wounded on the Blackburn Estate.

According to Campbell the violence was sparked when the police tried to arrest the remaining strikers. Although most labourers were back at work Campbell feared that the

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<sup>43</sup> M. Swan The 1913 Natal Strike in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pg. 255

<sup>44</sup> Author Unknown, *Strikers show consideration* in the Indian Opinion 19<sup>th</sup> November 1913



remaining strikers might inspire the workers to strike once again. According to Campbell's account this is how the day unfolded:

Mr. Campbell then called the police up and began asking the men separately if they would work. On the first one refusing he was arrested and the whole mob assaulted them with sticks and brickbats, a large heap of which was handy, several of the police as well as m brother being knocked of their horses. They were very determined and undoubtedly had the police not drawn and used their revolvers they would have been killed. As it was the police managed finally to drive the Indians back to their barracks and arrest several of the ringleaders to bring them to Mount Edgecombe but as the police were coming away from Hill Head they were suddenly ambushed by the men from the Blackburn barracks, who had already promised to go to work and who must have intended to help the Hill Head men. They had hidden themselves in some high cane through which the road passes and attacked the police on both sides. A very sharp fight ensued in which one of the police horses were killed and several of them had narrow shaves with their lives, but in the end they managed to disperse the Indians and returned to Mount Edgecombe with the prisoners.<sup>45</sup>

It was after this violent encounter with the police that protestors were quelled. By November 30<sup>th</sup> all the plantations were working with almost all labourers back at work. The men that were arrested would languish in prison for almost a year before any assistance was afforded to them. The protest that seemed to start on the 1 of November with what we could assume is a set of demands for better work conditions, very quickly becomes entangled with the *3 Pound Tax Strike*. Therefore if there were other reasons for the plantation workers going on strike these had not really been investigated. Not only did the media report the strike as part of the *3 Pound Strike*, the leaders of the *3 Pound Strike*

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<sup>45</sup> Campbell, Marshall /Papers Type KCM ... File 003 Letters 1901-1913 1 file (4 items) Available at KCAL

took up the control of the plantation worker protest. Although, not much is clear about the events on the plantations one thing that does emerge clearly is that although the workers were not initially rebelling against the *3 Pound Tax* by the end of the strike the tax was presented as their reason for striking.

By the end of November the strikes by Indians all around Natal were over. By the end of the strike eleven people had been killed and several hundred wounded. The strike was a success in that the all of the demands of the Indian Association were met. The political risk Gandhi took in shifting allegiances from one political constituency to another paid off well in the end. His reputation improved considerably amongst certain quarters of the population as he negotiated the deal with Smuts. However there was still skepticism and resentment towards Gandhi amongst many ex-indentured Indians.<sup>46</sup>

We hope Mr. Gandhi at least now will realize the mistake he has committed in having advised indenture Indians to strike, but whether he realizes or not, he ought to be very careful so as not to warrant the creation of circumstances similar to the Blackburn Estate Tragedy. Mr. Gandhi's performance of penance is a poor consolation, indeed, for those who have lost their bread winners and dear ones, and he would well if he gives these poor people a liberal compensation out of the funds he has been receiving from Indians.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Although the above author thinks it was wrong to call on the support of indentured Indians it was in the end the strike of the plantation workers that lead to negotiation. The refusal of the strikers to go back to work caused widespread panic amongst plantation owners and the government. The labour of the plantation indentured Indians contributed to large portions of the South African economy. This along with the violence that led to the quelling of the strikes meant that Smut was under pressure to take the demands seriously.

<sup>47</sup> Author Unknown *Changed aspect of the struggle* in the African Chronicle 27th December 1913