

A 1911 Telegram with a Tale to Tell

THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY'S TELEGRAPHS.

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N.B.—This Form should accompany any inquiry made respecting this Telegram.
SOUTH AFRICAN MEAN TIME is observed by THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY'S OFFICES.

Handed in at } Salisbury at 1.20 M. Received } here at } 2.20 M. Delivering Office.

1333—G.20. 840,000.4.05.

From Committee
Salisbury

To Secretary Farmers
Association Wankies

Mass meeting farmers Salisbury
December 5th protest Legislative
Council against labour tax and
devise protective measures advise
association come in body
possible or send strong delegation

Although the postmark poses an interesting question – **Why is there no 'S' in 'WANKIES'?** – it is the message that catches the eye: - **"Mass meeting farmers Salisbury December 5th protest Legislative Council against labour tax and devise protective measures. Advise Association come in body if possible or send strong delegation."** This was a call to arms by Rhodesia's farmers.

From 1890 to the 1910s, the single most contentious issue in Southern Rhodesia was the supply of African labour. In 1911, the government passed a new Labour Tax Ordinance replacing earlier ordinances from 1906 and 1909. It imposed a tax of one shilling per month per African labourer employed, which applied to all African employees, including farm labourers, domestic servants, seasonal workers and included those employed in the mining industry. The key feature of this ordinance was that the tax was paid directly to the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau, which controlled the recruitment and distribution of African labour. Farmers objected, believing that the BSACo favoured the mining industry. Following the meeting on 5th December 1911 farmers coordinated a campaign of passive resistance. They refused to pay the tax when it came into force. Hundreds of farmers were convicted and fined but they also refused to pay the fines. Implementation was delayed and the tax was never effectively enforced. By 1913–1914, the labour system shifted toward increasing hut tax rather than taxing employers and the 1911 tax was quietly withdrawn.