

## Chapter Seventeen

# The Divided Workers

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*'We dig the gold out of the mines, but when it comes to be divided, we are not wanted. There are two nations here — black and white.'*

— Congress leader, Mvabaza, January 1919.<sup>1</sup>

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### WHY MINE-OWNERS PREFERRED BLACK LABOUR

Mine-owners preferred to employ blacks. They preferred black workers for several reasons:

\* Mine-owners argued that black workers could survive on two shillings a day because they had compounds to house and feed them and the reserves helped to support their families.

\* Unlike black workers, whites were able to settle in the towns. There they had to find housing and food — which were not provided by the mine-owners. They relied completely on their wages to support their families, but as we have seen, they were able to demand and get higher wages.

*'The native is able in unskilled work to sell his labour at a price*

We have seen how the workers were divided into two groups:

- \* a small group of white workers whose wages were high;
  - \* a very large group of black workers whose wages were very low.
- Both groups were workers. Both groups were forced to leave their land and become wage-earners in the mines. But they were divided.

This chapter is a brief summary of the reasons why workers in South Africa came to be separated by the mine-owners. (The mine-owners did this to safeguard their profits and to protect their system of labour control.)

*at which a white cannot live,'* said a government commission in 1903.<sup>2</sup>

\* Blacks were in a weak position. They had to accept whatever wages they could get.

\* Poor, unskilled whites had more power than black workers. We have seen in Chapter 15 that white workers' voting power helped to topple the Smuts government in 1924. White workers also had trade union rights which were denied to black workers. Furthermore, white workers were free of the pass laws and other systems of labour control that the mine-owners imposed on black workers. Whites were therefore free of the wage colour bar. They could demand — and get — higher wages.

Mine-owners tried as far as possible to employ black workers. They justified this policy by claiming that whites were bad workers because they did not know how to take orders and were too soft to do the hard labour of the unskilled miner. They refused to give unskilled jobs to whites, saying that unskilled work was 'native's work'.

'I myself prefer getting a native to do native's work,' said one employer in 1913, 'because I have less trouble with him.'<sup>3</sup>

Another employer said that black unskilled workers were easier to control than whites. 'You can deal with the Kaffir very much as you like,' he said, quite openly.<sup>4</sup>



## WORKERS SEPARATED

The mine-owners were also careful not to give the black and white workers a chance to act together against management. Managers saw how the 1913 strike by whites encouraged black workers to try the same methods of striking and picketing.

'If a large number of White men are employed on the Rand in the position of labourers,' wrote one mine-owner, 'the same trouble will arise as in the Australian colonies.' (He meant that the Australian workers had organised trade unions.) 'The combination of the working classes will become so strong as to be able more or less to dictate, not only on the question of wages, but also on political questions by the power of the vote.'<sup>5</sup>

Mine-owners felt it was important to distance white miners from the black workers, and to place one above the other.

*'The white miner is more a shift-boss than a miner proper, being required to take charge of gangs of natives, superintend work and get as much out of them as possible,'* wrote the editor of the *SA Mining Journal* in 1893.

*'We do not want a White (working class) in this country,'* said the powerful mine-owner, Cecil John Rhodes, *'The position of the Whites among the vastly more numerous Black population requires that even their lowest ranks should be able to maintain a standard of living far above the poorest sections of the population of a purely White country.'*<sup>6</sup>

The white workers were only a small group of miners. The mine-owners could afford to give them higher wages than they paid for labouring jobs.

The black miners kept the mines going. It was more important to keep them under control and their wages low. So white workers were gradually given more and more supervisory work. They did less and less of the actual mining themselves.

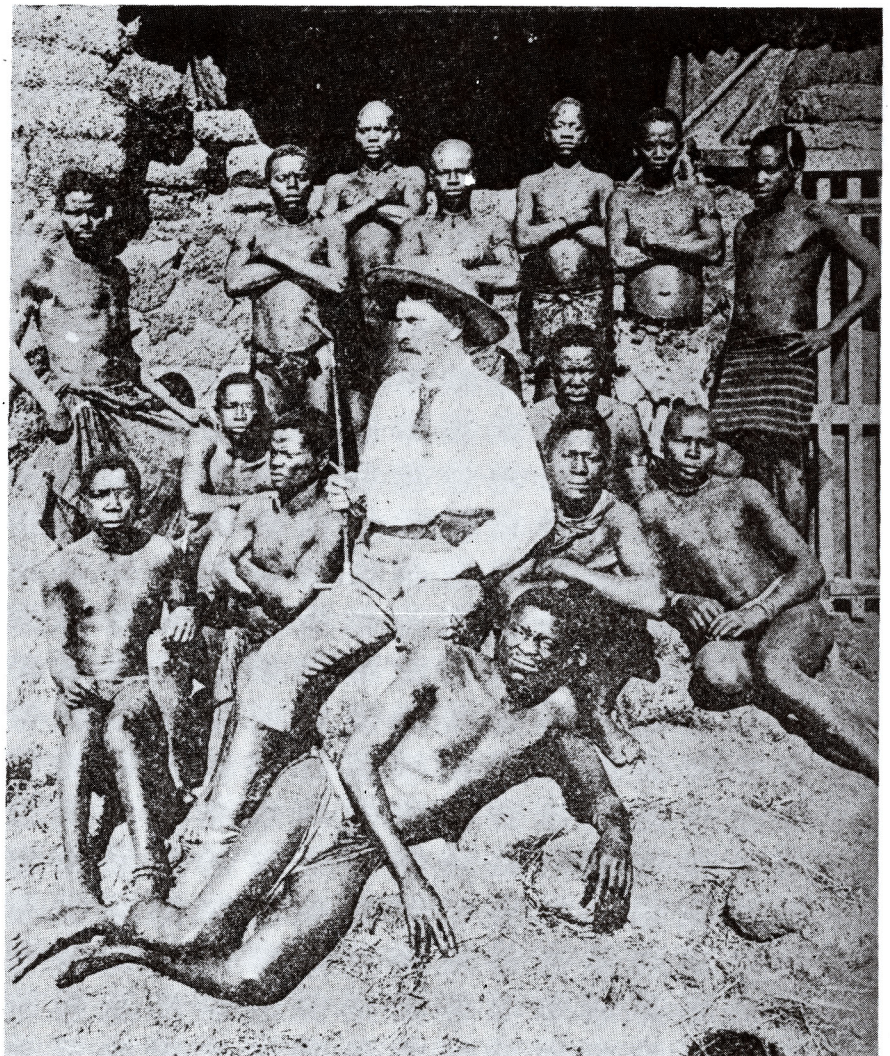
*Although they were workers themselves, white supervisors had direct power over black workers. They issued loafer tickets, policed the workers underground and generally came to represent for blacks the mine-owners' control over labour.*



*The system of labour control also produced collaborators.*

*'In this country, the white miner is more a shift boss than a miner proper, being required to take charge of gangs of natives, superintend their work and get as much out of them as possible.'*

— *SA Mining Journal*, 1893





By 1924, most white miners underground were mainly doing the work of supervising black workers.

### DIVISION BY RACE

The separation of workers according to race was welcomed by white workers. They regarded themselves as 'higher' than the black workers, even if they were 'lower' than the other white groups in South Africa. Why was this?

Most white South Africans were brought up to believe that they were better than blacks – in other words, they were *racists*, because they thought that one race was better than another.

Racism in South Africa goes back a long way. By the time gold was discovered, most of South Africa's land had already been conquered by whites. To justify taking the land, many whites said that they deserved the land. They claimed superiority over blacks, whom they had defeated. They were stronger than blacks with the help of horses and guns.

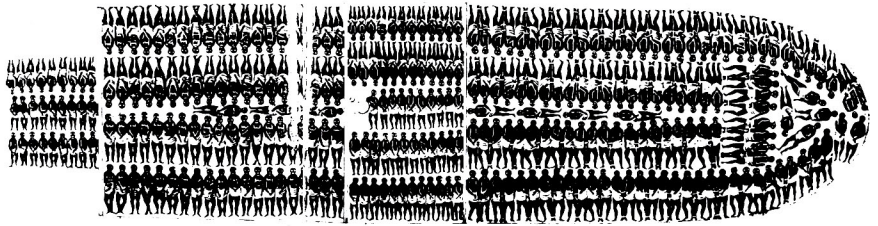
Centuries of *slavery* and *colonialism* lay behind this feeling of superiority.

(See box and pictures on this page).

When whites became workers, this racism continued. Racism divided the workers. We have seen how white workers came to fear the cheap labour of the blacks. They spoke of the danger of being 'pulled down to Kaffir wages' and fought for the job colour bar to protect their positions and separate them from the black workers. Racism helped semi-skilled whites to get higher wages. These whites called themselves 'civilised' because they were white – and argued that they deserved 'civilised' high wages.

(Top right) A plan of a slave-trading ship bound for the plantations of North and South America and the West Indies. The slaves were carefully 'packed' so that hardly a square centimetre was wasted.

## The History of Racism



Racism did not start in South Africa. Many Europeans had racist ideas before the first whites arrived at the Cape in 1652. European countries like England, Portugal and Spain became rich through the slave trade. Millions of slaves from Africa were taken to north and south America to work in the sugar and cotton plantations there. Of course, slaves were not paid for their work – they were bought by their masters and put to work in the same way as oxen are today. They were treated as property – like animals, not like people.

The slaves were black. The masters were white. Whites thought of themselves as born to be masters because of their skin colour.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, European countries began to establish factories. These factories needed raw materials to process and sell. They began to look for other countries which could supply these raw materials. For example, they needed warm climates to grow cotton, rubber, tea, coffee and sugar.

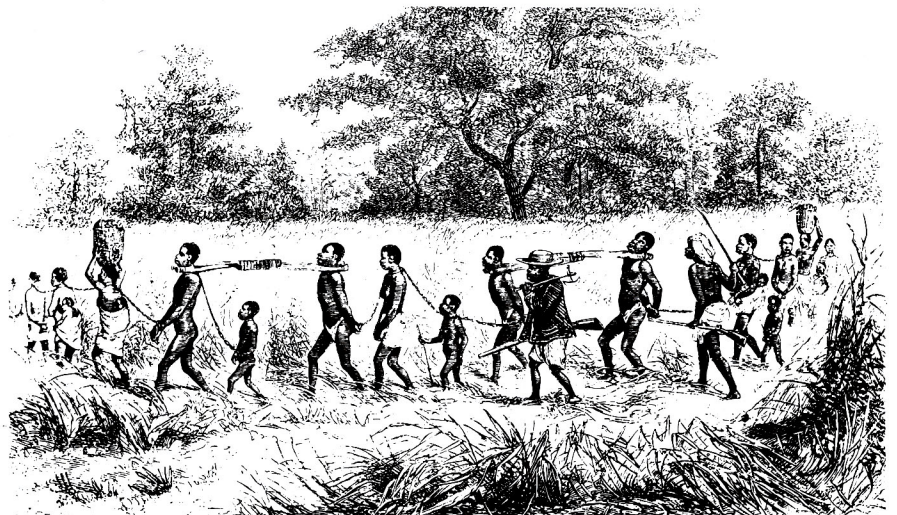
Britain conquered India, north America and parts of Africa after much fighting and resistance from these countries. Most of the rest of Africa was taken by France (who also conquered Indo-China). Portugal and Spain also took parts of Africa (in addition to their colonies in South America).

The control of one country over another is known as *colonialism*. By the end of the 19th century, a large part of the world was colonised by Europeans.

The British, for example, boasted of an empire so big that the sun was always shining on some part of it.

The colonisers began to think of themselves as the 'superior race', and looked down on darker skinned people as the 'lesser breeds'. They began to believe that they were 'helping' their colonies by bringing 'civilisation' to them – teaching them Christianity, teaching them to read and write and to wear European clothes. But while the colonised people benefited in some ways, these changes meant that they began to *need* clothes, books, transport and often food and drink made in Europe. Europe's factories grew richer from their colonies, while the colonies themselves grew poorer.

In South Africa, the most blatant racism is expressed by those whites who feel threatened by blacks in the competition for land, jobs and wealth. But racism goes deeper than aggressive behaviour and insulting words. The history of colonisation shows us that racists often congratulate themselves for 'advancing' the 'developing' peoples, while extracting profits at their expense.



A scene in 19th-century Africa. Slavery, conquest and colonialism set the black man against his brother, weakening the continent still further.



## THE MINE-OWNERS AND RACISM

Racism helped the mine-owners too. South Africa was a colonial society, where blacks had been weakened by the loss of their land. The mine-owners profited from this weakness, forcing blacks into cheap labour.

Racism gave them another excuse for paying blacks low wages and keeping them under control. Racism helped mine-owners and managers to believe that blacks were not the same as other people. One mine-owner, for example, gave a speech to his company in 1903. He spoke of the black worker as a 'muscular machine' — who did the hard labour on the mines, while the white worker — he claimed — did the brain work.<sup>7</sup> It suited mine-owners very well at that stage to see blacks as machines, without feelings or brains — this made it easier to excuse the low wages they got.

Many mine-owners and managers liked to think of blacks as backward and lazy, or otherwise as children.

'The position of Kaffirs is in many respects like children,' wrote the editor of the mine-owners' journal, the *South African Mining Journal* in 1892.<sup>8</sup> Both children and blacks needed 'special control and supervision when exposed to temptations'.<sup>9</sup> The black worker could not be allowed to 'roam unrestricted, not improbably (drunk), at his own sweet will.'<sup>10</sup> Blacks needed to be put into compounds for their own sakes, concluded the editor.

A mine-owner warned: 'We should not over-pamper the native and thus weaken his naturally strong constitution.'<sup>11</sup>

In these ways mine-owners used racism to justify the treatment of their workers.

Racism, therefore, resulted in direct benefits for both classes of whites — in the form of higher profit for the capitalists and higher-paid, protected jobs for the white workers.



*Racism was used to justify the bad conditions in the compounds. Said the chairman of the Rand Mines: 'In their own kraals natives in general live in a more or less backward state of civilisation, and there is in my opinion a danger that we may be going too far in our endeavours to make them comfortable, and I think that the natives far prefer those compounds which are not too well-ventilated and airy.'*<sup>12</sup>



*South African mineworkers, shoulder to shoulder — yet deeply divided.*





*'We are fighting our own battles and the white man is fighting his own battle. He does not consider us and we do not consider him in this respect, if I may say so.'*

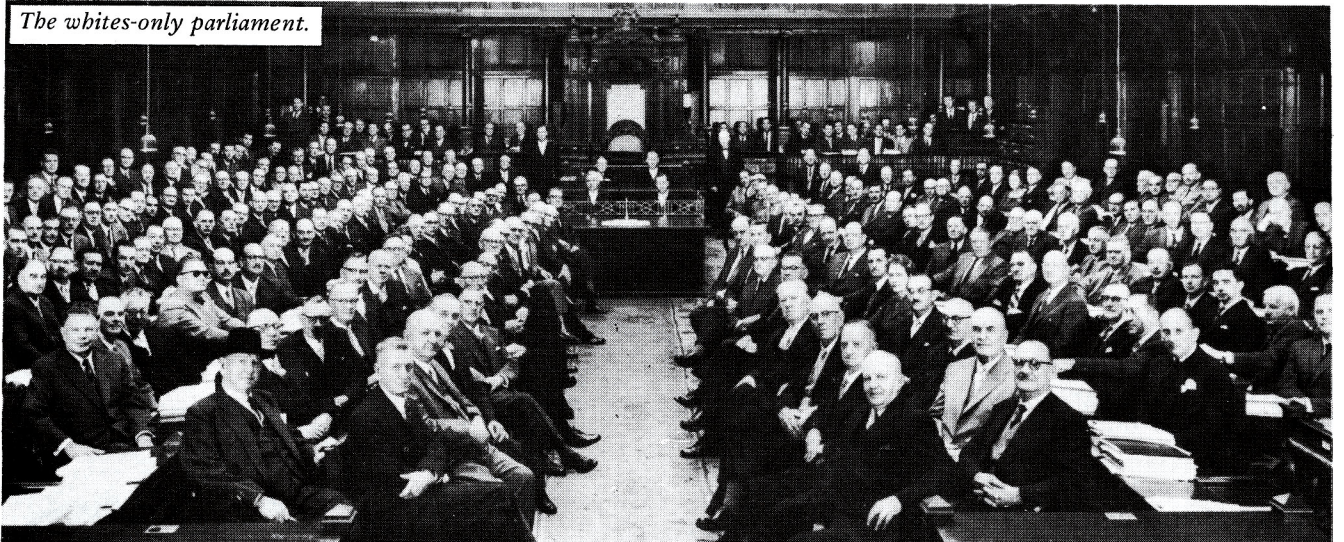
— (A.W.G. Champion, 1925)<sup>13</sup>

*There was a widespread feeling on the part of the blacks that white workers were using their power in a selfish way. The job colour bar was merely a form of protection against the mine-owners' control over black workers. White workers did nothing to help liberate blacks from the forced labour system, which was the real cause of their own insecurity. Few black workers therefore felt any sympathy for the whites' struggle for trade union rights.*



*A group of professional and business men. In South Africa, the middle class was reserved for whites only. Blacks were excluded from opportunities to advance themselves. Soon after the discovery of minerals they were barred from owning mining fields or licences; from the right to trade in diamonds and gold; from owning a shop or being 'in any way connected with the working of the gold mines, except as a working man in the service of whites.'*<sup>14</sup>

The whites-only parliament.



To sum up, then: in South Africa, racism developed with the conquest of the land. This racism continued into industrial times, and was used by the mine-owners to justify the treatment of black workers.

A pattern of race discrimination emerged.

- \* Whites settled in the towns — but black miners were migrant workers.
- \* Whites were free from the pass laws and other forms of labour control. Black workers were not.
- \* White workers had strong bargaining power — black workers did not.

\* Blacks, therefore, were paid ultra-low wages — whites were not.

So it came about that the workers of South Africa were divided by race, and South Africa's special form of racial capitalism was established.