

# THE FORUM

## ON THE

### ADVERSE EFFECTS OF MIGRATORY LABOUR

### ON AFRICAN FAMILY LIFE

**T**HE TWO-DAY FORUM arranged by the Black Sash to consider the effects of the migratory labour system in South Africa on African family life was held in Johannesburg early in June. For many years the Black Sash has been deeply concerned about the effects of apartheid legislation on the African family, and at our Annual National Conference last year it was decided that we should organize a campaign to inquire into the break-up of African family life.

#### Contributors

The Forum was convened by Mrs. Jeanette Davidoff, National Vice-President of the Black Sash, who received much valuable advice and assistance from Dr. Ellen Hellmann, Mr. John Blacking and Professor Julius Lewin. There are so many factors besides the migratory labour system that affect the stability of African family life, that it was decided to make the meeting a fact-finding forum instead of a conference. It was felt that all aspects of the problem should be investigated and examined, and information co-ordinated.

As well as the main speakers, all experts in their own particular fields, a number of other prominent citizens contributed to the Forum as Guest Chairmen. They were Mr. Henry Kuiper, until recently Managing Director of S.A. Associated Newspapers, still a member of the Board of Directors and now Managing Director of the City Merchant Bank; Mr. Richard Hacking, a leader of commerce and Managing Director of a large engineering concern; the Very Reverend P. H. F. Barron, the Dean of Johannesburg; Mr. W. P. Graham, Assistant Editor of the "Financial Mail" and a former Financial Editor of the "Star"; and Mr. Francis Hill, Technical Director of one of the largest mining groups, and a world authority on pressure bursts and rock movements.

#### Black Sash Advice Offices

In her opening address, Mrs. Jean Sinclair, National President of the Black Sash, outlined the background to our decision to investigate the effects of the migratory labour system. After giving a brief account of the establishment and

work of the Black Sash Advice Offices, she continued:

"Through our work in our Advice Offices, we come into contact with many Africans whose homes and families have been broken up through laws which restrict their right to be in the urban areas. We find that men who live and work in these areas as 'migrant' labourers are unable to have their wives and families living with them, although in many cases they have been so long in the urban area that they are really town dwellers. It is true that Africans who were born in an urban area, or who have lived there continuously for from 10 to 15 years, have the right to remain in the area and to have their wives

#### MR. W. P. GRAHAM

It is with deep regret that we record the sudden death on July 17th of Mr. William Peter (Ossie) Graham at the early age of 46. Mr. Graham was a good and valued friend of the Black Sash, and Guest Chairman of the economic section of this Forum.

He was a financial expert, a former Financial Editor of the "Star", the Assistant Editor at the time of his death of the "Financial Mail", and author of a best-selling book on the Stock Exchange. He was deeply interested in public affairs and a leader of the Progressive Party in North West Rand.

To Mrs. Graham and her family we extend our sincere sympathy.

living with them, provided they can prove that they 'ordinarily reside' with their wives. There are, however, many thousands of Africans who are not so fortunate. Forced by economic circumstances to come to the towns to work, they are obliged to leave their families behind in the country and to live in urban hostels."

### **"Labour Units"**

The major findings of the Forum were that, in the words of Mr. Blacking, "African family life is adversely affected not so much by migrant labour in itself, as by the laws which reduce Africans in general, and migrant labourers in particular, into mere labour units, and deprive them of personal freedom." It was pointed out by Professor Mayer that while migrant labour is by no means the only factor leading to the division of families, and while in many cases Africans prefer to leave their families in the country, the great hardship lies in the fact that "the filter of personal choice is not allowed to operate."

### **Economic effects of system**

Many speakers, from the platform and from the floor, stressed the economic effects of the system, particularly the poverty of the Africans themselves and the poverty of the reserves. The wages paid to migrant workers are in most cases still based, as Dr. Ballinger said, on "the illusion that a great industrial working force is really an established peasantry in disguise", the assumption being that their earnings are augmented by subsistence farming. The opposite is actually the case. Initially, migrant workers living off the land in the reserves were "induced" by the imposition of taxes to seek work in the towns, simply to earn money to pay the taxes, but now they are forced by the extreme poverty of the reserves to work in the towns to support those at home.

And in turn the absence of the men at their most productive time of life impoverishes the reserves, dependent on agriculture, still further. Figures quoted from the Tomlinson Report showed that 447,000 persons were temporarily absent from the reserves in 1936, and 590,000, of whom 503,000 were males, in 1951.

"While the absent males form only 12% of the total population, they represent more than 40% of males between 15 and 64 years of age. At least two thirds are between 20 and 39 years old, and nearly 90% are younger than fifty years . . . Nearly all males are employed outside the Bantu

areas at one time or another between their 15th and 50th birthdays."

Noting the percentage increase between the years 1936 and 1951, and bearing in mind the great increase in industrialization in the Republic in the last ten years, it may be assumed that the figure has since risen steeply. Since the Forum, a correspondent has suggested that from these figures, and from employment figures given, a warning can be deduced that during the last decade the number of men on migratory labour has very likely risen to 1,000,000 out of the 2½ to 2½ million African males employed in the Republic.

### **Development of the reserves**

Speakers commented on the Government's failure to develop the reserves in accordance with the recommendations of the Tomlinson Commission, and their refusal to allow the establishment of industries in the reserves by White entrepreneurs. Commenting upon Dr. Verwoerd's statement that "those who obtain knowledge and skill by experience and training within the White area will use it in their own areas where there is further progress and opportunities of using their knowledge and skill", Dr. Ballinger pointed out that Dr. Verwoerd had not explained what skills a migrant and unstable labour force usually succeeded in accumulating, or when the opportunities for the use of any skill acquired by these "pseudomigrant workers" were likely to appear.

On the whole, the experts were agreed that in time ideological considerations would give way to economic pressures, and "all the citizens of South Africa would be drawn into the Western type of society we are creating here." (Mr. Bradlow)

### **Destroying morale and integrity**

There was a good deal of discussion on the costs in health arising from the migratory labour system, the spread of venereal disease, the cessation of medical services upon the return to the rural areas, the adverse effects on health arising from the absence of the male head of the family.

Most speakers, however, including the two who attempted to answer the question, "What can we do?", placed most emphasis on the affronts to human dignity, the loss of self-respect, the feelings of insecurity engendered by a system "which is destroying the morale and integrity of large sections of the South African population, and incidentally making a mockery of Christianity in a supposedly Christian country."