

Introduction to the Labour Position in the Western Cape

A SHORT HISTORICAL SURVEY

A paper presented to National Conference by the Cape Western Region

Before the War (World War II) the labour force in the Western Cape was overwhelmingly Coloured and White. The African worker represented a small minority of limited economic significance, in the sense that it was in only a handful of occupations, involving heavy manual labour, e.g., handling ship's cargoes at the Cape Town Docks — that Africans were employed in any numbers. From about the turn of the Century there had been a small more-or-less stable community of plus/minus 12,000 African workers, housed originally at Ndabeni, and later at Langa, and also at Simonstown. There was but little African *migrant* labour for the first third of the present century.

During this period Coloured workers made up the major element in the labour force. Thus:

- (a) The skilled work — e.g., in the building trades, furniture manufacture, etc., — the traditional artisan of the Cape was a Coloured — not a white man. (Malays of course included). Only during the late twenties and the thirties did the European artisan become significant, mostly in newer trades, such as engineering.
- (b) With the growth of mechanised factory industry, the new class of operatives were overwhelmingly Coloured — and in some industries, such as garment-making very largely female.
- (c) Unskilled labour in general was also Coloured with the exception of certain occupations involving heavy manual labour (see above): these employed some Africans. On the farms particularly the labourers were well nigh exclusively Coloured.

It was with the outbreak of War, at the end of the nineteen-thirties, that the African migrant worker made his appearance in large numbers. And the reason was obvious. Starting with the very large construction programmes involved in the rapid extension of Cape Town Docks and the installation of defence works, and continued by the rapid industrialisation of the Cape Peninsula and such areas as Paarl, Worcester — initiated also by War conditions — the demand for labour rapidly outstripped the capacity of the

Coloured and White population to supply. As early as 1941 a Native Affairs Departmental report, written by the local urban areas inspector (named Caldwell) stated:

“In the Cape Peninsula the Native now forms part of the economic life of the community, and he has come to stay.”

This proved no idle estimate. Indeed after the War the demand for African labour continued to expand — not unnaturally. It is from about this time that African began to be employed on a large scale on Western Province farms. And the numbers employed in Cape Town and the “Boland” towns continued to mount. The local authorities of places like Paarl, Stellenbosch and Worcester, for the first time recognised the necessity of establishing and building African townships, African housing in the Cape Peninsula expanded considerably.

There is no evidence that the large-scale African influx into Western Cape during the War and post-War years was an undue influx, judged in terms of employment demand. It did exceed housing facilities, especially for family accommodation, resulting in the growth of “shanty towns”, “sakkesdorpe” etc. But this is a familiar phenomenon of rapid urbanisation resulting from industrial expansion. And at first the Government and the local authorities began to cope with it along familiar lines, namely by the provision of low-cost state-subsidised housing schemes. From about the time that Dr. Verwoerd became Minister of Native Affairs, however,

the policy began changing in the direction of limiting accommodation to single men — i.e., not accompanied by their wives and children — and excluding women from the area to an increasing extent. This policy has been carried to the point that it has become clear that African labour in the Western Cape is to be limited to male migrant workers: women and children not only to be altogether excluded from entry, but those that are here to be regularly 'screened' and endorsed out the minute they are found not to qualify for permanent residence for reasons given in my paper on African Women in Urban areas.

The history of employment makes it clear that in no foreseeable future circumstances can the labour needs of the area be met by reliance on the Coloured and White population, unaugmented by Africans. The very high degree of Coloured and White urbanisation has left a great gap in agricultural labour resources that can be filled only by Africans. Again the continuing expansion of Urban industry which must further expand in the future if current living standards are even to be maintained, let alone improved — makes reliance on African labour a permanent essential. This current policy necessarily involves permanent dependence on a virtually all male African labour force, permanently living and working 600 miles or more from their wives and children in undeveloped and overcrowded rural areas (the homelands). There is no record of even chattel slavery anywhere having produced so impossible a social situation the ultimate potentialities of which for every imaginable kind of evil can but shock the conscience and strike terror into the heart of any responsible South African. Such a zoological experiment with human beings is historically unprecedented, but its ultimate catastrophic consequences are guaranteed by the very nature of man.

In the whole Cape Province today there is a labour force of 920,775, nearly a million Africans — more than half of them — 535,593 — engaged in agriculture. Of this number there are 131,414 so-called single migrant workers in the Western Cape and 25,039 African families. In spite of the stringent application of Influx Control the number of Africans in greater Cape Town has risen from plus/minus 66,000 in 1960 to 99,000 in 1966. 29,526 contract workers—(no women) came into Western Cape in 1965. 40,000 of these constitute the male labour force of greater Cape Town, and there are about 3,000 African Women in domestic service. These men are almost entirely employed as unskilled, heavy labourers, in the Railways, Docks, the building industry, domestic service and as delivery men, particularly milk men. Of the 40,000 men, plus/minus 27,000 are single migrant workers living under "bachelor" conditions with their wives and families 600 miles away. Women are arrested if they are found in the bachelor quar-

ters and the men are arrested if they spend the night with their girl friends who are often their wives. Only 9,462 of the men are living with their wives and families. Those who are domestic servants in Hotels or private houses are also mainly living without their families.

In September 1966, the Government, because of an acute housing shortage, placed a total ban on the recruitment of contract African labour for work in the Western Cape. Shortly thereafter, employers were told that not only must they limit their quota of African labour to the number of employees (plus registered vacancies) as at the 31st August 1966, but also, that, unless they were prepared to take steps to cut down this quota by 5% each year, legislation would be enacted to force them to do so.

Cape Town Strangled

Soon after this Cape Town found itself being strangled by an artificial shortage of labour. The papers were full of headlines. 'South African Labour Dilemma'; 'Bantu Labour Curb Hits the Cape'; 'Many Bantu Not Replaceable by Coloured Labour'. In November the Cape Times quoted Mr. M. M. Earle, President of Parow Chamber of Commerce and Industries, as saying: "A very serious labour scarcity has developed in this area and during the past few years an increasing number of contract Africans have been admitted to the area to fill gaps where Coloured labour is not available." By August this year the influx had increased to such an extent that there were 26,000 single Bantu in Langa and only 20,000 beds. In Nyanga, where Parow obtains its labour, there are 6,000 Bantu and 3,000 beds. To reduce this serious overcrowding the Department of Bantu Administration stopped granting permits after September 1st. This has however, created a serious situation in industries depending on Bantu labour and for which Coloured people are not procurable. Local brickworks, for example, have already closed down some of the kilns while another large industrial organisation is faced with a labour shortage of 35 or 40% — by June 1967, unless the position is materially relieved.

Far from relieving what had been hoped was a temporary necessity, the Department of Bantu Administration announced, in January 1967, that in future no employer would ever be allowed to employ more Africans including registered vacancies than he did on the 31st August, 1966. Employers who, at that date, did not employ any Africans would in future not be allowed to employ any without first obtaining special permission from the Minister of Bantu Affairs. Furthermore, the Department announced that a number of specified jobs would be "verbotten" to all "unqualified" Africans. To be "qualified" an African must either have been born in the area and lived there continuously ever since, or he

must have worked at least ten years for one employer (or fifteen years for several employers) during this time (and subsequently) the African must not have worked, even for a short time, in another area. Nor may he have been convicted of an offence leading to a fine of R100 or six months imprisonment or more. To qualify it is not enough for the African to prove that he fulfils all the requirements. He must have registered with the authorities, his first arrival in Cape Town, otherwise his continuous residence will not have been legal. Thus as from January, all those who are not "qualified" for permanent residence in the Western Cape may no longer hold jobs as vehicle drivers, floor sweepers, cleaners, domestic servants, gardeners, newspaper vendors, ice cream sellers, grooms, stable-boys, delivery men (including milkmen), petrol pump attendants, clerks, packers, and time keepers. The effect of this decree is that "unqualified" Africans at present employed in one of the above categories will not be allowed to change from one employer to another without forfeiting their right to remain in the Western Cape.

Position of Coloured People

One reason given by the authorities for refusing to allow Africans to seek work in the Western Cape is that this is the natural home of the Coloured people and that Africans have been "taking the bread out of their mouths". Yet according to the official figures (Hansard 1967) the numbers of Coloured people registered as unemployed in the Western Cape were 881 skilled and 629 unskilled in 1964, and 74 skilled plus 379 unskilled in 1965. There is apparently very little unemployment of Coloured people who want to work although it is widely alleged that there are a great many "would-not-works" as well as a large number of unemployables.

The purpose of the "Coloured Cadets" Act, passed last session would appear to be to get Coloured people to fill the places left by Africans who are no longer allowed to work in the Western Cape. All Coloured youths between the ages of 18 and 24 must register even if they are already employed or still at school, university or training college. The Minister may exempt them from compulsory training but he is under no obligation to do so. Training colleges for Coloured young men are long overdue, but it is doubtful if the proposed training centres will be anything other than labour camps used to fill the gaps caused by the present policy of reducing the African population in the Western Cape.

At a private Conference of employers of Coloured Labour the delegates reported (a) the scarcity of Coloured labour (b) the unsuitability of Coloured labour for certain types of work, particularly in the docks (c) the shortage of White foremen and women and the need to employ Col-

oured men and women as such. Not one delegate thought that the Western Cape could do without African labour or even afford to have it limited, let alone cut down. Incidentally, I found it quite fascinating that 40 leading industrialists were prepared to spend the whole day discussing Coloured labour, how to improve wages, work conditions, housing and transport etc. The final decision which was unanimous, was that compulsory education of the Coloured people was the first essential, since habits of regular attendance, cleanliness, and discipline could not be acquired by people who never went to school at all or left at the end of Standard II, before reaching the age where such discipline is enforced. 51% of Coloured children who entered school in 1951 left at the end of Standard II and only 2% reached Matric, let alone passed it. I also attended a Multiracial Church Conference on Poverty at which 150 delegates worked in 12 separate study groups. Towards the end of the Conference all came to the conclusion that the first essential in order to combat poverty was compulsory education for all races. The industrialists reported attempts to train employees which were foiled by the low standard of education of the trainees. It is quite obvious that until such compulsory education of all Coloured children is introduced, followed by training schools the numbers of Coloured people available for employment will not be great enough to supply present needs and there is no likelihood of their being able or willing to replace Africans performing heavy unskilled labour in inclement weather.

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Kei Road Ladies' Church Work Association and Kei Road Womens' Association.

The Black Sash Branch in East London could ill afford to lose her.

MARGARET WILLSON ORPEN was born in Manchester in 1900 and died suddenly on July 12th, 1967 in East London. She was vitally interested in Black Sash and kindred organisations. Her brain was an asset to the Border Sash Committee on which she served. She was a student of Mathematics, giving many hours of her life to coaching students. She was President of the Business and Professional Womens' Club in East London for two years and previously, when living in Johannesburg was Convener for South African International Affairs. She was also an enthusiastic member and late president of the East London Ex-service Womens' Association. She was an inexhaustible mine of general knowledge, a voracious reader, a music-lover and another member the Black Sash Branch in East London could ill afford to lose.