"The progress of a course which has come to deny rights of domicile even to those Africans born in the towns which their labour helped to develop."

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE MIGRATORY LABOUR SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA

By MARGARET BALLINGER

SINCE THE FIRST DAYS of our industrialization, South Africa has maintained a system of migrant labour. The original emergence of such a system is understandable. In ordinary circumstances—that is where there are no external forces to dictate—industry adjusts its labour pattern to the labour supplies available. What calls for explanation is the continuance of the system in changed and changing circumstances in which its original raison d'etre has ceased to exist; and what calls even more for explanation is the extension of the system to economic and social areas where it has no obvious justification, where indeed it would appear to run counter to every sound economic principle and to defy every law of good government. Beginning with mining, it spread, through the Urban Areas Act and the segregation policy which inspired that Act, to the emerging urban African population, and is ending, in terms of present day policies, by covering the whole African population throughout the country. This is the canvas it seems to be my function today to fill in in historical terms.

Sudden demands of industrialism

Industrialism, as you know, was not a gradual growth in South Africa. It did not grow out of the community, gradually transforming that community in the process. With the discovery first of diamonds and then of gold, it burst upon a rural society quite unprepared, emotionally and every other way, to meet the demands, particularly the labour demands its peculiar character was to make. The whole population was small — less than a million Whites and between two and three million Blacks. It mainly lived very near the subsistence level, on land that could not be called rich and was often not even hospitable, but which provided plenty of space to compensate, encouraging extensive systems of grain and cattle raising. These, with a bit of hunting, satisfied the modest demands of the majority of the people and gave an easy pace to life that in itself discouraged change. The new type of mining which the particular character of our precious mineral deposits initiated, called on the one hand for a high degree of skill begotten of experience, and on the other for a considerable amount of rough labour to do the heavy work. The first demands the country obviously could not produce. It had to be sought abroad, at a price that would attract, making it a high cost factor in new and still uncertain industries.

The unskilled labour had to be sought at home, and what more promising source of supply than the "large" native population?

But if the South African White population had nothing to draw them into these new enterprises in their pioneering days, the African population had even less, with wants even less developed and land still sufficiently open and accessible to provide all their needs. Here even money, and more money, could not attract. In fact, for the man who could be induced at all to leave his home and go down into the bowels of the earth, the more money he got the sooner his wants were satisfied and the sooner he went back to his kraal, his family, and the way of life he was accustomed to.

Pressures

So the early history of industrialism in South Africa, on its human side, is a study of attempts to exercise or to create pressures that would induce the local African male population to come

DR. MARGARET BALLINGER was educated at the Holy Rosary Convent in Port Elizabeth, at Rhodes University and at Somerville College, Oxford. From 1918 to 1919 she was head of the Department of History at Rhodes University, and in 1920 she became a senior lecturer in History at the University of the Witwatersrand.

In 1934 she married Senator William Ballinger, a Native Representative in the South African Senate, and in 1937 she herself entered Parliament as the Native Representative for the Cape Eastern circle.

Mrs. Ballinger remained a Member of Parliament until 1960, when the Government abolished African representation in the South African Parliament.

In 1962 the University of Cape Town conferred an Honorary Doctorate of Laws on Mrs. Ballinger, and in June this year Rhodes University honoured her by conferring upon her a Doctorate of Laws of that University.

out to work, pressures of which the most conspicuous and the most insistently applied were reduction in the accessibility of land (culminating in the Land Act of 1913) and the imposition of direct taxes in money that could not be obtained except through the labour market.

However, even with these pressures, progressively provided by successively sympathetic governments, it was difficult for the new industries to maintain a regular flow of labour, and impossible for them to build up a stabilized labour force. Indeed, down to the end of the first quarter of this century, in spite of the many changes that had by that time taken place in the needs and conditions of the African population, it was difficult for industry, by this time highly organized, to draw in labour, to keep its unskilled workers for more than six months at a time.

Recruited contract labour

Out of these circumstances, there grew up the system of recruited contract (indentured) labour, living in compounds — closed in the diamond mines, open in the gold mines — which is the all-over pattern of the mining industry today. It is a system within which at any moment now 500,000 Africans are employed, about half of whom are our own people (mostly from the Transkei). The other half are contracted labourers from neighbouring territories, the recruiting areas having been progressively extended as the industry expanded, and increasing calls on our own resources have made it more and more impossible for us to satisfy the needs of the industry on the established level.

In the meantime, the period of contract has significantly lengthened. Before 1924, it was six months. In 1930, according to the Native Economic Commission which reported in 1931, it had lengthened to 10.88 months. By 1942, the average period of service had risen to 13.6 months based on a new contract of 382 shifts. The period between contracts had also tended to contract significantly. The Mine Native Wages Commission which reported in 1944 in fact recorded that 20% of those who came to the mines more than once, had been away for what could be regarded as merely a normal holiday.

In the meantime, the character and conditions of the African population had changed with the changing of the character of the whole community. Is it not then surprising that the labour pattern of this great industry has not also changed? In a country with an expanding economy, are there not more economical ways of using so vast a labour force? And does it pay us, in the conditions of the modern world and of changing Africa, to be so dependent on outside sources of labour supply for one of our great primary industries?

Mining industry's second thoughts

The mining industry itself had second thoughts about the system in the early years of this century. The result was a revolution on the Witwatersrand in 1922. Giving greater scope to the lower ranks of the labour force, that is, bridging the gap between skilled and unskilled, which has been the normal development within industry generally, was seen as a threat to the privileged position of the upper ranks, and the challenge was resisted with all the force that privilege could command. The final result was the Colour Bar Act of 1925, the amendment to the Mines and Water Act of 1911, to establish clearly and effectively the position of the African worker on the mines and to re-entrench that position at whatever cost to the community, the determining force here being White labour.

A quarter of a century later, when fortuitous circumstances — the rise in the price of gold and the discovery of the Free State reef — had falsified all the dreary prognostications of mining as a wasting industry, which had tended to operate

(Continued overleaf)

against change, another tentative effort was made towards modifying the system. This was the Anglo-American Corporation's proposal to aim at some 10% stabilized labour, that is family labour, on the new mines in the Free State. But the scheme had scarcely begun to get under way with a preliminary 3½% objective when the force that has now dominated our lives for more than a decade weighed in to put a stop to that. Dr. Verwoerd as Minister of Native Affairs had two main objections to the proposal. In the first place, it involved the provision of married quarters on the mines. These, he contended, would just become Black spots in White areas when the mines should close down, an extended invasion of the policy of apartheid. Secondly, in the meantime these family settlements, as they would be in effect, would become the source of new increases in the urban African population which it was the policy of the Nationalist Government to prevent, since the children of these privileged African mine workers would pretty certainly not become mine workers themselves but would slip into the main body of the urban African population.

Illusion

And so the migrant labour system remains the backbone of the largest single industry in the country, carrying on the illusion that a great industrial working force is really an established peasantry in temporary disguise — for while the mining industry was initially anxious to reduce the alternative resources for livelihood of the Africans for their own ends, they built a system based on the assumption that the African worker had some alternative source of income and paid him accordingly. He was in effect supposedly a subsidized worker.

The "poor Whites"

In the meantime, the idea of the African as essentially a migrant worker had spread to the great new fields of employment that had followed in the wake of the mining industry. The contingent development of services for the industry, of which transport was not the least important, and of other subsidiary industries, blossoming in due course into the extensive industrial diversity which puts South Africa in a class by itself in Africa, had exercised its revolutionary influence on all our population groups, drawing them in increasing numbers and at an ever increasing tempo into the new urban areas under pressures which they were not in a position to resist. It was a change in the social and economic set-up that the community was again not equipped for, either administratively or emotionally, and in the circumstances of the time, it gave rise to two serious points of political conflict between the politically dominant White group and what, except to some extent in the Cape Province, was essentially the subject African group. This was the emergence of "poor Whites," and the growth of major slums where competing poor Whites and poor Blacks rubbed shoulders with one another in a social contact which in the context of South African society was full of explosive political material.

It is difficult now to remember or to appreciate the dark shadow which "poor White-ism" cast over the country in the 20's and 30's of this century. Yet it was the formative force in the standardizing of the relationship of Black and White in the country. The very pressures that had been and were still being applied to get Africans to come to the developing industries to work were forcing Whites off the land and into a labour market where they had nothing to offer that the African could not offer, and in some cases not so much as he had, for example brawn. To appreciate all the social implications, it has to be remembered that it was a period of great economic instability in which the alternations of boom and depression, and more and more serious depressions, aggravated all the strains inherent in the process of urbanization among communities so ill-prepared for and as yet so ill-adapted to the new way of life.

"Back to the land!"

The resulting situation afforded a particular challenge and a particular appeal to different sections of the politically privileged, all alike untrained to appreciate the nature of the change in progress and the economic forces at work. To political Nationalists, the instinctive reaction was to support the claims of their own people to special protection. To the paternalists, this was part of the story but not the whole. Whites must of course be protected but Blacks also had their claims. The two groups, which between them represented the major political forces of the day, met in the cry of "Back to the land". But while for the Whites attempts were made to provide land, for the Blacks the assumption was again made that they had homes that they should remain in or at least return to. But the cry ran counter to the main economic forces at work in our society, and the process of urbanization went

on among both groups, calling for something more to meet the actual facts of the situation.

Emergence of idea of "White" areas

The groping after that something more came to a head in 1918, when, on the back of the first world war, the ravages of the Spanish influenza epidemic, particularly among the urban African population, put the spotlight on the social aspects of the situation. The result was a commission of enquiry, under the chairmanship of Colonel Stallard, who all his political life was a convinced segregationist. The determining finding of this commission was that Africans did not belong to the towns and should not be allowed to establish domicile there. If they came to the urban areas, they should be allowed to do so only as "visitors", as migrant workers, putting down no roots that could — and would — justify political claims. Such claims must be avoided at all costs. Here is then the first formal political emergence of this idea of urban areas as "White" areas.

These findings found their formal acceptance in the Urban Areas Act of 1923, to be given new body and substance in due course by a White labour policy under the Pact Government which came into office in 1924. In terms of this Act the African worker in secondary industry became legally a migrant worker for whom nobody but the public authority could provide housing, out of which he could be turned, not when he ceased to be able to pay the rent, but when he ceased to be employed in the service of the dominant community.

In 1932, the labour service contract system, for which the Urban Areas Act had provided, was extended to rural labour which was in any case implicitly migrant, and increasingly explicitly so also.

This machinery became the framework of the segregation policy finally formulated by the Hertzog Government and extended to the Cape Province in 1936 and 1937. In this later year, African women were legislatively excluded from urban areas except under special provisions, and African rights of purchase of property, which had survived by an oversight, were formally removed.

Permanent African town-dweller

But while succeeding years saw progressive tightenings-up of the Urban Areas Act, the process of urbanization went on apace, and both legislatively and administratively there were implicit acceptances of the fact that the African worker was becoming a permanent town-dweller and that he had, or should have, some rights as such. The

> *Cheap migratory labour . . . is cheap only in the short-term sense. From the health angle alone, the Union will in the end have to pay an enormous price in order to liquidate the debt.*
>
> **Dr. G. W. Gale, Secretary for Health —Report of Native Laws Commission (Fagan Commission) 1946-1948.**

Urban Areas Act itself, while it made provision for locations for the housing of the most recent arrivals from the country, without knowledge or experience of the conditions and requirements of healthy living in close communities, also provided for the release of areas for purchase by those who had learned these lessons and in doing so had acquired some substance and become truly urbanized. And as you know, there were administrative rules for the acquisition of domicile by those who could measure up to the standards laid down, while the right of those born in the urban areas to be regarded as belonging and having rights of domicile, was progressively explicitly recognized.

It was this situation that the Fagan Commission explored and on the basis of which they recommended the recognition of the process of African urbanization as both natural and healthy, a proposition which implicitly cut at the roots of the migrant labour idea except as a passing phase in the life of the individual.

Denial of rights of domicile

Then came the change of government in 1948 and the progressive repudiation of all claims of the Africans to stability in the urban areas. By this time, poor White-ism had been conquered, become a thing of the past, not through White labour policies and segregation of Africans, but by industrialization itself, increasingly assisted by African consumers' demand. But the political motive, never entirely absent from the economic history of South Africa, was also well to the fore, to revive and re-enforce any and all claims that the African had no integral part in South African society.

It is not my job to trace the legislative progress of the course which has come to deny rights of domicile even to those Africans born in the towns which their labour has helped to develop, and, abolishing all property rights within those areas which might suggest permanence, argues

(Continued overleaf)

that the worker on whom the whole edifice of the South African economy is raised is not integrated — any more than the ox or the ass or the tractor — into South African society. The idea of the migratory character of the African population has now been extended to cover the whole African population, and as far as I can see, for all time. Yet the urban African population continues to grow. More and more of that population knows no background other than the town and the city and can find a livelihood nowhere else. At the same time the platteland gets blacker and blacker and the production of the nation's food passes more and more into the hands — and control — of Africans.

No separate economy

All this assumes a special significance when it is viewed against the background of one fact which seems to me to have attracted all too little attention, that is that whatever separation the makers of Nationalist policy have been prepared to concede (and the field seems to have widened over the last 2 to 3 years), it does not apparently include separate economies — which goes some way towards explaining the conspicuous absence of any real economic preparation for that African self-government to which the Transkei is supposed to be leading the way. But how does a community keep its whole working class on a migratory basis? Let me remind you of what Dr. Verwoerd says about it. It may make more sense to you than it does to me. In recent years I have so often found myself wandering in a strange world, in a maze of words that don't convey any understandable idea or shape to me, that as a political person, with hopes and, I hope, ideals of my own, I scarcely know how to get to grips with what is happening to us.

Confronted in the debate on the Tomlinson report in 1956 with the question of what was to happen to the 6,000,000 Africans who, it was estimated, would still be in so-called European areas at the end of the century even with the most dynamic plans the commission could offer for the development of the African "heartlands" (practically all rejected by Dr. Verwoerd, because he knew better) he said, (Hansard Vol. 71 Co. 5311):

"As far as the second group is concerned, namely the 6,000,000 who will still be in the White area in the year 2,000, various points have to be taken into account. The first is that the assumption is unfounded that the same person will always be domiciled here permanently. I foresee an interaction betwen the White area and the Bantu area; 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. In other words, this interaction between the White area and the Bantu area is of great importance in considering the question as to whether we are dealing here with 6,000,000 permanent inhabitants." It is incidental to the present theme — or is it? — that he added, "Let me remind honourable members that of the 6,500,000 or thereabouts, 4,000,000 will in all likelihood be on the platteland; in other words in a place where the problem of apartheid is maintained locally." He went on:

"Anchor in homeland"

"A further fact, however, is that these people all have their anchor in their homeland. These 6,000,000 will also have their anchor in what they regard as their homeland. The developments which are being set in motion now, the closer connections which are being established, will take care of that." Then he added a gambit the protagonists of apartheid have relied on a lot. "They will be like the Italians who go to France to take up employment there. They remain Italians and they remain anchored in their homeland; that is where they seek their rights; they do not expect and ask for rights in the others place. **Moreover, these people will be in the White area from their own choice;** they will be there because it will pay them and because it is useful to them."

A symptom of poverty

Dr. Verwoerd has repeated this theme since 1956. He has not yet explained two things: (i) what skills a migrant and unstable labour force normally succeeds in accumulating; (ii) when the opportunities for the use of any skill on the part of any number of these pseudo-migrant workers are to appear. Migrant labour is itself a symptom of poverty which all modern countries strive to obliterate. But here I leave my theme in the sorrowful reflection that if I had known 30 years ago when we began our campaign against migrant labour that we should be where we are today, I doubt if I would have found the courage to face so doomed a course. But who could have conceived either such a situation, or the arguments by which it is supported? I feel it to be due to my own intelligence to say, "Not I!"