

PASSES AND AFRICANS

By **W. B. NGAKANE**

(Mr. Ngakane is a field-officer of the S.A. Institute of Race Relations, and writes this comment on the Pass Laws out of his personal experience of what they mean in terms of suffering to the African).

PASS! No other word in the country conjures up such a variety of associations as this one word. For the legislator and the administrator, it rouses memories of control over Africans, thus giving them a false sense of security. To the ordinary white person it means an abundant supply of cheap, docile labour—especially if he happens to be a farmer. But to the ordinary run of African, mention of it has a magical effect. It rouses memories of police raids, of numbers of families estranged from one another, of children separated from parents, of fathers sent to serve terms of imprisonment, and of humiliation in its bitterest form.

What constitutes a pass is a matter of dispute between those who have created it and those who have to carry it. What is a pass to the legislators and administrators may be of academic interest to those who are interested in the study of origins, but to us it is not of sufficient importance to merit following up within the limited gamut of a thousand words. Suffice it to say that, to the African, any document that has in it the elements of compulsion or restriction is regarded as a pass, irrespective of what the authorities think to the contrary.

HISTORY OF PASS LAWS

The history of the "pass" dates back to 1797, when, according to the Interdepartmental Committee on Native Pass Laws, "it was introduced for the purpose of excluding all natives from colonial territory and directed farmers and others employing natives to discharge them." Since this date the variety of ways in which it has been used is intriguing, although it shows what a useful instrument it has been for dealing with a subject people, according to the caprices of different governments. At one moment it was used, as I have already indicated, for segregating Africans from European frontiersmen. At another time it was utilised as protection for the farmers against the predatory habits of the vagrant natives. Then it was applied variously for enforcing contractual obligations between employer and employee, for detecting deserters from employment, to identify the natives on behalf of their relatives who died leaving assets, etc.

With the opening of the diamond mines, Cecil Rhodes conceived the specious idea of saving the large number of young natives, "the Kaffir mashers," who spent their lives in beer-drinking, by sending them to the diamond fields to be taught the dignity of labour, and so the Glen Grey Act was passed. More recently, expanding commerce and industry attracted large numbers of Africans in ever-increasing measure and the necessity to provide

adequate housing for them raised the question as to whether the age-old panacea could not be helpful again. And indeed it did not fail them.

PROCESS REVERSED

What was purely a sociological trend had to be reversed and the gravitation of the Africans to the industrial centres stopped. And all that was necessary to achieve this end was a slight twist or alteration to the pass laws. The Urban Areas Act was amended and the Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act was passed. These two acts together serve the dual purpose of canalising labour, so as to make it abundant for the farmers, who are thus saved from paying competitive wages, and controlling the influx of the Africans to the prescribed areas. So that, whereas at one time the passes were used to compel the Africans to go to the diamond fields and industrial areas, now they are used to **exclude them** from such areas.

To one who has observed the effect of these laws closely, the questions occur repeatedly: What have the pass laws achieved? Do they prevent crime? Have they achieved the purpose their framers had in view and do they humanise the African? Obviously they have so far achieved none of these results. Instead, they have reduced them to the lowest terms of depravity and demoralised both the Africans and those officials who have to administer them. While the farmers are forced to resort to all sorts of ruses to evade the maze created by the pass and influx control regulations, the administrators are exposed to the temptation to accept bribes. I have seen men go about on crutches in order to evade arrest by the police for being without passes; I have known men rendered completely homeless and condemned to a life of vagabondage, because they have fallen foul of one of the many regulations that hedge them about, to say nothing of the men and women who are sent to prison annually. I have stood in the pass office and seen how young adolescents, at a time when they need the support of their parents most, are ordered to leave their parents and homes because the pass laws demand it.

INCREASE IN CRIME

During the last few years stricter and harsher laws have been exacted and the police force has been doubled to enforce their observance. But crime has increased, and murder, robbery and rapine have become the order of the day. If the passes have any use, it is to cause resentment and intensify hatred for the white man, which expresses itself in increased criminality.

Until fairly recently, the women have been excluded from the operation of the pass laws—except for curfew and for the permit system, which operates in a few towns and was introduced for the purpose of excluding so-called loose women from the

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urban areas. Today however, they are being brought within the ambit of the pass laws. Teams of government officials from the Native Affairs Department are touring the country and issuing "identification certificates" to women in the rural areas and small towns. Although in many of the areas the women are yielding to government pressure and are accepting these "identification certificates," in many other areas there is strong resistance, which has led to prosecution of women, banishment of leaders and chiefs and to rioting and deaths.

WOMEN RESISTING

No women accept the passes willingly and their resistance derives from their knowledge of the manner in which their men folk have been harassed by the administrators of the pass laws in the past. In the first place, experience has shown that young and irresponsible policemen are not above arresting African women and promising to release them if they will give in to their advances. And cases are on record in which policemen have arrested women under curfew regulations and abused them. If women have to carry passes which must be produced on demand, the number of defaulters is going to increase considerably. Thousands of African women are thus going to be arrested by male policemen and the number of abuses increased commensurately.

To exemplify the sort of thing that is likely to happen: an African policeman made advances to a nurse. When she responded unfavourably, he decided to teach her a lesson. He knew that on certain days she returned home from duty after curfew, so he waylaid her one day and arrested her for being without a "special." On the way to the charge office he promised to release her if she accepted his proposal. According to the nurse, she feared going

to the police station and so reluctantly yielded to his "blackmail."

Women arrested under the pass laws will be introduced to prison life. And this will apply to young girls of the apparent age of sixteen years, as well as to adult women. Many white women support the idea of their domestics carrying passes "to bring to an end the desertions which are so easy and common." Admittedly desertions and occasional thefts by women domestics can and do cause great inconvenience, but can the inconvenience of a few women be compared with the misery of thousands of African women whom the passes will send to the courts and prisons? Can they justify the dislocation of family life caused by a mother who does not return home at night, because she has been arrested? Can they justify the suffering of young children whose mother has been arrested?

WASTE OF MAN-HOURS

Employers already complain of the labour hours which are wasted because of the large number of workers who are kept away from work daily by reason of their failure to produce a pass. Have those white women who support the pass laws for their African domestics calculated what it is going to mean to them in terms of inconvenience when "Annie" fails to turn up, because she has been "copped"? There are days when the townships are surrounded and the police demand passes. There are days when all exits from the railway stations are blocked by policemen in search of pass defaulters, when everybody who has no pass on him is picked up and taken to the charge office. It is on such days that the "missus" will wish she had not supported passes for African women.

Morning Market In Pretoria

WE are greatly indebted to our Chairwoman, Mrs. Lang, for taking the initiative in, and bearing the brunt of, a most successful Morning Market and Rally on the 4th September, 1957. For this Market Mrs. Lang gave her charming garden. Apart from being a great success financially and bringing in £88 17s. 8d., the Morning Market was a very pleasant rallying ground for members who so often meet in less agreeable circumstances, and usually in silence!

Mrs. Dora Hill came over from Johannesburg and spoke most effectively about the dynamic force that the Black Sash had been and would continue to be. No one who heard Mrs. Hill speak on "Why we go on" could be in any doubt about the urgency of protesting where and whenever possible.

Besides the tea, convened with great efficiency by Mrs. Zacchy Taylor, there were several stalls. Mrs. Lang, helped by Mrs. McMillan and Mrs. Becklake, ran a sweet stall of home-made sweets. Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Thorpe did a brisk business at a cake stall. Miss Barrett and Mrs. Monson ran a

miscellaneous stall at which they sold everything, including Penguins (which rather disappointingly turned out to be books). Mrs. Wallis and Mrs. Souter ran a Tombola Table, handsomely bedecked with articles we had dragooned our grocers and chemists into giving us. The flower stall was a family affair almost entirely stocked by Mrs. van der Byl with the most exquisite spring flowers from her garden, sold by herself, her sister, her daughter and her daughter-in-law.

Apart from stalls there were three "competitions," one for a beautiful fairisle jersey knitted by Mrs. Wallis, one for a most enticing twin set made by Mrs. Simpson, and one for the best-dressed doll in town begged and exquisitely dressed by Mrs. Lang.

Special medals should go to three of the stallholders, Miss Barrett, Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Wallis, who went straight from their stalls to keep the four-hour vigil at the Union Buildings.

MARGARET BRINK,
Acting Secretary.