THE DURBAN STRIKES 1973

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By Richard Hyman.

Most British observers recognised the strikes by African workers in Durban in early 1973 as events of major significance, even though their precise implications could scarcely be comprehended at the time. The immediate effect here was to focus attention on the intensity of the exploitation endured by Black workers, most of whom earned substantially below the government's own Poverty Datum Line. In consequence, the employment and wage policies of South African subsidiaries of British firms were subjected to sharp critical scrutiny, and it was revealed that the practices of many of the best known companies were bad even by South African standards. In the aftermath, the Trade Union Congress was shaken from its normally lethargic attitude to the South African question.

In two respects the Durban strikes were clearly unique. The first was the capacity of over 30 000 non-unionised Black workers to sustain militant action over a relatively protracted period, displaying a high degree of solidarity and self-restraint, and ultimately winning significant improvements in wages. The second was the passive stance adopted by the government and its agencies of repression, which in the past have consistently intervened brutally in order to smash acts of revolt by Africans. This non-interventionist role may be seen as one of the first notable instances of the Vorster government's endeavours to cultivate an image of "racism with a human face", in an attempt to remedy its increasingly desperate international isolation. The Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act, following swiftly after the strikes and offering a minimal legal basis for work stoppages by Africans, was another sign of this partial and often contradictory process of "liberalisation".

What explains the extent, cohesion and effectiveness of the strike movement itself? This excellent

study by the Institute for Industrial Education provides a convincing answer. The book falls into four parts. In the first, a fairly straight forward account of the strikes is compiled, largely from press reports; particular attention is given to the disputes in textile factories, especially those of the Frame Group. Typically the stoppages seem to have followed spontaneous mass meetings at the workplace; wage demands were not normally specified at the outset, but once formulated these involved ambitious increases. Serious bargaining did not occur, for no worker representatives were prepared to come forward and risk victimisation; works committees were ineffectual; while the textile union (the only one to operate in any of the undertakings affected) was weak and discredited. Commonly the employers offered increases of up to R2 a week which, though usually rejected initially at mass meetings, were normally accepted when it was clear that no further improvements were forthcoming.

The book's second part provides a survey of the attitudes of different groups to the strikes. The authors freely admit the methodological limitations of their findings, but these are illuminating nonetheless. The exceedingly low wages of African workers are clearly demonstrated: over three quarters of respondents earned less than the R18 poverty line. Their replies show that the stoppages were a spontaneous response to economic grievances which employers proved unwilling to remedy. The strikers felt that their action had achieved concrete results, but that far more remained to be achieved; most were prepared to strike again. The survey shows that a high proportion of Indian workers were also very low paid. About half of those who joined the strike did so out of solidarity with the Africans, or because they themselves stood to gain; there is little support for the widespread assumption that most Indian strikers acted only out of fear of intimidation by Africans. It is interesting that the large majority of Indians were willing that their trade unions should be able to admit Africans.

The English-language press at the time gave extensive coverage to the disputes, publicised

the strikers' wage grievances, and expressed qualified support for their action. These attitudes were endorsed in the survey of Whites. Moreover, a majority believed that Africans should be permitted to form trade unions. On most questions, the attitudes of English and Afrikaners did not diverge substantially. Not surprisingly, the employers who were questioned were far less sympathetic. Though all appear to have conceded wage increases, the majority thought that these were unjustified; they tended to blame the strikes on "agitators", and only a small proportion favoured unions for Africans.

In their third part the authors seek to explain why the strikes occured. Wages in Durban were not exceptionally low by South African standards, even taking account of local living costs. Nor was the make-up of the labour force exceptional. Explainations in terms of "agitators" and "intimidators" cannot be taken seriously: it is scarcely credible that one of the world's most effective police states could have failed to detect some clandestine organisation masterminding the stoppages. At the same time, the Black workers' spontaneous militancy almost certainly developed on the basis of informal networks of social communication, and may have been partly stimulated by such external agencies as the press and Black consciousness movements. The authors conclude that a cumulation of objective circumstances and material grievances, none of which would alone have been decisive, sufficed to cause the explosion of militancy.

The final section of the book discusses the broader social, political and economic implications of the conflict. Public debate immediately after the strikes tended to focus on the causes of the wage gap between Black and White workers, and on the possibility of African trade unions. The authors show how superficial was most public comment, as Whites sought to come to terms with the new phenomenon of Black aspirations and self-confidence which would not simply be suppressed (particularly given the desire for international goodwill) yet threatened the traditional basis of White supremacy.

These issues are analysed in their broader context - a prerequisite of any serious understanding. Low wages for Blacks were the historical foundation of rapid capital accumulation in South Africa, and were derived in turn from the forcible dispossession of Africans from their traditional territories. Blacks were turned into propertyless wage-labourers by White violence: this brute fact underpins the current reality of the South African labour market. Employment relationships based on crude exploitation served White interests effectively enough for roughly a century; but important contradictions have now emerged. For with economic and technological development, the Black labour force - like the working class in every industrialised economy - becomes more qualified, less easily replaceable by the employer, possessed of strategic bargaining power. For such an economy to operate smoothly, workers must accept the legitimacy of their situation; if they feel themselves forcibly oppressed, the consequences will inevitably be disruptive.

The Durban strikes were the first serious intimations of the impact of just such disruptive contradictions. In most developed nations, conflict of this kind is moderated by the normative and social integration of the working class, on the basis of political and trade union rights. But while Black South Africans are excluded from such rights, the crisis of legitimacy can only escalate; further explosive outbreaks will inevitably succeed those of 1973.

This study compares most favourably with other recent accounts on individual strikes and strike movements. The description of the particular set of disputes links effectively with the book's general theoretical framework. While the authors admit candidly the limitations of their evidence, their explanation of the Durban strikes has the ring of plausibility. Given the development of a measure of strategic power in the context of deeply experienced grievances, a combination of relatively minor incidents or conditions can easily spark off a major conflict. When this occurs, the precise

mechanisms through which the pressures erupt into strike action can rarely be documented precisely. In this respect, what happened in Durban mirrors many other stoppages which have been analysed sociologically.

For the British reader, the book suggests fascinating parallels with the movement of "new" or "general" unionism around the turn of the present century. Labourers in docks and road transport, municipal services, and a range of factory industries, long considered beyond the pale of effective collective organisation and action, became involved in a series of dramatic and spontaneous disputes. The strike wave won important improvements in wages and conditions, provided an impetus towards stable trade unionism, and - perhaps most important of all - gave the submerged strata an ineradicable sense of their own collective strength. Such consciousness was later to survive the most adverse conditions. For this reason, the prediction that the Durban strikes will herald increasing Black self-assertiveness is wholly reasonable. By the same token, it is impossible for any student of the history of labour in industrial nations to dispute the authors' argument that only through legal and recognised African trade unionism can the militancy unleashed in 1973 conveivably be contained.

Even this may well be insufficient. Where class antagonism is overlaid by racial oppression, the institutionalisation of conflict through trade unionism alone may prove impossible. This at least is suggested by the recent experience of Black workers in Britain and of Southern European migrants in such countries as France and Germany. It is hard to believe that the "liberalisation" of labour relations which the authors advocate will suffice to curb the antagonisms rooted in South Africa's elaborately institutionalised racism. It is hard also to believe that such liberalisation is in any case seriously in prospect. The preface to this study notes that three members of the research team cannot be associated with the publication because of banning orders. This matter-of-fact announcement is humbling to those of us who

publish and research under comparatively unrestrictive conditions. It also suggests that the struggle of Black South Africans for trade union rights which are taken for granted in most industrialised societies, like the struggle for social and political liberties, is likely to face bitter and even violent resistance from those whose material interests are most directly challenged.

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