

by Duncan Clarke

This note is intended primarily as a record of some activities of the Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union (APWU) in Rhodesia. It is based on the correspondence of the Union as well as discussions with the General Secretary during 1972 and 1973. Attention is also drawn to the difficulties faced by the APWU which have arisen out of socioeconomic conditions in Rhodesia in the post-1960 period.

SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Firstly a note on the background to plantation production and employment. Nearly 38 percent of all African workers (349 000) in Rhodesia were employed on 'European' owned farms in 1973. The enterprises on which they have been employed have had various production structures. The following classifications can be made:

- * Large-scale foreign-owned estates, owned by South African interests, which also have mining and industrial investments throughout the Southern African 'complex', including Rhodesia (e.g. Anglo American Corporation and Triangle Sugar Estates).
- * Large-scale locally owned enterprises, private and State owned, in both ranching and forestry.
- * Smaller settler plantations engaged in arable, pastoral and mixed production (forming the 'spine' of the industry and varying in size).
- * Estates principally maintained as speculative investments by 'absentee landlords'.

A variety of social and economic conditions pertain in these enterprises. Their labour requirements are not necessarily uniform and a number of forms of wage employment are to be found including the following:

- * Contract workers recruited from Malawi by the Rhodesian African Labour Supply Commission under 2 year contracts at very low rates of pay (approximately 3 000 per annum).

- * Locally contracted workers undertaking short-term tasks who are contracted through private African labour contractors (about 18 000).
- * Permanent and semi-permanent workers, constituting the bulk of the labour force (about 230 000 workers), many being foreign workers who have come originally from Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and Botswana, and most of whom reside in farm compounds and have been in varying degrees of dependence on wage-labour and plantation owners for cash, 'rations', health services, education, and social security (i.e. the 'right' to stay on the farm, obtain tillage to a small plot of land and enjoy the prospect of a 'retainer' to provide for post-employment subsistence consumption).
- * Squatters' who enjoy an insecure usufruct to a small defined area of land and who conduct peasant farming operations in exchange for which they provide labour to the landowners.
- * Casual workers (about 40 000, mostly women and children) who are drawn from the compound at peak periods or for specific tasks at wage rates below those prevailing for permanent/male labourers.
- * Employees in 'agricultural services', teachers, clerks, mechanics, technicians, etc.) who are *relatively* well paid and who number approximately 12 000.
- * A supervisory class of 'boss boys' and quasi-managers mostly placed below white 'farm assistants' and managers in the occupational hierarchy (probably about 6 000).

Approximately 115 000 farm workers were non-Rodesian in 1972. Their relative and absolute preponderance in plantation employment has diminished since 1960.

DIFFICULTIES OF UNIONIZATION

This complex pattern of production and employment makes it difficult for unionization. Those most in need of union protection are the most dependent. Social controls in white farming areas and on the

compounds make it difficult for unions and branches to organize. Farmers have also exerted a quasi-political and judicial authority on their farms which cannot be easily matched by unionism under prevailing political conditions. Workers have been ultra-dependent not only for wages. A host of non-wage relationships have 'tied' workers to estates (e.g. credit and indebtedness policies of farm stores and farm health and educational policies). Even though *real wages* have fallen by 17 percent from 1963-73, other socioeconomic pressures, like controls on foreign workers to exclude them from urban employment, urban influx controls to push local workseekers to farm jobs, and extreme poverty in the reserves, have ensured that increasing numbers of local workers have taken up farm employment. The existence of a small 'floating' unemployed population *within* the European areas has also provided pressures for workers to accept low levels of subsistence. Indeed, the spread of wage-employment in the Tribal Trust Lands and African Purchase Areas ('communal' and private owned farming areas respectively) at wages even lower than in many plantation jobs, has meant that farmworkers have had little option once they have been forced to become dependent on the plantation.

These factors have not provided conditions which have been conducive to successful unionization. Thus by 1972 the APWU only had a reported 900 paid-up members (though their nominal 'book membership' stood at 8 000). Paid-up membership thus constituted less than 0.5 percent of all farmworkers. In effect the plantation labour force has remained non-unionized. However, structural conditions alone have not accounted for this fact as is demonstrated by the history of the union, and the socioeconomic situation within which it arose.

UNION FORMATION

The General Secretary of the APWU has informed the author that the union was formed initially by workers in the Western Matabeleland area near Bulawayo. Observing the treatment meted out to 'squatters' (their lifelong neighbours) on adjacent farms they decided (because they were *fearful of*

their own security') to form the APWU; The 'squatters' concerned had always lived on the land, the area having been alienated by white farmers after colonization. The original owner left the 'squatters' to their own devices, provided they supplied the full statutory amount of labour to him (6 months per annum).

The legal position of these labour-tenants changed after the introduction of the Land Apportionment Act in 1930 and when, in the early 1950's, the Act was being implemented, their continued tenancy on the farm became dependent upon the contracting of a wage-employment relationship with the plantation owner. The owner gave verbal promise that such a contract was agreeable to him and he undertook to pay workers 50 cents monthly. The amount was entered onto the workers' Registration Certificate as '50 cents'. No period was specified. The workers were illiterate and did not verify the agreement. The farmers also agreed that under no circumstances would they be evicted from the farm. This situation continued for 10 years though the workers did not collect any wages. Their quid pro quo for labour was a 'freedom' to extend cultivated acreages and accumulate as large a herd as they could afford.

The sale of the farm in the 1960's brought new ownership. The 'boss' decided to demand the removal of all 'squatters' from the farm, a situation legally permitted at the time. The workers appealed to the farmer claiming that they had engaged in a wage-labour contract with the previous employer. The farmer thus altered his stance but refused to meet 'back pay' claimed by the workers at 50 cents monthly. The appeal by the workers to the District Commissioner was of no avail. There had been no written agreement specifying the period to which the 50 cents applied.

In the end, after the matter had been referred to the Dept. of Labour, the workers were discharged with 50 cents each for 10 years labour. All went eventually to the Matetsi Reserve. The drastic nature of this experience prompted neighbouring workers to mobilize collectively for protection.

PROBLEMS OF UNION ORGANIZATION

Employment contracts in agriculture have come under the Masters and Servants Act (1901) which was introduced on the basis of the 1856 Cape Colony statute and designed to stop 'desertion', penalise breaches of contract and ensure that bargaining power remained in the employers hands. Under the Act there is no provision for collective bargaining or Industrial Councils and Boards. Wage-setting has been left to individual 'bargaining' under conditions which have not favoured workers. Though the Act does not technically prohibit union formation, it does deny such unions a legal status as 'registered' unions. However under the 1959 Industrial Conciliation Act the APWU has had to register as an 'unregistered union' with the Industrial Registrar. This has made the APWU liable to many onerous provisions, but unentitled to any of the normal benefits that flow from registration, circumscribed though these may be.

EMPLOYER OBSTRUCTION

The APWU has no ability to influence the wage bargain by negotiation in advance of contract for the sale of labour, or to control the utilisation of labour once sold. Their ability to conduct 'negotiations' directly with individual employers (there are over 6 000 separate production 'units' has not been technically restrained by the Masters and Servants Act. Employers have simply refused to entertain such a situation. The Anglo-American Corporation, Arbor Acres (PTY) Ltd., and other individual farmers, have adopted this strategy of resistance, along with the Rhodesia National Farmers' Union. The RNFU have made it a condition in writing that they will give no assistance to agricultural unionism.

ROLE OF THE R N F U

The RNFU have thus refused to condone changes in the ICA to enable the Masters and Servants Act to be repealed and allow the industry to function under conditions of collective bargaining. The Chief Executive of the RNFU has written to the APWU

General Secretary (1st October, 1971) saying that
 'Under the circumstances I regret that we cannot subscribe to or support *any* approach you might make to Government in connection with this matter.'

The RNFU political lobby has been powerful and effective in influencing State labour policy in this direction. Its representatives in the Southern Rhodesian legislature successfully stopped pressures (paradoxically from the white Farm Assistants and Salaried Managers' Association) to have the sector incorporated under the provisions of the ICA when it was amended to incorporate African industrial workers in 1959.

The Rhodesian Front party has a strong rural bias which is also reflected in the constituency distribution between urban and rural seats. In 1974 there were 17 of the 49 RF Members of Parliament who were themselves farmers, including 10 of the 18 Cabinet Ministers as well as the Prime Minister.

The RNFU itself has been active in thwarting union formation. The words of the RNFU Labour Committee Chairman (L.T. Molam) in 1973 sum up their hostile attitude:

'I would like to turn to another warning sign which has very serious implications - that is the threat of trade unionism. We have a very *sympathetic* Minister of Labour, and you can rest assured that an agricultural trade union will *not* get official recognition. In addition we have prepared a very well documented case against trade unionism should the time ever arise when it might be needed to fight moves towards it -----
 trade unions are willing to support any grievance the workers may have. A recent example is the intervention of Mr. Mpofu (the APWU General Secretary) at a chicken farm near Salisbury.'

THE "DOUBLE BIND"

The union has thus been caught in an intended 'double bind'. Employers refuse to negotiate because (they say) the ICA does not apply to agriculture. The State will not change the law because it represents only employer interests. Nor will it intervene to provide minimum wage laws or other protections. The RNFU oppose any move towards collective bargaining, recognition of unionism, or co-operation with the APWU through a reform of industrial relations. The union is not powerful enough to provide leverage for affecting this change.

POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

Political constraints have been crucial as constraints on union formation. The nature of the Land Tenure Act and the all-embracing control provided under the Emergency Powers Regulations (in force since 1965) have made it very difficult for union officials to travel freely in 'white areas', hold meetings and visit workers in the compounds (always the property of the employer). Farmers have generally regarded union officials as 'subversive' and regular attention has been given to this issue at RNFU Annual Congresses. Much of the control over agricultural unionism has been left to the powers of the State. Thus, upon formation of the APWU, concern was expressed at the RNFU Congress of that year. Mr. C.G. Tracey is on record (RNFU Proceedings, 21st Annual Congress, June 1964) as noting that the government said to the RNFU : 'Don't have anything to do with it (the APWU) (the APWU); we will contain the matter.' The RNFU President requested members to 'stop the union' by reporting their meetings to the Police. The 1966 Congress re-iterated this concern over farm unionism. It has remained an article of faith for the RNFU since, in clear contradiction to their claims to be working for better conditions for farmworkers.

The State has largely kept its promise. Union officials have been harassed continuously and

executive members, among them the General Secretary, have been detained without trial for various periods on offences that have not been specified. Mr. Mpofu was detained in mid-1973 and, as has been usual in such matters, his family have experienced considerable difficulties as a result. He has also been seriously ill in detention and has been unsuccessful in appeal against his detention order.

VICTIMIZATION OF UNION MEMBERS

Workers have also been victimised for joining the Union. Union members have been dismissed at Arbor Acres Chicken Farm, Hippo Valley Estates and elsewhere. At the time of the Pierce Commission's visit a 6 day industrial strike by 1200 at Hippo Valley Estates was put down with the assistance of the police and reservists. The Union claimed that 250 of its members were dismissed. APWU complaints against victimisation have been frequent but powerless.

ORGANISING DIFFICULTIES:

Foreign and casual workers have been difficult to effectively unionize. The union has focussed on the large commercial estates (eg. Hippo Valley in the Lowveld) in order to maintain contact with as many workers as possible. The rest of the agricultural labour force have been widely dispersed in up to 6000 compounds throughout the country. It has been impossible to make contact with even a fraction of these workers. Although membership fees have been low (joining fee 25 cents and monthly subscription 10 cents) these are not inconsiderable amounts for impoverished farm labourers. Their average earnings (cash and *all* payments in kind) in 1973 were valued by the Central Statistical Office at \$11.00 monthly (35 per cent of which on average has been supplied in the form of 'rations', services and an imputed value for accommodation - almost always built by workers during their 'leisure time').

THE FARM WORKERS' BUDGET

The budget that farm workers and their families have

had to survive on has been austere in comparison to basic subsistence consumption needs (the PDL in urban Rhodesia for a family with 2 children in 1974 was \$55). The subsistence wage has thus been pressed down to an extremely low level. Under-consumption of basic items (food, shelter, children's education, health services, recreation, etc.) has provided the means whereby sub-PDL existence has been catered for in the plantation system. Non-permanent workers have often had to obtain income supplementation from the reserves. Permanent labourers have attempted to increase family income by sending wives and children to work (usually though not exclusively on the same farm), by living off the land, and compensating for low wages through theft and by the sale of petty commodities (beer-brewing for local sale being such an example).

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

Financial problems have also resulted from the high cost of collecting union dues from members scattered across the country. The union has thus been heavily dependent on international aid from the International Trades Secretariat (International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers) whose *small* contributions have been channelled through the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' representative in Rhodesia (Mr. W.G. Lawrence). These funds, with contributions from membership dues, have been inadequate to meet the minimal effective requirements of a small skeleton staff of executive members. The union has not therefore been able to build up a grass-roots organization wholly supported by workers and independent of foreign funding. The reliance on a small cadre of organizers has also rendered the APWU vulnerable. Detention of leaders has removed much of the union initiative and left donors without effective organizations to channel resources towards. Whilst aid has been necessary to get the APWU going, it has not succeeded, as yet. Serious revisions to existing policies appear to be required.

ACTIVITIES OF THE APWU

The farm workers case has been represented by APWU

at the national level through National African Federation of Unions (NAFU) affiliation, and through the African Trades Union Congress (ATUC) in its regular condemnations of the policy of keeping workers under the Masters and Servants Act. The APWU has actively worked for a merger between these two organizations. However, neither of these labour confederations has been registered. The ATUC for instance, was denied registration in 1969. The direct impact of the labour confederations on State policy in the late 1960's and early 1970's has been relatively small because government has been able to ignore them. Their calls for changes to the ICA, like those of the APWU, have fallen on unsympathetic ears.

APPROACHES TO MINISTER

The APWU has made numerous approaches to the Minister of Labour to change the Act (at least 6 formal submissions since 1968). All have been curtly rebuffed by brief notes of acknowledgement from the Minister's Private Secretary; none of the replies have contained any reasons for non-consideration or rejection of the APWU case. Requests from the APWU to meet the Minister (made on numerous occasions) have been refused. The APWU's case was broadly supported and adopted by the NAFU Congress in September, 1968. It condemned the exclusiveness of the ICA and called on the Minister to amend the Act. It criticized the rise in health charges because of their regressive impact on lower paid workers in agriculture. Called for a Commission of Inquiry into the conditions faced by agricultural workers, expressing concern at the state of housing provided for farm workers (mostly wattle and daub, except nowadays in the North-East where guerilla penetration has caused farmers to provide better accommodation) and condemned the fact that many farm animals have been better provided for in terms of housing than workers; called for an inspectorate to overlook farm employment practices and conditions, to ensure the provision of piped water, adequate drainage and sanitary arrangements in farm compounds. These complaints, including others about C.I.D. raids on union offices, had been made before - both locally and to the British Government (in Memorandum in October, 1966). The British Government did nothing, a fact later con-

demned by the APWU in its appeals to the IFPAAWU for financial assistance.

THE APWU AND THE PEARCE COMMISSION

The APWU has thus had to use various policies to publicize the plight of farm workers. Direct petitioning of the RNFU proved unsuccessful. It submitted a memorandum to the 1971 Pearce Commission which was sent to Rhodesia to assess the 'acceptability' of the Anglo-Rhodesian Settlement Proposals. The Union rejected the terms of settlement after holding meetings in all 18 branches and receiving a unanimous condemnation of the terms from its members. The grounds for rejection were similar to those of the African National Council, but with *significant additions*. The APWU condemned the exploitation of cheap labour, the union's inferior legal status under existing legislation, the fact that union members would not gain from the 'Settlement Package', the situation in which they were denied freedom of assembly and association, the system whereby their wages were depressed by the State's contract labour policy, the fact that even under ICA the effective '*right to strike*' had been removed and made dependent upon the President's discretion, the poor conditions of education for the children of farm workers (i.e. the lack of State subsidized schools, high fees and the 'tying' of education to child labour on the farms), and the élitist franchise proposals which would disbar almost all farmworkers from qualification as voters.

ROLE IN POST-STRIKE SITUATIONS

The union has also had a small but effective role to play in post-strike situations. A role which has been pressed onto it by the conditions that have pertained, and Special Branch activities in calling out Union officials to help settle disputes through 'third party' intervention. These activities have not been unrewarding for workers and in a number of cases the finalized wage settlements have been very beneficial.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER OF LABOUR

Soon after the strike at Arbor Acres, the Minister of Labour made a public statement on the reasons why the ICA would not be changed to incorporate the farming industry. It was claimed that there were inherent difficulties in prescribing comprehensive conditions of service for farm workers. This was an excuse for inaction. Certainly the exercise would provide some unique problems, but they would have been no more complex than in other industries where Industrial Councils have been effectively established. The Minister used the excuse of a technicality to evade a matter of principle. The APWU have been fully willing to participate in an Industrial Council and assist in devising appropriate measures in order to obtain protected conditions for workers. It was also claimed by the State that the large, seasonal and fluctuating labour force on farms prevented the incorporation under the ICA. Again, similar problems have been found in other industries (eg. textiles). Expediency in response to the union's request thus characterized the Minister's reply. This excuse blatantly ignored the 70 per cent of permanent farm workers; and it also did not reflect the contemporary tendency towards labour stabilization in farm employment. Finally, the State claimed that a larger inspectorate would be needed to enforce regulated conditions. This could not have been a significant objection. Since it involved nearly 40 per cent of the African labour force, it was not unreasonable to expect that more inspectors would be needed. The normal system of Industrial Council levies could easily have helped finance this need for expansion in the administrative system.

CONCLUSION

This account of the APWU, its formation and some of its activity, provides evidence about the union formation process in contemporary Rhodesia and highlights the many difficulties facing 'unregistered' unions. The position facing the APWU has been additionally complicated by the settler -

colonial political economy of the plantation system. Employers have resolutely opposed union formation. The State has backed them in this policy.

There are also many other rural workers whose problems have not been dealt with by the APWU. The union has had limited resources and has had to try and concentrate them to best effect. It has thus had little to do with the condition of workers on African owned Purchase Area farms and of wage - workers in the Tribal Trust Lands. As the dislocation of the 'traditional' socioeconomic formation has proceeded, under the penetration of commercial relations in peasant agriculture, so the difficult situation of these workers has come to the fore. Until 1973 these groups did not engage APWU attention. Undoubtedly this will become a more permanent issue.

It is possible, though not certain, that the contemporary political re-alignments which are taking place in Southern Africa (especially Rhodesia) may assist the APWU in pursuit of its objectives. However, the emerging pattern of agricultural unionism cannot be easily predicted. What is more or less certain, however, is that protections for workers are desperately needed in rural Rhodesia, and will be whatever the political complexion of the future.

Duncan Clarke
Dept. of Economics
University of St. Andrews
Scotland.