

THE AFRIKANER STRUGGLE FOR AN EFFECTIVE VOICE IN
THE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY PRIOR TO 1948 (f).

During the years immediately before the Anglo-Boer War and for several decades afterwards, Afrikaans-speaking Whites poured into the cities. The White urban population of South Africa grew from 36% in 1890 to 75% in 1946. In the nineteenth century, urbanization for Afrikaners had been concomitant with anglicization. Indeed in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Afrikaans-speaking workers had become deeply involved in the labour movement, especially in the Mine Workers' Union. Leaders of the Afrikaans-speaking community, especially churchmen, fearfully anticipated the complete disappearance of the Afrikaner. Lead by post-war Afrikaner nationalists like Dr. Malan, they raised the cry, "Back to the land".

By 1918, however, a group of Afrikaners on the Rand had discovered that the very pace of urbanization led to the growth of Afrikaans-speaking ghettos in the great cities, wherein an urban Afrikaner culture could be nurtured vis-a-vis both the English-speaking bourgeoisie and labour aristocracy and also unskilled Black labour. An elite organisation, the Afrikaner Broederbond, largely formed of teachers and ministers, but with some worker members, was founded in 1919 to foster the enthusiasm for Afrikaans and Afrikanerdom within the cities. Although it became a nation-wide organisation after going underground in 1922, the Broederbond never lost touch with its urban origins, and saw its major task as the "arousal of Afrikaner national self-consciousness" especially in town. Only by mobilising urban Afrikaners could the Broederbond achieve its ultimate goal, "the Afrikanerisation of our public life and our education in Christian-National direction".

Since the 1930s, then, Broers had realised that cultural unity around Christian-National ideals could not be limited to the platteland but must extend to the rapidly growing numbers of urban Afrikaners as well. This was achieved by absolute insistence on Afrikaans language schools and strong support for General Hertzog's policy of 'civilised labour' which used state power to elevate White South African standards of living above those of their Black compatriots.

In the 1930s, however, the Afrikaner Broederbond also mounted a direct attack on the economic front. As early as 1934, Professor I.J. du Plessis, a major Broederbond theoretician, had published an article proposing what he called volkskapitalisme. The threat to Afrikanerdom lay not in capitalism as such, he argued, but rather that the proceeds of capitalist enterprise were benefitting English-

speaking individuals rather than the Afrikaner community. Afrikaners must break into the world of English-speaking capitalism and multi-racial trade unions and transform both for the benefit of the Afrikaner volk;

"The purpose of our economic struggle is thus national, even Christian-National, as against the personal and sectional. As organised Afrikanerdom, we wish consciously to take part in the economic development of our land, naturally in order to ensure our own existence but above all to restore our people to prosperity and so enable it to fulfill its God-given calling In the past we accented as inevitable that the masses who were unable to adjust to capitalism quickly or well enough should drop down to poor Whiteism. Sympathetically we belittled them and separated ourselves from them, or at best offered them 'alms' in a philanthropic manner ... Meantime this process of adjustment was destroying our people by denationalisation of its economic leaders and proletarianisation of its producing masses. But in the awakening of self-consciousness the people has become aware of this also, and the new ethnic movement is intended to prevent the further destruction of the Afrikaner people in an effort to adjust to a foreign capitalist system and to transform it so that it fits our ethnic nature".

In order to achieve this goal, the Afrikaner economic movement had to fight on two fronts. On the one hand it must Afrikanerize big business and on the other it must save the workers for the volk. Afrikaner volkskapitalisme must thus both win control of the economy and also prevent class division in Afrikaner ranks. It was on the latter front that the need for decisive action seemed most urgent in the 1930s. In the words of Professor Cronje, "the Boer culture must be carried into the English-cosmopolitan life of the city", in order that "organised Afrikaner action in the city will day by day become more purposeful and more irresistible".

In 1936 Piet Meyer returned with a doctorate from Amsterdam and became assistant secretary of the Federasie van Afrikaner Kultuurorganisasies (F.A.K.) (an acknowledged Broederbond front organisation). He immediately proposed a national kultuurraad whose purpose was to enlist the aid of the F.A.K. and the Dutch Reformed Churches to organize Afrikaner workers into Christian-National labour

unions. On October 4, 1936, Meyer, along with Nic Diederichs, Albert Hertzog, and an Afrikaner banker named Frikkie de Wet met in Johannesburg to found an organisation which would provide financial backing for Christian-National Afrikaner trade unions. They called their organisation the Nasionale Raad van Trustees. Since the Mine-Workers' Union of the time, under the leadership of Charlie Harris, was hopelessly corrupt, and since the majority of White mine-workers were Afrikaners, they undertook first to organise on the mines.

Within five months the new Afrikanerbond van Mynwerkers had forced Charlie Harris to wrap up a 'closed shop' with the Chamber of Mines. Protests streamed in from the Afrikaans churches and platteland cultural organisations, but to no avail. The United Party government refused to intervene. There was nothing for it but to disband the Afrikanerbond van Mynwerkers and found a 'reform movement' within the M.W.U. itself. By 1939, the threat of these 'Hervormers' was such that Harris was forced to ban union elections. But he had not reckoned with "the hand which guides the fate of men and nations". On June 15, 1939, before the new oligarchal constitution could be ratified, Harris was assassinated by a young Afrikaans-speaking mine-worker. There are those who believe that the Divine Hand was itself prompted in this matter, but the courts found no evidence of conspiracy.

New elections were called and the reform movement seemed on the brink of victory when the war froze all union activity to ensure maximum productivity. But the organisation of the Afrikaners within the M.W.U. did not stop. Albert Hertzog was able to muster the support of the Ossewabrandwag, the Blankewerkersbeskermingsbond and Dr. Verwoerd of Die Transvaler. By 1946, the Mine-Workers' Union was ripe for an Afrikaner takeover.

The Hervormer's efforts to capture Solly Sach's multi-racial garment workers' union were much less successful. The women of the garment workers' union, English, Afrikaans and Coloured alike, returned violence with a militance of their own. In 1944 the full support of the Dutch Reformed Churches was swung behind the Hervormers on behalf of 'White womanhood', but to no avail. Nevertheless, the swing to the National Party in the Rand in 1948 was due in no small measure to the dedicated efforts of Albert Hertzog, Piet Meyer, Nic Diederichs and Verwoerd, to "save the unions for the volk".

However, Afrikanerization of the trade unions was but one thrust of the whole movement for volkskapitalisme. The other was the Broederbond effort to break into capitalism. Despite the assistance of the State since 1948, the movement to capture capitalism for the sake of Afrikanerdom cannot be said to have been fully successful. The intentions,

however, were clearly stated at the Economic Volkskongres in 1939. Capitalism must be transformed from its base in liberal individualism to an ethnic system which would work to the good of the Afrikaner people as a nation. This was to be achieved by Afrikaner control of both production and consumption. Afrikaner capital should thus be organised to support Afrikaner enterprise, both by investment in Afrikaner business and by purchase of Afrikaner goods. For this purpose, M.S. Louw proposed the establishment of a specifically Afrikaner business house (Federale Volksbeleggings), and H.F. Verwoerd urged the formation of Afrikaner consumers co-operatives. Funds were to be controlled by the establishment of an Economic Institute of the F.A.K., whose membership was made up entirely of Broers. Short-term loans were made to up-and-coming Afrikaner retailers after 'investigation' by the Broers of the Economic Institute. An Afrikaner Chamber of Commerce was founded. Thus although by 1950, Afrikaners still numbered only about ten percent of all white businessmen in South Africa, the Broederbond had achieved a remarkable degree of control in Afrikaner business life.

Economic advance for ordinary Afrikaners during the 1940s, however, was but slight, and a result of long-existent racist labour legislation rather than the Broederbond economic movement. The economic 'great leap forward' for the Afrikaner bourgeoisie came after the victory of the National Party in 1948 when the whole force of the state was mustered on the side of the Afrikaner economic endeavour. But economic success has led to the disintegration of Christian-National volkskapitalisme, rather than its rigid imposition on South African business life. That however, is another story.

(f) My book, The Rise of Afrikanerdom, to be published by the University of California Press in January 1975 gives a rather more complete treatment of the Afrikaner economic movement within the context of the development of the Broederbond and Christian-National ideology and the struggle for power before 1948.

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