

The first part of this article, which appeared in our last issue, dealt with the policy of the Chamber of Mines towards labour and wages, commencing with the Chamber's annual report for 1889, and showing how from the outset the Chamber's search for cheap labour led to the introduction of certain laws with widespread effect throughout South Africa.

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

PART II

DESPITE their constant difficulty in finding adequate numbers of African labourers to fill their compounds at constantly declining wages, the Chamber of Mines set itself resolutely against the employment of white labourers. Deeply prejudiced as they were against the native people of Africa, whom they contemptuously referred to as "savages," their class interests led them to fear white labourers even more. In a letter to Colonel F. H. P. Cresswell, written in 1902, Percy Tarbutt writes:

"I have consulted the Consolidated Goldfields people and . . . Messrs. Wernher, Beit & Co. (forerunner of the present Corner House group) and the feeling seems to be one of fear that if a large number of white men are employed on the Rand in the position of labourers, the same troubles will arise as are now prevalent in the Australian Colonies, i.e. that the combination of the labouring classes will become so strong as to be able to more or less dictate not only on questions of wages, but also on political questions."

Commenting on the Tarbutt letter, George Farrar, one of the Rand mining magnates, had this to say to the Transvaal Legislature late in 1903.

"What did Mr. Creswell do? He was endeavouring to introduce unskilled white labourers to work below a living wage . . . What does the importation of unskilled whites mean? It means labour combinations . . . no one is satisfied . . . you will have nothing but discontent and strikes . . ."

The mine owners solidly opposed any attempt to introduce unskilled white labour. In preference, they turned their attention to recruiting non-white labour from other areas, while continually pressing for measures to compel the local African men to leave their rural homes. Missions from the Chamber scoured the world, looking for ready supplies of cheap and docile labour. Reports of agents came in from as far afield as the Congo, India, Egypt, Madagascar, Abyssinia and

China. They throw interesting light on the aims and outlook of the Chamber. H. Ross Skinner, for example, reporting to the W.N.L.A. on his mission to the Far East, reports:

“A very potent force amongst the Chinese (in America) is a system of co-operation somewhat akin to freemasonry. They understand well the power and advantages to be gained from combination. In San Francisco there are six Chinese Companies or Guilds. Such societies, comprehensive as they are, if established on the Rand . . . might be useful and beneficial, but their power might also become a danger, especially if they could suppose that the mines were entirely dependent on the Chinese for unskilled labour. To avoid such an emergency it is plainly desirable that all the present efforts to increase the supply of Kaffir labour should be vigorously continued, with a view to balancing as far as possible, the supply of Kaffir, Chinese and other unskilled labourers.”

In case the clear intent to divide and rule is not understood, Ross Skinner adds:

“This principle might also be adopted in the case of Chinese from different districts. For instance, experience points to the fact that it is unlikely that Northern men would co-operate with the Southern Chinese.”

Once the great debate on the importation of unskilled white labour had been won by the Chamber of Mines, its policy of recruiting labour from far and wide was energetically pursued. But as always, there was the twin aim: Get the labour! But get it cheap!

In a letter to the High Commissioner for Uganda and Mombasa, written in November, 1900, the Chamber discusses the question of pay for labourers recruited from those territories.

“The Chamber understands that the rate of pay, when they do work, is a dollar a month.” Enclosing a copy of the Chamber’s schedule of pay rates, which lay down a minimum of 30s. and a maximum of 35s. for thirty shifts, five weeks, the letter carefully points out, however, that “. . . It would be necessary to stipulate for a lower rate of pay at the offset than that shown in the schedule, in order to recoup the cost of bringing the natives to the Transvaal, which may be from £6 to £8 a head. A minimum, however, of 13s. a month would probably be adopted . . .”

A new principle is introduced into South African wage scales for African workers. Those who are brought from afar, because people nearer at hand will not accept the miserly wage scales, are to pay the cost of their transportation themselves. It is a principle which successive South African Governments, especially the Nationalist Government, have extended to wider spheres.

But still the Chamber ploughed a hard, uphill furrow. Constantly their competitors for African labour would raise the rates of pay above those paid on the mines. In 1901, the Johannesburg Town Council decided to recruit some two hundred and fifty labourers from Delagoa Bay, **“to be employed in sanitary work at the rate of not less than 1s. 8d. per diem.”** The Chamber of Mines protested strongly. In a letter to the Town Council it enclosed again its schedule of wage rates, stipulating a minimum of 1s. and a maximum of 1s. 2d. per shift.

“I may add,” writes the Chamber’s Secretary, **“that at the present moment natives on some mines are receiving less than 30s. per month of 30 days, the fixed minimum has been suspended . . . My Committee would ask your Council to consider whether it cannot accept the Chamber’s schedule, as such a course would be equally advantageous to your body . . . as to the mines; while on the other hand, if your Council pay the highest rate of 1s. 8d. per diem, it will increase the cost of your labour, and possibly embarrass the operations of the W.N.L.A. which collects the labour for the mines . . .”**

The Health and Measures Committee of the Town Council was duly impressed. Its reply to the Chamber it says that it will be recommended to the Town Council that they **“come to some understanding with your Chamber in regard to wages . . . While attaching the greatest weight to the question of maintaining moderate wages, the duty of carrying out the sanitation of the town without interruption is of paramount importance to this Committee.”**

The rebuke apparently failed to pierce the self-important skins of the Chamber of Mines. By the following year, 1902, the Chamber was negotiating with the Governor-General of Mozambique for a monopoly to be granted to the W.N.L.A. to recruit in the territory. In its proposals for agreement on this monopoly, it suggests that the Mozambique Company, the largest, almost the only large employer of labour in that territory, should adopt the Chamber wage scale of 30s. per 30 shifts.

“In support of this proposal,” writes the Chamber’s Secretary, **“. . . my Chamber is informed that, whereas at present the mines in the Mozambique Company’s territory have to pay as high as 50s. per month for native labour, whether skilled or unskilled, the effect of placing all recruiting and supply of native labour under the control of the Association (W.N.L.A.), will secure the desired general reduction of wages to 30s.”**

Not surprising, therefore, that the 1902 regulations for the admission of Portuguese Native Labour to the Transvaal contain the following provisions:

“An armed guard will accompany each train from Komatipoort to Johannesburg and no natives will be allowed to leave the train except by military order.

“On arrival at the Rand, natives will be confined in compounds under military guard until distributed.”

During the same year, it came to the notice of the Chamber that certain contractors on the mines were paying their own African labourers wages which were above the scale laid down by the Chamber.

“As a result a large number of boys employed directly by the Companies are rendered discontented by the higher wages paid the small number in the service of the contractors.” It recommended to the W.N.L.A. that “. . . no Company shall permit the employment of any natives except such as hold the Company’s passports and are supplied and paid by the Company, are subject to its regulations, and treated in all respects as employees of the Company.”

The growing trend at interference in the wage rates of other employers, even other countries, was significant. The Chamber of Mines by 1902 had established itself as the real economic might, the real power behind the throne in the Transvaal. Its control, then as now, spread far beyond the boundary fences of the mining properties; governments governed by its agreement; town Councils held office by the Chamber’s grace; industries and commerce bowed down to the patterns dictated by the Chamber through its control of the financial bloodstream of the land. This was the era of imperialism, the era of the conquest of the Transvaal by the forces of British imperial power. And though the “thin red line” may have been the symbol of that era, the Chamber of Mines was—and is—the real controlling power of the era.

In complete harmony with its real position of power was the Chamber’s proposal of 1902, made to a Commission of Inquiry into “. . . certain details in connection with the extension of the boundaries of the Municipality of Johannesburg.”

“It was suggested,” says the Chamber’s annual report, “that when an elective Town Council was substituted for the present nominated one, the Mining Companies should be entered on the Voters’ Rolls, and should get one vote for each £1,000 of rateable property . . . separate wards being formed for the mining areas; and that in matters affecting the mines . . . special By-Laws should be drafted and submitted to the mining wards for approval, arbitration to follow if agreement could not be arrived at.”

A power above the common law; a State within a State. Imperium in imperio. This is the authentic voice of the mining magnates, as it was fifty-three years ago.

Nor is it vastly different from their position today. As the years have passed, the blatant advertising of their imperialistic aims, and of their sinister conspiracy against the unity, the well-being and the liberty of their workers, has been covered over with a veil of silence. It is no longer possible to read the letters, the discussions and the debates which go on inside this State within the State. The Chamber conducts its most intimate business today in secret. But the power is there, just as it was, with the same twin aims. Get the labour! Get it cheap! And keep it cheap and docile by division.