

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY — I

The Story of the Chamber of Mines

By L. BERNSTEIN

"In our schedule of wages, we, to a great extent, fix the standard of cost. The townspeople, the contractor and all the employers of labour in the smaller industries have to outbid us to attract the native to them; the farmer has to raise his rate of pay to ascertain what labour he requires, and the sense of this responsibility increases one's care and caution when it comes to the question of fixing wages or altering conditions."

—Sir Percy Fitzpatrick. In a Presidential address to the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, 1902.

IT is customary today for the Transvaal Chamber of Mines to surround itself with a mantle of benevolence and philanthropy. Public relations experts and hired-scribes shroud all the Chamber's real purposes in unending tributes to the hospitals, the charities and the universities that the Chamber endows.

But behind the carefully built facade, the Chamber remains what it always has been — an employers' association, where the mining magnates band together to keep labour cheap and plentiful, and to keep profits high. The wage standards set on the mines still determine the standards for wages—especially labourers wages — in agriculture and industry. Fifty years ago, the Chamber's spokesmen were frank enough to admit it, and openly proclaimed their twin aims — to drive the Africans from tribal, rural life to work on the Reef, and to keep wages down to barest minimums.

"Complaints from the various mines of the difficulties of securing and retaining a sufficient number of Kaffirs to carry on the works are constantly growing more numerous and urgent," states the Chamber's annual report for 1889. "It is to be feared that eager competition, between managers . . . will be inevitable. A manager finding himself short of labour . . . has, standing alone, scarcely any other remedy than that of raising his rates of pay."

In the following year, it is reported that the assistance of the Government had been asked for, but no satisfactory reply had been received; so a special committee had "received instructions to formulate a scheme for obtaining a supply of natives."

The precise nature of the scheme formulated is to be seen in the next report for the year 1891, which contains a letter sent by the Chamber to a Mr. J. Meyer, then a member of the First Transvaal Volksraad.

"The want of native labour is becoming urgently felt" the Chamber's Secretary writes. "I trust that the Volksraad will not allow this session to go by without making some legislative provision dealing with this most important question, whether by raising the hut tax to an appreciable amount and relieving working Kaffirs from its payment, or by some other means...."

The problem however remained unrelieved for several years, although crop failures some two years later helped to 'increase the supply' despite the indifference of a Volksraad composed of farmers. Though there were still insufficient workers to meet the expanding needs, the Chamber pursued its twin policy.

"The big increase which has again occurred in the demand for labour . . . has had the close attention of your Committee" states the 1894 report. Two main objects have been kept in view; the principal one the maintenance of supply; the second the reduction of wages."

Two years later, the Chamber of Mines Standing Committee met the Native Commissioner, Captain Schiel, *" . . . and the question of the supply from the Northern District of the Transvaal was discussed. In April (1896) an interview was held with another of the Native Commissioners, Captain Dahl, who referred to the disinclination of the natives to work, and stated that although the crops for the year would be 50% below the average, pressure would have to be brought to bear to induce the native to come to the (gold) fields. Meantime he and the other officials had received peremptory orders from the Government to render the Companies all possible assistance in getting labour."* Although it is thus clear that the Kruger Republic would use its authority to meet the mining magnates' needs for cheap African labour, there were apparently limits to their co-operation. The same report (1896) referring to further negotiations with the Native Commissioner for the Zoutpansberg District says that *".. .. Captain Schiel stated that he had met the Government Commission, and had advised them that the only way to secure labour was to empower the Native Commissioners to order the natives to proceed to the Rand to work With two members of the Commission he had called on the President at Pretoria, who would not, however, consent to the employment of coercion"* Captain Schiel, nothing daunted by the President's attitude suggested *" . . . that the Government should be petitioned (by the Chamber) to get a law passed to compel natives to work for 3 or 4 months in the year."*

What went on between 1896 and 1897 is not recorded in the Annual Reports, save for a self-congratulatory passage in the 1897 report, which records that *"Taking into consideration the increased demand . . . the supply must on the whole be regarded as very*

satisfactory, more especially as... a large reduction in the scale of native wages has been successfully carried through."

For the next few years, activities of the Chamber of Mines are somewhat hard to follow. On the Witwatersrand, the dominant group of mining magnates headed by Cecil Rhodes were conspiring with Dr. Jameson for an armed putsch, a conspiracy which ended in the dismal fiasco of the Jameson "Raid." Obviously the clouds of war between the Kruger Republic and British imperialism were banking up, threatening to submerge the whole country. The African labourers in large numbers returned from the Reef to their homes, leaving the white men to fight out their quarrels. Certain it is that at the turn of the century, the supply of labour for the Witwatersrand mines was at a low ebb.

Yet once again, despite their difficulties, the Chamber could record in their report for 1900 and 1901 that "*... the question of native wages was dealt with, and a revised schedule was agreed upon, which will result in a material saving to the mines.*" Though wage rates are thus again reduced the Chamber of Mines salve their consciences with the thought that: "*At the same time the rates fixed are reasonable, and will not, in the opinion of your committee, in any way interfere with the inflow of native labour.*" The new, 'reasonable' wage scale laid down a minimum wage for all Africans, irrespective of the work they do, of 30/- per 30 working days (I.E. 5 weeks.), and a maximum of 35/-. The rate for what are politely called "picannies," child labourers, was set at 15/-.

The jovial tone of satisfaction is not maintained the following year. There is an air of gloom throughout the report. In his Presidential address to the Chamber, Sir Percy (Jock-of-the-Bushveld) Fitzpatrick, speaking of the 30/- to 35/- rate laments: "*The low rate of wages was introduced by the Boer military authorities, it was perpetuated by the British military authorities, and it was finally adopted by the mining companies when circumstances seemed to warrant the belief that it could be successfully maintained. Circumstances as you know changed considerably. The war was prolonged far beyond the time anticipated. Whether the change should ever have been made is a matter on which there are divided opinions; but the change having been made, I do not think there can be much difference of opinion as to the advisability of giving it a good trial.*"

Sir Percy was apparently misinformed. There was still considerable difference of opinion on giving the lower wage rates a further trial, after it had already heightened the labour shortage. A special committee of the Chamber, reporting in the same year (1902) on the labour shortage recommended: "*That the rate of native wages be increased, but so regulated that the average earnings of the native on any mine shall not exceed 50/- per head, either*

from piece or day work, per month of 30 shifts." Here, for the first time, emerges the idea of a maximum average wage rate, a system still in operation in the mining industry. "This rate" says the committee, "would enable the native recruiters to safely state that it will be possible for natives to earn in future the same wage as before the war."

The Chamber did not see completely eye to eye with its sub-committee. In a circular to all mines in November 1902, the Chamber gives its opinion that ". . . it is not desirable to increase the natives' pay without obtaining corresponding extra work . . ." While accepting the average wage of 50/-, the Chamber states: "In order that there may be no misapprehensions . . . I am directed to emphasize that, except by means of legitimate piece and task work, the pay to natives shall not be raised above the rate at present ruling." (i.e 30/- to 35/-).

Not surprising that in 1903 the Report records that ". . . owing to failure of the crops, it was anticipated that some surplus labour would be available for the Rand, but this hope was not realised." Means had to be found. Africans would not come voluntarily to work; the Chamber would not voluntarily raise the wage rates. (In 1902, Rand Mines Ltd., paid a dividend of 80%.) To the rescue of the millionaires came the British Government, now ruling the Transvaal through its Lieutenant Governor, Sir Arthur Lawley.

In July, 1903, under strong pressure from the Chamber of Mines, there was appointed a Government Commission "To enquire what amount of labour is necessary for the requirements of Agriculture, mining and other industries of the Transvaal, and to ascertain how far it is possible to obtain an adequate supply of labour to meet such requirements from Central and Southern Africa." The Chamber of Mines was strongly represented on the Commission whose numbers included Sir George Farrar, J. Donaldson and G. H. Goch. Of the 53 witnesses before the Commission, 23 dealt "more or less exclusively" with mining in the Transvaal, twenty of these being directly appointed by the Chamber of Mines. Another 19 witnesses were labour agents and recruiters, 11 of them representing the WNLA (Witwatersrand Native Labour Association.)

It is the report of this Commission that expresses, perhaps more clearly than any other document, the attitude of the Chamber of Mines and its agents to the African labourer.

"We have formed the opinion that the scarcity of native labour is due first and foremost to the fact that the African native tribes are, for the most part primitive pastoral or agricultural communities, who possess exceptional facilities for the regular and full supply of their animal

needs. The only pressing needs of a savage are those of food and sex, and the conditions of native life in Africa are such that these are, as a rule, easily supplied . . .”

In explaining why it found that there could be no *immediate* and radical increase in the numbers of labourers coming from South and Central Africa, and why it therefore proposed importing Chinese and other Asian labourers for the mines, the Commission follows its short dissertation on savages thus:

“The subject of food supplies is thus intimately bound up with the fact that African natives are in possession or occupation of large areas of land. This explains the attention which was paid by witnesses to suggested modifications of the system of land tenure. No considerable change can reasonably be anticipated in their industrial habits until a great modification of these conditions has been brought about.”

Concrete proposals were put to the Commission, for increasing the labour supply, most of them coming from the mining and recruiting interests.

“These suggestions generally fall under the heads of compulsion, either direct or indirect modifications of native tribal system, or changes in land tenure” the Commission records. “The imposition of higher taxes was generally advocated . . . The introduction of legislation modifying the Native Land Tenure System was generally approved. It will be seen that the more weighty proposals put forward to improve the supply recommended that the existing native social system should be attacked with the object of modifying or destroying it.”

The Commission however revealed that the mining magnates had not yet clearly decided their future policy. On the one hand, they had, in advance, pinned their faith on the importation of Asian labourers, as a solution capable of immediate and quick results. On the other hand, fearful perhaps of the possible failures of such a scheme — (which was, in fact, tried, and failed) — or perhaps with a long-term object in view, they pressed simultaneously for the destruction of the social system which kept many Africans on the land in preference to mining.

Subsequently, as history reveals, after the importation of Chinese labourers had been carried through and proved unsuccessful, the same interests had no further hesitation in pressing for and carrying through the very destruction of the whole basis of African tribal life, society and land tenure which it regarded in 1902 as too “grave and far-reaching.”

The minority report of the Commission is as interesting a document as the majority report. Signed by Messrs. Quinn and Whiteside, early leaders of the ardently pro-British labour movement, the minority fought consistently for the importation of British labourers, in preference to Chinese. In a hard-hitting attack on the Chamber of Mines, which they describe as ". . . composed of gentlemen who represent and, for the most part, act under the instructions of the large financial houses whose headquarters are in London or other European centres," Messrs. Quinn and Whiteside describe the great financial houses as bodies ". . . whose direct interest in the Colony (of the Transvaal) is confined to the value of their shareholdings . . . In our opinion, the policy of the Chamber of Mines is directed to the perpetuation of the Inferior Race Labour System by the importation of Asiatics, and is one of opposition to the growth of a large working population."

Though the minority report clearly supported the basic Chamber of Mines attitude that civilised working and living standards were not for Africans, there was much truth in their contention. The Chamber, in urging Asian labour, were consciously striving to prevent trade-unionism and working class unity amongst their labourers. There is on record a notorious letter from a mining magnate, Mr. Rudd, published in the London Times in 1903, in reply to one from a Mr. Kidd.

"As regards trade unionism in South Africa" wrote Mr. Rudd, "could Mr. Kidd replace the 200,000 native workers by 100,000 unskilled whites, they would simply hold the Government of the country in the hollow of their hands, and without any disparagement of the British labourer, I prefer to see the more intellectual section of the community at the helm. The native is at present, and I hope will long remain, a useful intermediary between white employer and employee."

The dictum of divide and rule, and the truth that class ties are stronger than national, have never been more clearly stated. They were echoed in another letter from Percy Tarbutt to the leader of the "white labour" agitation, Col. F. H. P. Cresswell.

(To be continued)

SOUTH AFRICA'S GREATEST DAUGHTER

Homage to Olive Schreiner

By HELEN JOSEPH

ONE hundred years ago on March 24th, 1855, on a remote mission station in the Karroo, Olive Schreiner was born; the woman, who throughout her life was fearlessly to champion the