

# STARK REALITIES

## The Significance of June 26th

by ALAN DOYLE

"Industry views with concern the warning that its Native labour force proposes to absent itself illegally from work on June 26 (for) . . . increased remuneration at the fantastic rate of £1 a day, even for unskilled labour.

"This demand is regarded as reckless and irresponsible in the face of the stark realities of our industrial economy."

— Mr. L. Lulofs, President of the Transvaal Chamber of Industry. (Report in The Star, June 24, 1957.)

June 26 in Johannesburg this year was in some ways the most remarkable of the many historic events which have taken place on this famous anniversary. There was an almost complete general strike of African industrial workers: estimates range from 80 to 90 per cent. effective. Most of these workers are not yet organised in trade unions, and in fact no one, officially called them out on strike. True, Congress had called a "day of protest", and some unknown daring spirits had put up a sticker calling for a stayaway. But there can be little doubt that the real impetus behind the demonstration came from the masses of the workers themselves. They coined the slogan "Awuphatwa!" — It (the work) shall not be touched. Spontaneously they held hundreds of unofficial meetings in factories and workplaces. They made the demand for more wages and a £1-a-day minimum their own. And they decided not to go to work that Wednesday.

The employers and the police panicked. Dire warnings and threats were issued. Those who failed to turn up to work would be sacked. Their passes would be endorsed and they would be expelled from town. In response to Mr. Lulofs' circular, bosses called meetings and relayed these threats to the workers. All day long on the Tuesday radio diffusion broadcast police warnings and Native Affairs Department appeals. The answer of the workers was to stay away in tens of thousands. They understood perfectly well how empty the threats were, and that the employers would never seriously consider sacking them all and finding and training entirely new staff to replace them.

### WHAT WAS BEHIND IT?

The Johannesburg June 26 demonstration cannot be dismissed as the

work of agitators. Those who participated in it faced not merely threats of dismissal but also the very real loss of a day's pay. There was no "intimidation" or picketing, and the police who turned out in townships and railway stations and bus stops to "protect" those going to work found they were wasting their time. There was no-one there for them to "protect". Instead of trying to pretend it was a failure (like the Rand Daily Mail and Die Vaderland) or writing it off as the work of agitators (like Mr. Lulofs and his Chamber of Industries) it would be a good deal more sensible and responsible to make an effort to understand what was really behind the strike. What was it that caused all these workers to act like one man on June 26?

Congress advanced many slogans for its day of protest. Against passes and permits. Stand by our leaders. No more apartheid and group areas. All these slogans did really meet with a response from the hearts of the Non-European people. But all objective observers are agreed that the slogan that captured the imagination and feelings of the workers particularly at this time was that for more wages — £1 a day.

It is not difficult to understand why. The workers, particularly the African workers, are accustomed to poverty and hardship, though they have never accepted it. They have had, for very many years, to make do with too little pay, too little food, too little warmth and comfort for their families. But the rising prices over, especially, the last ten years of Nationalist rule, without any equivalent increase in the contents of the wage-envelope, have cut down the buying power of even the little wages that our South African employers see fit, and are not ashamed, to pay their workers.

### THE £ BUYS LESS AND LESS

These facts are brought out with merciless clarity, and illustrated with detailed figures, in the Memorandum "The Urgent Need for a General Increase in Wages", which has been sent to major employers' associations throughout the country by the Congress of Trade Unions.

The "Retail Price Index Numbers" issued monthly by the Government shows that prices of food have gone up by 56 per cent. over the past nine years, and the prices of "all items" have gone up by 44 per cent.

But SACTU shows that these figures do not adequately represent the real increase in the cost-of-living, especially for lower-paid Non-European workers. The figures are based on the expenditure of middle-class European families. Non-Europeans spend a far higher percentage of their earnings on food. And the food they buy has gone up far more than the foods bought by middle class people. For example mealie meal has increased in price by 177 per cent, potatoes by 284 per cent, rice by 346 per cent.

The Memorandum estimates that the real increase in the cost-of-living since 1948, for low-pay workers, is between 65 and 70 per cent.

That means that the £ today is worth only about 11s.9d. compared with its value in 1948.

## BUT WAGES LAG BEHIND

Compare this increase in living costs with the sluggish movement of wages for so-called "unskilled" labour. As an example, rates in four industries are quoted for the Witwatersrand area, in 1948 and then in 1957 (the figures include cost-of-living allowances). Here they are:—

INDUSTRY	1948	1957
Chemical .....	£2. 3.0	£2.11.9
Distributive .....	2. 8.0	3. 0.9
Engineering .....	1.18.0	2.11.3
Motor .....	2. 7.0	2.16.7

The average for the four groups of workers in 1948 was £2.4s. In 1957 it is £2.15s. The increase in the money wage is 25 per cent. The increase in prices is at least 65 per cent.

The lesson is plain. The workers were badly off in 1948. Today they are much worse off. Their real wages, measured in terms of what the money will buy, have gone down a lot.

## THE WORKERS ARE STARVING

How do they manage? They can't save on rent. They can't save on clothes — already many are dressed in rags and cast-offs. There is only one item they can save on — food. And since they were already not getting enough to eat, there can be only one result. The polite term is malnutrition. Let us call it by its proper name: starvation.

Mr. Lulofs, your workers are starving. Their children are crying from hunger. They get sick and die because they have not enough to eat. That is one of the "stark realities of our industrial economy" about which you talk so glibly, when you threaten workers with dismissal and deportation.

It is not just the Congress of Trade Unions who say so. Here is the conclusion of Miss Olive Gibson, who compiled a painstaking survey of the cost-of-living for Africans for the Institute of Race Relations:—

"The cost of the minimum food requirements has risen by 29 per cent, since 1950 and would absorb 94 per cent. of income if actually purchased. As other items of expenditure are unavoidable, the cost of these is met by cutting food expenditure down to well below the minimum required for the maintenance of health and substituting, within the reduced amount, quantities of cheap starchy foods in place of those necessary to build up health and efficiency."

"The need to increase the unskilled wage level is clamant."

Miss Gibson's survey was made in 1954. Since then the position has grown much worse. But nothing has been done to meet the "clamant need" for higher wages.

The journal "Commercial Opinion" is not a workers' paper. It is a journal for employers, representing the employers' point of view. In its issue of March, 1957, it declared that there was an average shortfall of

£7.11s.5d per month between the income of unskilled workers and their minimum requirements of expenditure. It commented:

"These figures are stark and simple. There is no way of juggling them to belie the story they tell . . . In general the consequences are misery, malnutrition and a dangerous state of mind."

### **RECKLESS AND IRRESPONSIBLE**

What do you say to that, Mr. Lulofs? Is it "reckless and irrespons-ible?" Or isn't it really reckless and irresponsible to pretend that these stark realities don't exist?

The newspaper "Umteteli wa Bantu" is not a workers' newspaper. As a matter of fact it is owned and published by the Chamber of Mines. Early this year it made a survey of income and expenditure of African families. It concluded —

that an income of £31 per month was necessary for adequate and decent living for a family of five in a Johannesburg African township.

In its recent annual report, the Chamber of Mines announced vastly increased profits. Last year the mining companies distributed £5,815,000 extra in dividends to their fortunate and wealthy shareholders. It is scandalous that they did not pass on a single penny increase to the 360,000 African workers who slave and toil to mine the gold and uranium out of which they collect these enormous profits.

"Umteteli" does not say anything about the wages of the miners. But it is right when it says that Africans in industry need £31 a month — over a pound a day.

And there are others who tell the same story, people far removed from SACTU and the other Congresses. There is Mr. Max Goodman, the Mayor of Johannesburg — a United Party man. There is the Manager of the Non-European Affairs Department of the Municipality of Pretoria.

### **NO OTHER MEANS**

The increase of prices has hit the workers. But the employers have reaped the benefit. It has meant increased profits and prosperity for them. They ignore all the voices warning them that the workers are reaching breaking point. They refuse steadily to allow the workers a share in the prosperity. And then they blame the workers and shout for police when a demonstration takes place like that of June 26.

But before you blame the workers, it would be a good idea to ask yourself: what other means did they have of making known their demands and their desperate position?

European workers have their registered trade unions. They sit down at Industrial Councils and discuss wage agreements with the bosses — agreements which also cover wage-rates for Africans. But the Africans are not there, and no honest person could claim that either the employers or the White trade union leaders care very much about how they can live, or whether they can live, on their wages.

African unions are not registered or recognised. The employers refuse to negotiate with them or even to reply to their demands.

Colour bars prevent Africans getting skilled jobs. The pass laws are specially designed to place them at the mercy of the bosses — and the bosses show no mercy. The Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act is clearly — as we have seen on the Port Elizabeth docks recently, and elsewhere — nothing but a miserable device to rush police, N.A.D. officials and scabs to a job whenever they ask their employers for more money.

### ASK THE GOVERNMENT?

Why don't the workers ask the Government to make a new wage determination? ask some employers, hypocritically. Ask the Government? The Nationalist Government? Do they think the workers are 'mad'? We all know very well what the Nationalist Government thinks about Africans' wages. They say the workers are getting quite enough already — too much.

Look at Port Elizabeth. The stevedoring employers were quite willing and ready to grant their workers an increase of 3s. a day. Then the Government stepped in—in the person of Mr. S. D. Mentz—chairman of the Native Labour Board, and told the employers not to pay the increase.

Here are some extracts from speeches made by Nationalist M.P.'s in Parliament, and reported in Hansard:

"As far as Native wages are concerned, I want to say that I believe that the Natives in this country are being paid enough."

—Mr. N. van Rensburg, Nationalist M.P. for Bloemfontein South. (Hansard: 8.5.57).

"We must not expect the Non-Whites to have as high an intake (of meat) as a man who does a good day's work, because thousands of the non-Whites in our midst stay home for six months in the Reserves or in the Protectorates, and they do not work at all. They therefore require a very small intake of proteins."

—Dr. Carel de Wet, Nationalist M.P. for Vereeniging District. (Hansard: 8.5.57).

". . . one point becomes abundantly clear to me, and that is that our Natives in this country are maintaining a surprisingly high standard of living."

—Mr. J. C. Greyling, Nationalist M.P. for Ventersdorp. (Hansard: 8.5.57).

"When the employers made their offer of 3s., the Department told them it was wrong."

—The Minister of Labour. (Hansard: 8.5.57).

Do the employers seriously suggest that the workers should go along and ask men like these to see that they get higher wages? No. You cannot hide behind the Government. This is a matter between the employers and those whose labour has built up the industry of the country.

In its Memorandum, the Congress of Trade Unions makes three proposals to the employers. They are:

1. An "immediate and substantial" increase in wages of all workers;
2. The immediate payment of a minimum of £1 a day for "so-called unskilled workers";
3. Direct negotiations with trade unions, including African unions.

## REASONABLE AND PRACTICAL

These are by no means "reckless and irresponsible" proposals. In fact they are eminently reasonable, moderate and practical. In this, they are in marked contrast with the unbalanced and thoroughly unreasonable attitude of the authorities and the majority of the employers, especially in industry.

It is very much to be hoped that those to whom the proposals are addressed will treat them with the seriousness and urgency which they merit. The time is due, and overdue, that the employers of our country woke up from the fools' paradise of easy profits and quick returns on capital which they have enjoyed in the past, with never a thought to the welfare and problems of the men and women who sweat and strain to make those profits possible. To them they were just "hands" — strong brown hands, whose owners leave the factory, shop or office at closing time and crowd into buses and trains for their far-off locations, and are conveniently forgotten.

To them the "realities" are the figures in the cash book and the ledger and the share-market reports: not the live men and women who do the work.

Perhaps June 26, 1957, will have helped the gentlemen of the Chambers of Industry and the Chambers of Commerce, and the Chamber of Mines and the Agricultural Unions to open their eyes to the true "stark realities of our industrial economy. The realities of the hundreds of thousands who are desperate and starving, who struggle to bring up families and live decent lives and bravely face the morrow in wretched slums, on beggarly wages.

## BROADER VISION

Perhaps too, it may help some of them towards a broader vision of what is the aim and purpose of our economy — not just to provide big profits, comfortable homes, culture and luxury for a few "captains of industry", but to offer a share of the wealth, comfort, culture and security for all who help to create it.

Payment of decent living wages, may no doubt compel a few marginal enterprises to go out of existence. If they cannot pay a living wage they do not deserve to exist.

But, try to look at the perspectives of our economy as a whole. It has everything to gain and nothing to lose. Undernourished, ill-housed, poorly clad, uneducated, miserable and discontented workers can never form an efficient and highly-productive labour force. Give the workers their due, and you will see the economy of our country flourish.

What industry pays to the workers in the way of increased wages it will reap a hundredfold, for a vast additional sector of the consuming public will come into the market for all types of consumers' goods, opening the road to a new era of prosperity and progress for the country.

## THE ALTERNATIVE

And, what is the alternative to accepting the SACTU proposals? The Memorandum concludes:

The bus boycotts and other incidents which have occurred in recent months are a striking demonstration of the desperate position in which the workers of our country find themselves. They are patient and long-suffering people, but their patience is not inexhaustible.

The workers have not lost the lesson of the boycotts and June 26. They have learnt that they are a mighty force when they act together. And if the employers were not able to learn from June 26, they will be taught many another lesson in the months to come. As the workers flock to the new-type trade unions which SACTU is building they will become increasingly purposeful and effective in their actions.

Sooner or later, the employers will have to give way to the insistent demands of the workers. Let them take note of the instructive awakening of Mr. Ben Schoeman, who thundered in February: "The Government will not give way, no matter whether the boycott lasts a month or six months.

They gave way.

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