

# “EVERY WHITE MAN A GENTLEMAN”

by ELI WEINBERG

“EVERY white man shall be a gentleman”, is a slogan which epitomises the traditional policy of successive South African governments to preserve for the white man a position of privilege as against the Non-European. This policy is dictated by the need to maintain a class of privileged supervisors, whose interests would to some extent coincide with those of the exploiters and who would act as a bulwark between the white masters of the land and the mass of the exploited Non-Whites.

In earlier South African industrial history the tendency to ensure a dominant position for whites was successful and encouraged by the fear of the white workers of encroachment on their hard-won trade union rights and standards on the part of the mass of cheaper paid Non-European workers. Thus the early English trade unionists, whose skill and experience was necessary to establish the Mining Industry, succeeded in entrenching certain occupations on the Mines as European strongholds “never” to be penetrated by cheap black labour. This position was ultimately legalised by the Mines, Works and Machinery Act (1926). In time and with the industrial development in South Africa similar principles were applied, by custom if not by law, in every new industry springing up. These job reservations were enforced by means of co-operation between the highly organised white workers and their white employers.

## INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENTS

However, these artificial barriers have not been able to stand up against the onrush of capitalist industrial development. The growth of new industries, accompanied by the introduction of new techniques of production, have tended to break down the tight preserves of Europeans, who in any case have been too few in number to fill the enormous demand for labour arising out of industrial expansion.

The last thirty years have brought this development to a point where large groups of frustrated employers and production experts are beginning to translate the practical position into forceful demands to open up avenues of skilled employment for Non-Europeans. These “progressive” employers have, of course, uppermost in mind the considerably higher profits to be made out of cheaper African labour. The point is that this trend has in the past two or three decades completely altered industrial relationships in South Africa. An illustration of this is, for example, the position in the Engineering Industry, formerly mainly a maintenance industry designed to keep the machinery of the Mines going, but now one of the major



basic industries in South Africa. Some twenty years ago the labour force in this industry was made up roughly of half Europeans and half Non-Europeans. The European labour force consisted entirely of highly-trained artisans, journeymen with expensive skills, the Non-Europeans were almost entirely labourers, whose work was limited to "drawing of water and hewing of wood".

### ADVANCE OF NON-WHITE LABOUR

Now there has been a complete quantitative as well as qualitative change in this labour force. Europeans now constitute roughly only 23% of the labour in the Engineering Industry, the balance being Non-Europeans. But more important is the fact that only about 10% of the labour force is made up of highly skilled white "technicians". Some 13% of the workers are white operatives and machine minders in semi-skilled, repetitive occupations. A very large proportion of the African labour force, estimated roughly at about 50% of the total labour force, are still largely labourers, but the remainder are now engaged as operatives on many semi-skilled and comparatively skilled operations.

This revolution is even more pronounced in many secondary industries, which being comparatively young never had the opportunity to establish strict racial lines of demarcation in skilled positions. In the Clothing Industry, for instance, the number of European employees between 1938 and 1953 rose from about 11,000 to 13,000, but the number of Non-Europeans in the same period rose from about 7,500 to almost 35,000. Non-Europeans, in fact, predominate in many skilled occupations.

These examples are illustrative of a general trend equally pronounced in most other industries.

It is clear that this radical change in the South African labour force must have a profound effect on the traditional racial barriers. The Non-European workers themselves, having acquired a heightened political consciousness, are also beginning to clamour for the right to do any skilled job and are increasingly staking their claims for recognition of the role they play in industry. As already indicated they are supported in this by the progressive employers and production managers, who see in the old relationships a barrier to economic development.

It is also clear that this does not suit the book of the advocates of the "old order". They argue that this is a threat to the privileged position of the white man and that "white supremacy" is being undermined by the penetration of Non-Europeans in positions of industrial responsibility. This, they say, must lead to the highly undesirable acquisition of the Non-Europeans of a sense of their importance in society and, consequently, to a strengthening of their claims for equality. Moreover, the occupation of identical positions in industry leads to the identification of interests of white and Non-white workers and in such circumstances what remains of the traditional purpose of keeping the white worker as a bulwark between the exploiters and the exploited? The white workers might so easily make common cause with the exploited, a fact which indeed has found expression in many industries in the formation of multi-racial trade unions or, at least, frequent co-operation between white workers and Non-white workers in industrial disputes.

These fears led some rich members of the Nationalist Party in the 1930's to finance the establishment of the so-called Blankewerkersbeskermingsbond. This organisation, financed largely by rich farmers, and led by



such men as the present Minister of Labour, was set the task of preventing any further collaboration between white and black workers, of weaning the white workers away from the multi-racial trade unions and generally of preserving the white workers as an ally of Afrikaner Nationalism, i.e. the economic aspirations of the rising Afrikaner farmers and capitalists.

Although tens of thousands of pounds were spent by this organisation on paid organisers, publications and campaigns, the Bond made little headway at first. This was due to the fact that many white workers and many trade union leaders could not so easily be weaned from the commonsense idea which had developed in their mind, that they were facing the same exploiters as the Non-White workers and that the sensible answer to low wages and bad working conditions was workers' unity. Forceful Afrikaner workers' leaders, such as Jan Venter, Johanna Cornelius, Anna Scheepers and others were advocating this with a considerable measure of success.

As a further weapon in the struggle against this advance of workers' unity, the Bond began to develop a "new" ideology, a complete philosophical textbook. What white workers needed for their protection was not trade unions at all. The idea of collective bargaining was foreign to the "Afrikaner soul" and should be replaced by the responsibility of the "State", a State which of course should be controlled by the Nationalist Party. Such a State would see to it, by means of a Supreme Economic Council, that the conflicting interests of employers and employees are reconciled, that the workers' wages and conditions of employment are safeguarded (having paramount regard to the employers' profits) and that the white workers' privilege, so sadly undermined by capitalist development, is restored to its former glorious pedestal. And so the idea of job reservation was re-born.

This article will be continued in the April issue of LIBERATION.

## SOUTH AFRICA AFTER THE NATIONALISTS

*As you see, this issue of LIBERATION is crowded from cover to cover with important articles, which we felt we just could not leave out. They deal with vital issues at present confronting every progressive person in South Africa.*

*So we just could not find room for the continuation, this month, of our series — South Africa After The Nationalists. Further contributions to this series will appear in future issues.*

*We also had no room for our usual subscription form and appeal for funds. The fact is, our magazine is just too small to print everything that should go in. We therefore make a short, urgent appeal to all readers to send us donations, to obtain new subscribers for LIBERATION, and to increase the influence of our magazine.*