

UNEMPLOYMENT BY RACE

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UNEMPLOYMENT in South Africa rose in July to the highest level recorded for over twenty years. After a long period of full employment, workers are again being tormented by the fear of losing their jobs. The number of registered unemployed is double what it was two years ago: in October 1957 there were 14,445 White, Coloured and Indian workers registered as unemployed at all government labour exchanges; by July 1959, the number had risen to 28,722.

It must be noted that these figures do not cover African unemployment, although Africans comprise more than half the total labour force in manufacturing industry, 90% in mining, 80% in construction and 48% in transport. The official records of unemployment take no account of African workers, who are considered outside the scope of the unemployment problem for which the Department of Labour is responsible. The official records are thus grotesquely misleading—not only because they are incomplete, but because the very workers excluded are those most liable to become unemployed. Africans occupy the jobs where labour turnover is highest and where permanency is rare.

The government of Africans falls under the control of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development; African workers, both employed and unemployed, are under its jurisdiction. Its approach to labour matters, however, is quite different from that of the Department of Labour; it does not keep the same type of unemployment register, for its interest in unemployment is one of control and discipline, not of a welfare problem. It is consequently unable to give reliable, comparable figures for the number of Africans out of work, either generally or in respect of specific industries. It cannot supplement the Department of Labour's monthly figures for Whites, Coloureds and Indians, so as to provide a reliable record of the over-all unemployment position.

An estimate of the number of Africans out of work, based upon returns from regional labour bureaux throughout South Africa, was released by the Chief Information Officer of the Bantu Administration Department, Mr. C. W. Prinsloo, last May.¹

¹Rand Daily Mail—23rd May, 1959.

He said that reports from regional labour bureaux² showed that there were 95,000 Africans seeking work, "*which was a normal figure, representing about 4% unemployment*". In the absence of proper statistics, this is probably an optimistic estimate. It becomes interesting, however, in the light of the Government's constant claims that South Africa enjoys full employment.

"Full Employment"

The Minister of Labour said in Parliament on the 21st May, 1959 that unemployment at the end of April had risen to 2.06% of the working population, which was still hardly more than the generally recognized measure of "full employment", viz. 2%. He made it clear, however, that he did not include Africans in this calculation, as they fell outside the scope of his Department.

The use of partial statistics to prove "full employment" has become commonplace in the field of political propaganda and is accepted without comment by the experts who report upon the state of the nation's economy. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Minister of Labour had not the slightest compunction in taking statistical apartheid a stage further in order to present the employment position in an even better light. Speaking to a Nationalist Party Congress at Bloemfontein in September, where White party stalwarts were preparing for the Provincial Election campaign amongst White voters, the Minister said, "*The unemployment figure for July was 28,722 of whom 14,534 were Europeans, representing 1.45% of the employable Europeans. According to international standards 2.5% was normal.*"

These figures not only excluded Africans, but Coloured and Indian unemployed as well. The Minister of Labour, in applying apartheid in this fashion, was merely following his leader, the Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd, who bluntly stated in Parliament,³ "*. . . in my opinion the Indians are not our problem in the first place, but the problem of those who are so anxious to take the care of the Indians on their shoulders. If other people are worried about the Indians, let them take the Indians back there, where they would have better opportunities of employment.*"

Dr. Verwoerd did not identify "those", "them" and "there." Most of the Indian workers at present unemployed are descend-

²Many of these bureaux are controlled by municipalities who are not required by the central headquarters in Pretoria to submit monthly returns of unemployed Africans, such as are collected by the Department of Labour in respect of workers of other races.

³Hansard Col. 9420—29th June, 1959.

ants of the Indian labourers brought to Natal 100 years ago at the behest of the sugar planters, who suffered an acute shortage of labour.

Unemployment Insurance

Statistical separation of the workless is the cold record of the practice of discriminating between workers of the different races. Africans thrown out of work not only lose their livelihood, but find their very survival in jeopardy. Social security in the form of unemployment insurance is denied to all but an infinitesimal number of them.

Under the 1946 Unemployment Insurance Act, African workers in commerce and industry were covered in the same way as all other workers. The scheme was a contributory one, but soon became unpopular amongst farmers and the mining companies. The farmers, who had been suffering a shortage of labour for some time, resented the fact that Africans in the towns could draw unemployment benefits, instead of being forced by hunger to work on the farms. The mining companies complained to the Government that: "*At a time when so many employers are in need of Native labour, it is illogical that large numbers of Natives should be able to draw unemployment benefits and live in idleness at the expense of the State.*"

At the time the mines were short of some 20,000 African underground workers. The pay offered was 2s. 8d. per day plus food and quarters, and it was a requirement that the workers should "live-in" in the special compounds provided.

One of the first things which the Nationalist Party did after coming to power in 1948 was to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act so as to exclude from the benefits of unemployment insurance all Africans earning less than a £3 10s. 0d. per week basic wage. As 90% of African workers fell within this category, the change amounted to a virtually total exclusion of Africans. Then, in 1957, the Act was re-phrased to make it clear that only those Africans earning a total wage of more than £5 3s. 3d. per week (£272 per annum), inclusive of cost-of-living allowances, qualified for membership of the Fund.

The removal of Africans from the protection of the Unemployment Insurance Act exposes them together with their families to utter destitution, and so produces pressures upon them to accept work on the farms and in the mines. These pressures are vigorously reinforced by laws and regulations

which limit the rights and opportunities of Africans to seek work. They are not free to go from factory to factory, from town to town, from one area to another in order to look for employment.

Once out of a job, an African becomes the pawn of the local labour bureau, to which he must report within 72 hours. There he is issued with a permit to seek work, for a limited period and only within the magisterial area where he is registered. The purpose of this control is to ensure a regular supply of cheap, disciplined labour. It was conceived a long time ago—long before the Nationalists ruled South Africa. It has been defined by the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, Mr. de Wet Nel, with patriarchal simplicity in these words:⁴

“There will always be thousands of Bantu on the Whites’ farms, in the mines, in industry and also as servants in the Whites’ homes . . . They will be there not as a right, but at the bidding and by the grace of the Whites. At best, they will be visitors in the White area.”

In practice, this means that Africans cannot expect the protection of social security measures in the White (i.e. urban) areas. As long as there is work for them, they are welcome; but once they fall victims to unemployment, their presence becomes objectionable. Dr. Albert Hertzog, one of the Government’s specialists in labour affairs and now Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, emphasized this relationship between unemployment insurance and labour control when he said,⁵ *“ . . . this must be seen from the point of view of the Government’s whole policy of apartheid . . . (which) means that Natives are no longer to be allowed free and unhampered entry into the cities . . . and means that there need not be a single unemployed Native in the city.”*

The Racial Remedy

In tackling the problem of unemployment, racial considerations are of prime importance to the South African Government. While it would prefer to see the entire population gainfully employed, the Government believes that when there is not enough work for all, steps must be taken to ensure that Whites receive preference in the allocation of jobs.

A somewhat crude long-term plan has been devised to give effect to the racial priorities of the ruling political party; and this doctrinaire solution to the unemployment problem expresses

⁴Addressing the Nasionale Jeugbond—5th September, 1955.

⁵Hansard Col. 6798—1st June, 1949.

the real spirit and intent of the racial policy now being peddled at home and abroad as "separate development". It falls into three parts: (i) job reservation on racial lines; (ii) deportation of "foreign" Africans; and (iii) farm and mine work for Union Africans.

In terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956, the Minister of Labour has power to reserve jobs for workers on racial grounds alone and make it a criminal offence for workers of one race to perform work which has been reserved for members of another. Several such decrees have already been issued, affecting employment in the clothing, building, engineering and transport industries, where a number of jobs have been reserved for White workers only.

As unemployment grows, so will job reservation. If the situation becomes serious, the Government is determined that the main burden should be carried by the non-Whites. If there are to be long unemployment queues, the Government hopes to keep as many Whites as possible out of them.

The State-owned railways, which at the moment are experiencing some slackness, have begun to get rid of non-White employees. During the recent session of Parliament, the Minister of Transport, Mr. B. J. Schoeman, stated,⁶ "*Where it is found that there is a job being temporarily done by a Native that a White man can do, then the White man is placed into that job.*" The Nationalist Member of Parliament for Vasco, Mr. C. de Villiers, boasted at a Party meeting on the 3rd September, 1959⁷ that "*during the past year, 13,000 non-Whites were ousted from the Railways, in keeping with the policy of the National Party to protect the White worker.*"

The second part of the Government plan to combat unemployment is also discriminatory, placing Union Africans in a different category from those who have come from Nyasaland, Basutoland, Swaziland, Bechuanaland, and other parts of Africa. Many of these "foreign" Africans are already being deported; and only those working in the mines or on farms are being allowed to remain.

The Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd, feels very strongly that workers from outside the country are an unnecessary burden, for he said in Parliament:⁸

⁶Hansard Col. 2443—12th March, 1959.

⁷'Evening Post'—4th September, 1959.

⁸Hansard Col. 9420—29th June, 1959.

"We are still saddled with approximately 400,000 foreign Natives, who are not our concern and responsibility. If those Natives were to be pushed out of South Africa—because preference must be given to Union Natives when there is unemployment—then there would be no suggestion of unemployment amongst Union Natives."

A peculiar situation would develop in international affairs if the Prime Ministers of other countries adopted this extraordinary attitude towards workers who had immigrated into their territories. What would happen, for example, if the Prime Minister of Australia, faced with an unemployment problem, suddenly declared that the Hollanders, Germans and Englishmen who had flocked there and helped boost production in good times, were no longer Australia's concern and responsibility?

A month before Dr. Verwoerd's statement to Parliament, the Chief Information Officer of the Department of Bantu Administration declared that large-scale unemployment among Union Africans would not eventuate, *"because the 750,000 foreign Bantu now working in the Union could, and would be moved to make way for unemployed Union Africans."*⁹ The Minister of Labour claimed on the 2nd October, 1959¹⁰ that, since coming to power in 1948, the Nationalist Government had deported no less than 800,000 "foreign" Africans.

If this is correct and a further 750,000 are to be deported, the present government will have succeeded in expelling more than one-and-a-half million Africans from South Africa. Surely this must rank as one of the major feats of mass removal in history.

The policy of deporting "foreign" Africans is likely to bewilder thoughtful people who take note of the persistent complaints of shortages in mine and farm labour. The contradiction can be explained by the general belief amongst Whites that if every Union African could be compelled to work, there would be no shortage of labour anywhere in the country. The Unemployment Insurance Act was bitterly resented precisely because it ran contrary to the traditional policies for the control and direction of African labour; the very idea of Africans drawing unemployment pay was regarded as outrageous by most Whites.

Despite the stringent control exercised over the influx of rural Africans into the towns, in order to bind them fast to the rural areas, there is a chronic shortage of unskilled farm labour. And the mining industry, which enjoys special facilities in the

⁹Rand Daily Mail—23rd May, 1959.

¹⁰Die Transvaler—3rd October, 1959.

employment of Africans and draws vast supplies of migrant labour from the rural areas and the neighbouring African territories, experiences persistent difficulty in maintaining an ample supply of unskilled African labour.

In promising to give Union Africans the jobs now held by "foreign" Africans, the Government is in fact telling the Africans that their future lies in farm and mine work. "Surplus" Africans will be removed from the urban areas and made available to the farmers and mining companies. There are sufficient laws on the Statute Book to make this a simple task.

An African qualifies for permanent residence in an urban area only if he has been there continuously since birth, or has legally lived there for an unbroken period of fifteen years, or has worked for the same employer continuously for ten years. In addition, he must possess the further qualification of never having been sentenced to a fine exceeding £50 or to imprisonment exceeding six months.¹¹

As unemployment spreads, those who fall out of work or are displaced by the application of job reservation will be deemed to be surplus to White needs in the urban areas and summarily ordered to leave. Steps will be taken to remove them from the towns to the rural areas or Reserves, where they can be induced to sign contracts of service with farmers or with the mining companies as migratory labourers.

In terms of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, any unemployed African is exposed to the danger of being declared "an idle or undesirable person", to be thereupon sent to a work colony unless he agrees to accept work with an employer (usually a farmer) approved by a Native Commissioner or Magistrate. As Dr. Albert Hertzog knowingly said, "*there need not be a single unemployed Native in the city*".

Will the Government solve its unemployment problem by applying its racial remedy?

The possible economic effects cannot be examined here, although they are obvious. The simple expedients of job reservation and mass removal are bound to shrink the internal market and invite boycotts in the export field.

Remedies of this kind can have nothing but harmful effects upon industry and trade. Nevertheless, they are already being applied; and thousands of workers are already suffering their effects.

¹¹The maximum penalty for taking part in a strike is £300 and 3 years' imprisonment.