

## THE AFRICAN IN INDUSTRY

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ONE of the factors which is holding back the economic and social development of South Africa is the low standard of living of the African people. On the one hand, it deprives the South African producer of a well-developed home market capable of absorbing the bulk of his goods. On the other hand, it prevents the African people from acquiring the education, knowledge and skill which would enable them to increase their productivity. The disastrous effects of low wages on the African people themselves, though obvious at a glance, are generally the last to be discussed by professional economists who place the demands of their "dismal science" before those of human nature. Yet it is time that the human factor was taken more into consideration, for unless there is a change in the official attitude adopted towards the African worker, South Africa is in store for a series of unpleasant explosions on the industrial front.

Official figures of disputes involving Africans in 1959 are, of course, not yet available. But in the two years 1957 and 1958, according to figures supplied in Parliament by the Minister of Labour, Senator de Klerk, there were 173 strikes involving Africans in which a total of over 13,000 workers took part.

The figures themselves do not tell the whole story. In terms of the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act passed by Parliament in 1953, it is illegal for African workers to go on strike. In practically every strike which has taken place this year, prosecutions have followed and workers have been victimized; in 1958, prosecutions were instituted on 23 occasions, and 453 workers were convicted. It is not surprising that under the circumstances the threat of prosecution acts as a deterrent to striking; if there is a façade of "peace and quiet" in industry, it is mainly the result of the Government's arbitrary use of *force majeure* to settle all industrial disputes involving Africans.

Just how effective the Government's labour legislation is in this regard may also be gauged from the fact that in only 9 cases out of the 173 strikes in the last two years were the disputes settled by the granting of increased wages or improved working conditions. The hard fact of life for the African worker is that

he is paid wretched wages to start with, he is denied means of collective bargaining to improve his conditions, he is severely punished if in desperation he goes on strike to bring about a change, and he may eventually find himself—as a result of taking strike action—either working for lower wages than when he started, or without a job and in danger of being endorsed out of town.

Let us briefly consider each of these factors in turn.

### The Wage Front

A great deal of attention has been focussed on the question of African wages in the last two years, firstly by the great bus boycott of 1957, and second by the campaign for £1 a day which culminated in the attempted three-day strike coinciding with the general election in 1958. The tremendous pressure which was built up from below, though it has not so far enabled the African worker to reach his target of an adequate living wage, has nevertheless demonstrated to the whole country the reality of African poverty and the demand that something be done about it. And the recent rioting in Durban has emphasized the urgency.

The Institute of Race Relations, in its excellent "Analysis of the Proposed Increases in African Taxation," issued in August 1958, quotes figures to show that "between 69 and 78 per cent of the African families in the towns concerned have incomes below the minimum necessary to provide the barest essentials of living." After analysing a number of surveys conducted by various public bodies and individuals, the Institute concludes: "Each of the surveys so far conducted of the incomes and expenditure of Africans has re-emphasized the fact that *their standard of living is far too low to be accepted with equanimity*. Wage levels have increased, but have not kept up with the increase in the cost of living; and the gap between average incomes and minimum expenditure essential for the maintenance of health has widened."

In other words, far from sharing in the so-called "prosperity" of which the Government boasts, the African worker knows only that his income is declining, that he has less money for food and clothes. Add to this that recent forced removals have in most cases faced the African breadwinner with the doubling of his already high transport costs; and that his taxation has arbitrarily been increased by a minimum of 75 per cent as from the beginning of this year; and it will become clear that widespread unrest among African workers is only to be expected.

We are thus presented with the fantastic situation that everybody—the African worker himself, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, even the Government—is agreed that African wages are too low; yet nothing is done on a national scale to set matters right. Here and there a firm grants a wage increase; organized commerce and industry says it is the responsibility of the Government; the Minister throws the ball back to the employers; and the African continues to starve, to strike, to receive punishment whenever he gets too impatient.

Government policy is at the root of the present impasse. The Nationalists acknowledge that African wages are too low; but they are not prepared to do anything about it for political reasons. When, for instance, stevedoring workers in Port Elizabeth went on strike for higher wages in 1957, the employers reached an agreement with them for an increase—but the Minister of Labour, Senator de Klerk, refused to sanction it. The Government believes that any concession to Black clamour will only encourage further demands. If progress comes, it must come from the kindheartedness of the White, and not as the result of pressure from below. It ignores the fact that the White generally only develops a kind heart when pressure from below leaves him no other alternative.

### **Collective Bargaining**

In their attitude toward Black demands, the Nationalists are neither original nor alone; they are merely its most consistent exponents. The pattern was set in 1946, when 75,000 African miners went on strike in support of the demand for a wage of 10s. a day. Their strike was bloodily suppressed by the Smuts Government, 13 men being killed and the remainder forced back to work at the point of a gun. The workers did not get their increase—but a few years later the ever-increasing shortage of labour compelled the Chamber of Mines, “unilaterally” as it claimed, to concede a general increase in wages to all grades of African mineworkers. The increase was not great—about 10s. a month—but it inevitably posed the question: why could it not have been granted when it was asked for, thus saving 13 lives, many broken bodies, a whole harvest of hatred and the entire ugly aftermath of the strike?

The answer was most clearly supplied by Mr. Ben Schoeman, then Minister of Labour, in 1953, when he was piloting his Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Bill through the House.

The Minister was explaining why the Government rejected the recommendation of the Industrial Legislation Commission that African trade unions should be recognized, subject to stringent controls:

"I think that hon. members must realize that if we give that incentive to Natives to organize—and we must bear in mind that they are primitive and illiterate Natives who have not the faintest conception of the responsibilities of trade unionism, that they are people who cannot even read the constitution of a trade union, who know nothing about negotiation or the industrial set-up of South Africa—if we give them that incentive to organize and they should become well-organized—and again bearing in mind that there are almost 1,000,000 Native workers in industry and commerce today—they can use their trade unions as a political weapon and they can create chaos in South Africa at any given time. I think that we would probably be committing race suicide if we gave them that incentive".

Mr. Schoeman's argument was of course self-contradictory. On the one hand he argued that the Africans were incapable of trade union organization. They were illiterate and barbarous. But on the other hand, if they were incapable of trade unionism, why not give them the right to run trade unions? Surely people who were barbarous and primitive could never learn to organize and could never become a threat to the White man? Schoeman, of course, knew very well the Africans *were* capable of trade unionism. His own Industrial Legislation Commission had told him so.

"The Commission is satisfied that a sufficient number of Native workers in commerce and secondary industry know enough about trade unionism to make the recognition of Native trade unions a practical proposition", it said in paragraph 1629 of its report, though it added, bearing in mind the needs of White Supremacy: "provided suitable measures for the guidance and control of these unions are introduced."

In paragraph 1546 of their report, the Commission had said: "Notwithstanding the unsatisfactory features characterizing the Native trade union movement, the Commission is satisfied that there are a number of unions which are well organized and are conducted on correct lines. The leaders of some of these unions have in the past rendered considerable assistance by advising against, and restraining their members from taking drastic action; they are able to place the case for the workers before

wage fixing bodies, and some of them have shown indications of a measure of ability to negotiate with employers”.

But Mr. Schoeman refused to recognize African unions, and hoped that as a result of his Bill they would “bleed to death”. In their place he proposed an apparatus of compulsory arbitration by the State which, to the best of my knowledge, has never yet been able to bring a dispute to a satisfactory settlement.

The Act provides for the establishment of a Central Native Labour Board, of Europeans only, appointed by the Minister; regional Native Labour Committees, of which the chairman is a European and the remaining members “Natives appointed by the Minister”; and works committees elected by the workers in any establishment under the supervision of the Native Labour Officer for the area. (Despite the name, a “Native Labour Officer” must be a European, again appointed by the Minister.) The function of a works committee is to be consulted by a Native Labour Officer, who must report to the regional Native Labour Committee, which must settle the dispute somehow and make a recommendation to the Central Native Labour Board, which must make a recommendation to the Minister, who can do as he pleases, unless the Board is unable to reach a solution, in which case the matter can be referred to the Wage Board.

When he introduced his Bill in Parliament, the Minister, Mr. Schoeman, said it was essential to create machinery and appoint officials “in whom the Natives will have confidence”. Not surprisingly, however, the workers have had no confidence in the cumbrous, bureaucratic machinery set up under the Act. Mr. Schoeman’s successor, Senator de Klerk, told Parliament in April, 1959, that in the whole of the Union only 8 works committees had been set up in terms of the Act. The Africans have, for the most part, refused to have any dealings with the officials appointed in terms of the Act, whom they regard as agents of the Government and *ipso facto* their enemies. The workers have clung to their own free unions, despite every discouragement; but in the majority of strikes they have acted on their own, without unions, without Government officials, relying on their own team-spirit as workers to see them through any dispute.

The Government’s own claims for the success of the Act can only be described as modest in the extreme. The Minister says that in the two years 1957 and 1958, only 4 disputes were settled by the Central Native Labour Board, and only 3 by the works

committees, though he claims a total of 363 were settled by his regional committees and Native Labour Officers. It is difficult to determine the real significance of these figures, however, bearing in mind that he had earlier told Parliament there were 173 strikes involving Africans in these two years. What, for instance, does the Minister understand by "settling" a dispute? He admits that in only 9 of the 173 strikes was the dispute settled by the granting of wage increases. Does he also regard a dispute as "settled" if the entire labour force is arrested, convicted and endorsed out of town and the employer supplied with alternative labour? There can be no other explanation for the Minister's strange statistics.

### Prohibition of Strikes

The fact is that the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act was never designed to meet the needs of the African workers. The only section of the Act which can be said to have worked is the one prohibiting strikes (section 18). And that has been invoked with unflinching regularity. When a dispute breaks out, the employers have been instructed to send out an immediate S.O.S. to the Labour Department, and in a trice Department officials and the police, as well as members of the Special Branch, appear on the scene. If the dispute has reached the point where the workers have stopped work, the Labour Department officials warn them that they are breaking the law and must return to work immediately. *Absolutely no attempt is made to negotiate on the actual grievances or demands of the workers.* No undertakings are given. The men are told to go back to work, or else. . . . Not unnaturally, the men often refuse, insisting that they have had good reason to stop working and that they want their demands discussed. This is usually the signal for the police to arrest all the strikers on the spot or to launch one of their vicious baton charges. Examples—the recent stevedores' strike in Durban, the huge Amato strike in 1958. In most cases it can be stated quite categorically that police and Labour Department intervention actually prevented the conclusion of a peaceful agreement between the workers and the management, and was the direct cause of the subsequent violence.

In the beginning, the Chamber of Industries was fearful that the Native Labour Act, by encouraging the establishment of works committees, might lead to co-ordinated and collective action by the African workers and facilitate their demands for

higher wages. In a circular letter to employers issued in 1955, the Transvaal Chamber of Industries advised: "On reflection, it would seem that the less use there is made at the present juncture of the Native Labour Act, the greater the assurance for maintaining the equipoise of competition within the country, and South Africa's ability to compete with external manufacturers". Which is the Chamber's polite justification for the policy of continuing to pay as low wages as possible.

Later experience of the workings of the Act reassured the employers, however, that the raising of wages was the last intention behind the enactment of the law, and nowadays it is commonplace for employers to turn to the Labour Department at the first sign of trouble.

Some employers, however, have found that the swift retribution meted out to strikers is not always beneficial for business. When your entire labour force is removed in police vans to the cells, your factory production comes to a stop. If hundreds of workers are involved, it is not so easy for the Government's labour bureaux to replace them. In Randfontein in 1955, for example, 169 textile workers went on strike and were fined £10 each. The firm employing the workers paid the fines, but the court ordered that the amounts be deducted from the pay packets of the workers, the entire amount to be repaid over a period of eight weeks.

Similarly, in 1956, an East Rand employer paid out £406 in fines when 58 African workers from Rand Mining Timber Co. were fined £7 each. Similar examples can be quoted from many other centres. An alternative tactic on the part of the employers nowadays is to have only the ringleaders of the strike arrested—2,000 dynamite workers in Somerset West went on strike, but only two were charged. Where workers' unity is complete, reprisals become impossible, as in the case of the Hammersdale strike this year, and the milling workers' strike in 1957.

The Hammersdale strike provides, incidentally, an illuminating insight into the labour policies of the Nationalist Government. The owners had closed down their factories in Fordsburg and Durban and opened the Hammersdale factory outside the urban area, about 36 miles from Durban, because they would be able to pay their workers lower wages (in the urban area the levels are laid down by an industrial agreement which does not cover the outside areas). About 500 workers were employed there at wages ranging from 15s. for women to £1 for men *PER*

*WEEK*. The labour force included an ex-principal of a school, ex-school teachers and matriculants.

In spite of the low wages paid, there was a surplus of labour in the area, and each day scores of workers seeking employment were turned away. For when the factory was first established at the beginning of 1958, the local Native Commissioner, using the despotic powers vested in him under the pass laws, blockaded all labour in the area and in the neighbouring reserves and prevented it from going into the larger industrial areas of Durban, Maritzburg and Pinetown to seek work.

The result of the strike was that wages were increased immediately by from 5s. to 7s. 6d. a week—but even at the new level, they constitute less than 30 per cent of the monthly £23 10s. laid down by the Institute of Race Relations as the bare minimum for a family of five.

### Unemployment

A factor promoting unrest is the widespread and increasing unemployment among Africans throughout the Union. Unfortunately, no figures of African unemployment are kept. At the end of January, 1959, the registered European, Coloured and Asian unemployed totalled 24,700—the highest figure for some years. By the end of February this figure had risen to 25,071. But the Government's African labour bureaux do not keep figures of unemployed, only of registered workseekers, which is quite a different thing. An African who is unemployed does not report for unemployment pay, because since December, 1952 he has not been entitled to receive any; his industrial council is not interested in him, since he doesn't rate as an employee under the Industrial Conciliation Act; he probably has not got a trade union; if he reports to the pass office, where there is already a pool of available unemployed registered workseekers, he is likely to be endorsed out of town, back to the reserves or on to the farms. The total number of registered workseekers fluctuates enormously from month to month, depending on the seasonal demand for labour in the towns, but has at times been well over the 100,000 mark. The total number of unemployed Africans might easily amount to 500,000. But who can tell? Stock diseases have to be notified and treated; human unemployment is ignored by law.

The ever-present threat of unemployment and endorsement out of towns has the effect of keeping an African worker tied



to his job and fearful of asking for higher wages because of the drastic penalties to which he may be exposed by his "recalcitrance" (the word used by the Transvaal Chamber of Industries in its 1955 circular to describe Africans who make wage demands).

### **What is to be Done?**

When the Africans on the Witwatersrand embarked on their three-month long bus boycott in 1957, in protest against the 1d. fare increase, Minister Schoeman, with his usual braggadocio, promised to beat the boycotters to their knees and threw the whole police force into the fray. In the end, however, it was the Africans who won the day, and Schoeman was forced to introduce a special Bill in Parliament providing for the payment of an increased subsidy to enable the bus company to continue to operate at the old fare.

At the same time, public clamour, in which the Chambers of Commerce and Industry this time joined, forced the Minister of Labour to undertake an inquiry into unskilled wages on the Rand through the machinery of the Wage Board. The inquiry took almost two years, and its recommendations for the Witwatersrand and Pretoria were only gazetted in the first quarter of this year. But quite apart from the length of time it takes the Wage Board to make a recommendation, the worst feature of its recent activities has been that it recommends wages which are lower than those African workers are already receiving! Johannesburg municipality, for example, is today paying its unskilled labourers £2.12s. 9d. a week; yet the Wage Board has recommended an amount of £2 11s. 9d. The Wage Board claims it is recommending increases ranging from 15 to 22½ per cent, but these are not increases on the existing wage, but on the previous legal minimum laid down 17 years ago. The same thing has happened in other industries.

The Wage Board's justification for this practice is that it is only laying down the legal minimum, and that there is nothing to stop employers paying higher wages if they want to. But there are employers willing to take advantage of their legal rights, and a canning factory in Tulbagh has already notified its intention of cancelling its agreement with the union and cutting wages by up to 13s. Union officials point out that when the first determination for their industry was gazetted in 1943, it had the effect of *raising* the lowest levels of unskilled wages in the canning indus-

try, i.e. the legal minimum was higher than the then prevailing level actually paid. Today the position is reversed.

For all these reasons, workers have no confidence in the machinery of the Wage Board. Its inquiries take too long (only 7 determinations in the 2 years, 1957 and 1958), and its determinations bear no relationship to the real situation which faces the workers. It is not surprising that under the circumstances, the chairman of the Wage Board complained that during its hearings on the Witwatersrand, the majority of employers could not be bothered to place their views before the Board. Why bother with a Board whose findings are irrelevant to the needs of employers and employees alike?

The greatest shortcoming of the Wage Board is that it is not empowered by law to investigate two industries which employ enormous numbers of unskilled workers—farming and domestic work. Further, although often requested to do so by the trade union movement, it has never undertaken an investigation of the mining industry, which employs between 300,000 and 400,000 African workers. Yet it is precisely these three industries which determine the general pattern of unskilled wages. Unhampered by most industrial legislation and wage-fixing machinery, these three industries pay the lowest wages in the Union. The mines, for example, are today paying wages only a fraction higher than were paid to African miners at the turn of the century nearly 60 years ago.

The overall picture, then, is one of ruthless exploitation of Black labour by private enterprise, aided by the Government's apartheid legislation, which denies the African the right and the opportunity to organize effectively for collective bargaining with his employer, and deprives him of the ultimate weapon used by workers throughout the world—the right to withdraw his labour power.

The outlook for the future, so long as present policies are enforced, is grim. The economic deadlock cannot be resolved within the framework of apartheid. African starvation will continue and intensify. Race and class conflict will become more determined and more bitter on both sides of the line. Only a complete recasting of our national policies can bring about a lasting solution. Of this the Nationalist Government is incapable. It is only the democratic opposition, both inside and outside Parliament, which can bring about a change.