

THE NEW SERFDOM

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BEHIND the Nationalist Government's temporarily suspended "inducement" to Africans to "volunteer" for farm labour and behind the continued leasing of African convicts to white farmers lies the story of a much greater Nationalist achievement—the transformation of 2½ million Africans into hereditary serfs.

The "volunteer" system, which is outlined elsewhere in this issue, has been shown to be illegal even in Nationalist law, and it has been this fact which has enabled Mr. Joel Carlson, a Johannesburg attorney, to bring one *habeas corpus* application after another before the courts in recent months, and to secure the release of individual "volunteers". Sworn affidavit after affidavit has told of the summary arrest of an African youth or man for alleged pass-law infringements; of his being held incommunicado whilst officials made dire threats of long hard-labour sentences in notorious jails unless he "volunteered" for farm labour, and of reluctant thumbs pressed onto inking pads and contracts. Then comes the "sold" man's trip in closed trucks to the farm of his new *baas*; frequently followed by gratuitous assault on arrival; and always the long, back-breaking labour from dawn to dusk under club- or whip-wielding African "boss-boys", who buy their pitiful positions of power by giving brutal physical expression to the greed which drives their white masters.

Frantic families try vainly to find what has happened to the men and boys who, unable to communicate with them, eke out their days on diets of porridge and weak coffee, dressed in sacks and crowded at night onto the concrete floors or bunks of filthy buildings.

Only if, when they are not at work, the "volunteers" are locked up can a *habeas corpus* application succeed, as a Supreme Court judge has ruled that otherwise they are free to escape. Such attempts are, in fact, commonplace; but, if unsuccessful, can lead to the "volunteer" being beaten to death. It was a court order for exhumation in a case where this was suspected of having happened that shocked the English language press, which has in recent years been taking a remarkably increased interest in African affairs, into backing Mr. Carlson's crusade against the scheme.

When Chief Rabbi L. I. Rabinowitz of Johannesburg immediately called on Jewish farmers to abandon "volunteer" labour, some of them did so; and when two Jewish M.P.'s in the United Party joined the widespread liberal protest against the scheme by attacking it in the House, it proved too much for Nationalist rank-and-filers. Parliament was treated to the most virulent outbursts of anti-semitism heard in South Africa since Dr. Verwoerd resigned as editor of the "Transvaler".

Nevertheless, the Government thought it worth-while to throw white public opinion—and the overseas press—the sop of suspending the scheme. It was, of course, a cynical diversionary gesture, for a judicial commission of inquiry was refused. Instead, "impartial" investigations are being conducted by two committees made up of representatives of the police who arrest alleged pass-offenders; of the government departments which "induce" the suspects to "volunteer" for farm labour in the first place; and of the white farmers to whom, in the language used by officials, they are "sold".

All this should not, however, be allowed to obscure the fact that, horrible as it is, the "volunteer" system is only a relatively minor aspect of the plight of African farm labourers in the Union. For both the "volunteer" and the convict labour system can, even if extensively operated, provide only a partial answer to the white farmers' need for cheap labour. Nor will this need be met by the Nationalists' present policy of facing Africans from neighbouring territories who have settled in South African towns with the alternative of becoming farm labourers or being thrown out of the country. Aside from migratory mine workers, there are at present some 330,000 Africans from the British Protectorates of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland in South Africa, and some 70,000 from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. Many of these men have settled in the towns and married local women, but the farm labour harvest from their ranks can hardly meet the white farmers' needs.

South African farmers are, on the whole, remarkably inefficient, obtaining low yields from extensive dry farming which, even to-day, depends largely on unskilled labour. The second world war created boom conditions for agricultural products, and over the past twenty years white farmers have increased the area they cultivate from 6·8 to over 10 million morgen, out of their total land holding of 102 million morgen. The State's agricultural policy has always protected the inefficient and the

lazy white farmer, and before the war agriculture was sunk in an ox-drawn torpor. The increased intensity of cultivation since then has been achieved largely by the introduction of tractors, of which there were only 6,019 in 1937 but 106,000 in 1957. This mechanization, however, did not extend to such key activities as the harvesting of *mealies* (maize), to which 40% of farming land is devoted. Therefore the expansion of white farming has, despite mechanization, meant an ever-increasing demand for unskilled labour. And this labour has been increasingly difficult to come by, for the war-stimulated development of industries has drawn Africans to the towns. Between 1936 and '57, South Africa's total non-white population increased by 48%, but its urban non-white population increased by 119% (from 1,843,000 to 4,040,000).

The farmers did not meet the challenge of regular working hours, higher wages and increased opportunities which the towns offered, by substantially improving conditions for farm labourers. Increases in cash wages have, in general, barely kept pace with the rising cost of living; and in other ways, as will be described, conditions have actually worsened. Government statistics show that in 1954 the average monthly income in cash and kind of a male farm labourer was only 74 shillings, excluding free "accommodation".

Instead of improving conditions, white farmers have looked to the Government to provide them with cheap labour. Under South Africa's electoral constituency system, the weighting of the white farmer's vote has increased as whites, too, drifted to the towns; and as long as the façade of white parliamentary government is maintained, the demands of the white farmer must be heeded.

When the Nationalists, their political mystique tied to a fast-vanishing pastoral *volk*, came to power in 1948, they were fully aware of these facts. They were in any case determined to tighten control over every aspect of the African's life, and both rural vote-catching and the ideological fantasies of *apartheid* could be served by clamping down particularly on the movement from farm to town. Like their predecessors, the Nationalists have seen the African as a transient in the white man's world, forced to seek work there by imposed taxation and allowed to remain only for as long as his labour is required. But, unlike their predecessors, the Nationalists have made a legal reality of this transient status for almost all Africans in the towns, and are

increasingly imposing it even on white-owned farms. Their ideal is a rootless, right-less and self-perpetuating black rural working class, forced to accept whatever wages and living conditions its white employers may choose to grant.

The Nationalists therefore set out to abolish the squatter and to reduce the labour-tenant system, both of which had become widely established and, to use a much-abused word, traditional. Squatters either pay rent to the farmer for land which they cultivate for their own use or, if they are lucky, are permitted to farm rent-free. Labour-tenants are permitted to cultivate a part of the white farmer's land for their own use, and in return the whole family has to work for the farmer when required. Here, as with hired full-time labourers, there has never been any outside control over working hours, payment or living conditions. Nor has productivity entered into the picture; supply and demand have determined conditions. The farmer has offered only as much as he thought would prevent the worker from moving elsewhere. Having no vote, no trade union and practically no rights, the labourer's only bargaining counter was the fact that he might look for better conditions elsewhere.

The Nationalists' achievement is that they have so effectively tightened the State's control over the African as to make it practically impossible for the farm labourer to leave his employment, however bad his circumstances may be.

They are, moreover, to-day within measuring distance of making it impossible for most of the 2½ million Africans presently resident on white-owned farms ever to be anything but farm labourers, thus making their status hereditary. Those of them who have a legally recognised stake in the Reserves can elect to take their chance instead in these already heavily over-populated and endemically famine-stricken "Bantustans"; those who have no such stake have not even this 'alternative'.

It has become almost impossible for farm workers or their families to settle in the towns. In theory, a farm worker may move from one farm to another. But, since 1952, matters have been so arranged that, in effect, no African farm labourer can leave his work without his employer's consent. No one may now employ an African over 16 years of age without his producing a reference book, which must be endorsed every month and in which the fact and date of discharge must be entered. To employ an African whose previous employer has not released him in this way is an offence. If a farmer refuses to accept a labourer's

notice and refuses to enter a discharge in his book, there is nothing the labourer can do about it. If he leaves without an endorsement, he becomes a deserter, commits an offence, and cannot look for work on neighbouring farms. And even if his *baas* lets him go, he can only get another job as a farm labourer in the area or, if he is lucky enough to have a stake there, risk starvation in the Reserves. The towns are closed to him; and, in effect, he and his children and his children's children can be nothing but farm labourers, untouched by outlandish ideas such as minimum wages or maximum hours of work. Their lives are completely dependent on the paternalistic whims of their white *baas*, who may, if he wishes, forbid them religious and social gatherings, beer-brewing and drinking, and bar their children from school.

Naturally, the realization of this new serfdom depends on the effectiveness of the white State's administrative machine, and here, as elsewhere, tyranny is being tempered by inefficiency. This and economic realities no doubt account for the fact that, whilst the years 1951-57 saw the Union's total African population increase by 14%, they increased its urban African population by 42% and the African population of "white" farms by only 17½% (from 2,120,000 to 2,500,000).

The increasing measure of success which Nationalist farm labour policy is meeting with, however, may be judged by the fact that the number of adult male labourers increased by 19% (from 629,000 to 750,000). These latter figures indicate that the Nationalists are succeeding dramatically in reducing the number of squatters and labour-tenants.

Statistics on farm labour are notoriously hard to come by, but a clear idea of what the country-wide position of farm labourers will soon be has been given in an excellent study published this year by the South African Institute of Race Relations and entitled "Labour in the Farm Economy". In it, Miss Margaret Roberts gives the detailed results which she obtained from a year's field work on 73 farms in the Albany and Bathurst districts of the Eastern Cape, as well as the laws affecting farm labour and some excellent general conclusions, on which I have drawn in this article. Miss Roberts found that the average earnings—in cash and kind—of a family of 6 to 7 were just under £9 a month; and that most of this was paid in kind. Despite the grim poverty which this figure reflects, farmers in these districts are increasingly being faced with the—to them quite new—problem of a surplus

of labour. Even where they are prepared to allow young Africans to leave the farms on which they have been born and to seek employment for a while in the towns, officials will not issue the requisite permits.

If, moreover, a married man were to be granted a permit, his family would, unless he had a stake in a Reserve, join the most tragic of all the groups which 'white civilisation' has created in South Africa—men, women and children who have no legal right to be anywhere at all. For to-day only the families of men employed on a farm may live on it. Men alone are, occasionally, permitted to leave the farms to work as needed in the towns; but the moment they do so, the families they leave behind face eviction and prosecution. The Government has talked of setting up villages to accommodate the families of migrant workers in the Reserves-become-Bantustans, but so far these exist only in the mists of ideological *apartheid*.

Meanwhile, the same grim fate of permanent flight and illegality faces the families of farm labourers who lose their jobs or who die. This applies throughout the country, and in the area surveyed by Miss Roberts most of the labourers had no stake in the Reserves.

As court cases have shown, there are already people in this position in other areas, such as Bethal, which are far from any Reserve. Though no one knows what their number is, it is certain to grow rapidly as Nationalist administration is tightened up.

The position of farm workers can, under the present system, only grow worse and worse. Miss Roberts found, in the Albany and Bathurst districts, ample proof that African labourers were keen and able to acquire the skills which mechanization required, and that they were increasingly dissatisfied with their present lot. Farmers here, as everywhere, fear the risk of capitalising their enterprises as long as farm produce prices are not stabilized; but even if they increased the productivity of their labourers through mechanization, it would worsen, rather than improve, the labourers' position. The law of supply and demand has been administratively abolished for them. Mechanization would bring no increase in wages to the skilled operators of machines, and it would make large numbers of manual labourers redundant. With increasing numbers of labourers, confined by law to a given farming area, competing for fewer and ever fewer jobs, wages and conditions would sink yet lower.

With the steady natural increase in the Union's African population, "surpluses" of farm labourers will in any event be created in all but those few farming areas which, like Bethal, have never had large resident African populations. But even the farmers in such areas need not lose heart, for the legal and administrative machinery already exists to "effect an even distribution for the farming community". Faced with the alternative of starvation on the farms on which they were born, Africans may be "induced" to move permanently even to Bethal, whose labour "problem" would thus be "solved".

This, rather than concessions to public outcry or international protest, may eventually lead the Nationalist Government to modify, if not to abolish, the "volunteer" and convict labour systems. Meanwhile, by excluding Africans in "white" rural areas even from the farcical structures of Bantu Authorities and Bantustans, the Nationalists have given the world notice that they are in deadly earnest about forcing the 2½ million African men, women and children presently on white-owned farms into a new serfdom.

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