

# PROBLEMS OF AFRICAN LABOUR

An address given at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg

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Africans, like all other peoples of the world, are striving to acquire skills and trades to enable them to sell their labours somewhere in the open labour market so that they may live decently in order to serve their people and improve their lot. These are the aims of any people anywhere in the world. A duty to yourself and a duty to the society of which you are a member. But when you are an African there are extra hurdles lying or lain on your way. Of these, two stand out, namely ignorance and poverty.

In fact, it is a vicious circle. We are poor because we are ignorant, and we are ignorant because we are poor.

In 1970 the Department of Statistics showed these wage structures from different walks of life:

Sector	White	Coloured	Asiatic	African
Manufacturing	R315	R 73	R 80	R 52
Mining	R341	R 71	R 93	R 19
Construction	R326	R110	R144	R 49
Central Govt.	R293	R145	R195	R 52

There is no comparison but a contrast. None of the salaries for Africans are shown above the Poverty Datum Line. Yet the bulk of the labour force in all sectors is African. Here is the proportion of the economically active population of South Africa as illustrated by the Institute of Race Relations. Figures are drawn from the Department of Statistics 1971.

## Economically Active Population

Race	Population	Percentage
White	1 471 000	20%
Coloured	708 000	10%
Asiatic	161 000	2%
African	4 972 000	68%
Total	7 312 000	100%

The bulk of the economically active population is African yet the wages are not only the lowest but so low that there is a vast surplus reservoir of cheap labour which can be tapped at will from the street at any time. This labour force is kept unskilled and voiceless—not allowed to have trade unions to assure its availability. Skilled labour is imported from overseas. The African is kept both ignorant and poor.

The result is South Africa has the lowest productivity per capita.

In industry today there are jobs of a mixed nature where certain white collar jobs which were traditionally a white preserve are now shared with Africans.

The disparity in earnings is most shattering where all the workers have the same qualifications but are of different races.

In the nursing and medical professions—all nurses, chemists and doctors write the same examination throughout South Africa but salaries take race into consideration. The following figures are drawn from the Institute of Race Relations Survey 1972. These are the maximum annual salaries.

## Nurses Salaries

Rank	White	Coloured/Indian	African
Sister	R3 450	R2 040	R 1 620
Student nurse	R 1 920	R 1 170	R 840
Physiotherapist			
Radiographer	R3 450	R 1 920	R 1 620

Notice that the Indian nurse earns 61% of the white nurse's salary while the African nurse is paid 45% of the white nurse's salary. A white student nurse on training earns a maximum of R 1 920 while an African Sister with a double qualification S.R.N. and S.R.M. earns a maximum of R 1 620, that is, R300 less than a white student nurse.

Perhaps money is not all. But money is a symbol of status. The other racial groups have a feeling of superiority toward us because they earn more.

Certainly they can get more for their money. In any case it is true man shall not live by bread alone, but man being mortal cannot live without the bread. However, we are entitled to that bread which is the fruit of our labour.

Whether the ignorance is all our fault or not is debatable. That we are ignorant because we are surrounded by such naked poverty, is not a matter for debate but grave concern.

Although the economic well-being and prosperity of the Republic of South Africa has progressed to a level

surpassing any achieved anywhere in Africa, poverty continues to be the lot of every Black man. South Africa can achieve its full economic and social potential as a country only if every individual has the opportunity to contribute to the full extent of his capabilities and to participate in the workings of our society.

It should, therefore, be the policy of South Africa to allow everyone the opportunity of education and training; the opportunity to work and the opportunity to live in decency and in dignity.

The most feasible way in which to tackle the problem of poverty in South Africa is that of increasing the national income by making a more efficient use of factors of production such as economic resources at our disposal.

The population of a country or at least, that part of it which is of working age, constitutes its working force and if the maximum use is not made of this working force, then the national income is not as large as it should be. Here in our country, this goal cannot be achieved unless South Africa uses to the fullest all of her available labour force.

A feature probably exclusive to the so-called South African way of life, and one which reduces the effectiveness of its labour force, is the migratory labour system. Some of these labourers spend six months of the year in industry and another six months as farm labour hands, while others live and work in gold mines under contract.

From the national point of view, this is an expensive procedure to follow. The high labour turnover in industry sends up its operating costs for, although the worker concerned normally works only as unskilled, he has to learn new routines each time he returns to industry. The ever changing population of

these "homelands" where this labour reservoir is, prevents the maximum use being made of the limited resources a worker has.

There are also several conventional legislative or administrative restrictions which prevent a Black worker from obtaining employment as a skilled worker. Trade Unions registered under the Industrial Conciliation Act may not enrol Blacks as members neither can Blacks work as artisans even for a wage less than that prescribed for white skilled workers.

The regulations flowing from this Act prevent the best possible use being made of available skills because those with some skills of some sort are not able to graduate out of the ranks of unskilled workers and there is absolutely no incentive for those with latent skills to develop their aptitudes. This is the reason you find that the majority of Black workers live on subsistence allowances and are in poverty.

The new labour bill is the first government response to black economic power, power that has not yet won any tangible victory but which will certainly be used in the future. New black unions are being set up and if the government were wise it would recognise them as an inevitable development today rather than agonisingly tomorrow.

As I mentioned earlier, there has been another force for change acting in South Africa's industry in recent years, the growth of the economy. There are some four million whites in South Africa, compared with 19 million blacks. As the economy has expanded the number of skilled jobs has outstripped the number of whites.

It is this phenomenon that has been powerfully used by those who believe that economic progress will ensure that all will come right in South Africa in the end.□

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# **POLITICS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENT**

by David Maughan Brown

Every time a student voice is raised, or a placard appears outside the gates of a South African university, to protest against some government action or some piece of legislation which the students regard as manifestly unjust, an answering voice is heard down the road shouting "Stick to your studies", "Stop wasting the tax-payer's money" or "You are too young to know anything about it anyway."

These slogans can usually be dismissed in one of two ways. Either one can regard them as the evasions of comfortable men anxious not to have to think about the issues involved, or brittle men troubled by the stirrings of a conscience which, if not shouted down, could damage the skeletal narrowness of their views. Or one can regard them simply as the angry outbursts of prejudiced men who hate and fear those who don't.