

# Chapter Sixteen

## NAMIBIA

### THE OVAMBO STRIKE

#### *Background (1)*

THE OVAMBOS number 270 000, over 50% of the total black population, and they provide 70% of the labour required by the modern, white-owned and white-managed industries in the south of the country and 90% of the mine work-force. This area, constituting two-thirds of the 318 000 square miles of Namibia, is designated for exclusive white settlement. Following the recommendations of its own commission in 1964, the South African government have been carrying out the forcible re-settlement of the approximately 80 000 African and Coloured inhabitants from their traditional reserves to ethnic 'homelands', reducing the overall status of the indigenous majority to that of temporary migrant labourers.

#### Conditions of Work:

The contract labour system was run by the South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA) established in 1933, and staffed by representatives of the government and mining industry. This organisation recruited workers at a fixed rate for the job, for a temporary period of 12 or 18 months, for work in the Southern part of Namibia, generally known as the Police Zone. This was the only means of employment for men outside the boundaries of the 'homelands'. While working in the urban centres (white areas) they have to live in 'bachelor' quarters in Apartheid townships, such as Katutura outside Windhoek, zoned on a tribal basis, or in compounds close by the mines.

Workers are allowed out of townships or compounds only on a company pass. All public meetings within the townships can be banned by the white township superintendants. No dependents are allowed to accompany the contract worker to his place of employment; the compound outside Windhoek is a typical example of accommodation with eight men to a room. An ordinance of January 1970 prohibited wives from residing with their husbands in Katutura (housing 30 000 Africans) unless they had been born in Windhoek or lived on the location with permanent employment for 10 years.

Prospective employees report to the recruiting office in Ovamboland, and if accepted are sent to the railhead at Grootfontein, where they are graded according to physical fitness and age into categories A, B, C and 'picannin' (children under 18) for work in mines, industry, agriculture and live-stock farming. Minimum wages are laid down for each class, ranging from R10 a month for an unskilled mineworker, R9,75 for a class A farm labourer, to R3,75 for a 'picannin'. While some employers pay more than the minimum wage, the average is around R20 a month.

The system forbids the forming of trade unions, the organisation of strikes, and the right to break contracts before their expiry. By contrast, employers who break contracts unilaterally are rarely punished. At a congress in Windhoek, one farmer said that he always withheld the wages of his employees until their contract had expired, and recommended this to other farmers as a way of ensuring that workers stayed to the end of their contract. Though publicly advocating a breach of contract on the part of employers, no action was taken against him. For an employee to make a complaint he must report to the police, or nearest magistrate. If, however he leaves his place of employment without his employers' permission, he is liable to be charged with desertion. The workers are not free to choose their employers or the type of work they are to do, but must accept the employers to whom they are assigned.

### *The Strike (2)*

The immediate cause of the nationwide protest was the reply of Mr Jannie de Wet, the Commissioner-General for the indigenous people of S.W.A., to Lutheran church criticism of the labour system; in an open letter to the South African Prime Minister and in meetings with local officials, they denounced the system as 'slavery'. De Wet stated that contract labour could not be described as slavery, because the Ovambo people accepted it voluntarily, and did not hesitate to sign contracts.

At two meetings in Walvis Bay and Windhoek, the strikers made the

point that, to show their rejection of the system, they were freely handing in their contracts and opting out together by demanding repatriation to the North.

The residents at the municipal compound at Windhoek held a meeting at which it was decided to strike the following day. On the Monday, the vast majority of the 6 000 workers did not leave the compound to go to work - halting municipal services, construction and commercial activity. The strike was not initially effective at Walvis Bay, but by the end of the week most of the 3 000 work-force were on strike and the strike spread to the Tsumeb mine, the largest base metal mine in Namibia. Production was also affected at the Klein Aub, Oamites, and Seeis copper mines, the Berg Aukus lead mine, and the Oranjemund diamond mines, following a walkout by most of the 11 000 black mine employees.

### *The Effects of the Strike (3)*

The day after the strike started in Windhoek, special police were flown in from South Africa, and the municipal compound was surrounded. Half the African police force were reported to have been dismissed in Walvis Bay and Windhoek for showing sympathy with the strikers. Thirteen men - 12 Ovambo and a Coloured - were charged at Windhoek Magistrate's court with ring-leading the mass walk-out at Katutura. Ten thousand Ovambos were repatriated, on their own request to the North. The minister for Bantu Administration, Mr M.C. Botha, stated that new labour arrangements would be announced at the end of January, in consultation with the homelands governments and employers, but the apartheid aspects of the system would not be altered.

The South Africans acted relatively flexibly, both due to the spotlight of world attention focussed on the country since the world court ruling on Namibia in July, 1971, and to the signs of a developing national resistance by the Namibians to South African rule.

The spontaneity of the strike is obvious: both SWAPO and church leaders have stated that they had little role in starting it: it spread by radio to remote parts of the country, indicating a general and spreading dissatisfaction with conditions under South African rule, and a high feeling of solidarity.

While the contract system would not be fundamentally changed while the South Africans continue to rule, the effect on Ovamboland, the image of which the South African Government have assiduously cherished, and which plays a crucial role in the Apartheid plans for the country, will be far-reaching. It was estimated that R1 000 000 would be lost by the workers opting out, shattering the myth that the area can be 'economically independent' within the existing apartheid framework.

## THE UNITED NATIONS' SECURITY COUNCIL MANDATE

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr Kurt Waldheim, was mandated under the terms of the UN Security Council's resolution to investigate means of obtaining independence for the former German territory.

### *Dr Kurt Waldheim in Namibia (SWA)*

The Secretary General of the UN, Dr Kurt Waldheim, indicated that he was satisfied he had met all shades of opinion during his short visit to Ovamboland.

'I have had the opportunity to talk to a cross-section of the people and their leaders', he said, 'and I am therefore in a better position to judge the situation'.

He said he was not free to reveal details of his discussions with African leaders 'because I must first report to the Security Council'. He had talks with the Ovambo Legislative Council's executive committee and church leaders. He also met the Kavango Legislative Assembly leader at Grootfontein. In Grootfontein, a petition with a suggestion that SWA be divided into different homelands and that the whole territory then be administered on a federal basis, was handed to Dr Waldheim.

When asked what was the point of establishing dialogue with South Africa when she (S.A.) had no intention of withdrawing from South West Africa he replied, 'The aim of the South African Government is to grant self-determination to Namibia'.

In talks with the UN Secretary-General, in Windhoek on the 9 March 1972, the National Convention of black political parties demanded the 'immediate removal of the S.A. regime from Namibia'. They demanded the establishment of a Namibian government in S.W.A. in the shortest possible time (4).

In a petition to Dr Waldheim, the convention also demanded the unconditional release of all Namibian prisoners in S.A. jails and the immediate return to S.W.A. of all Namibian refugees. The petition said the black parties were united in their efforts to get rid of the 'racist' South African Government and were conscious of their responsibility to persist in their attempts to make the government obey the resolutions of the UN.

### *Dr Kurt Waldheim in South Africa*

On the 10 March, 1972, Dr Waldheim held a meeting with the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster and Sir de Villiers Graaf in Cape Town. On arrival, in a press conference, Dr Waldheim said there was a deep gulf between the UN's idea of self-determination and South Africa's view. But there

would be further visits if South Africa showed any willingness to make concessions, Dr Waldheim said.

He further said his presence in South Africa and the fact that he had been able to establish contact with Mr Vorster and his government was a most important development and a breakthrough.

Speaking at a dinner given in his honour by the Prime Minister in the city's historic castle, he said he was looking forward to continued contact with South Africa with a view to solving the problems confronting the country and the UN. He was sure his visit would help and he thanked Mr Vorster for his assistance.

### *Reaction to U.N. Plans by Nationalist M.P.*

Mr 'Pik' Botha, Nationalist M.P. for Wonderboom, and a member of the South African legal team at the International Court of Justice in the Hague last year, warned (11 March, 1972) that the unification of the various nations in S.W.A. could only bring trouble and possibly rebellion (5).

He said several of the national entities in S.W.A. had indicated they would not be prepared to amalgamate in a unified S.W.A. The only possible solution to the dispute between the UN and South Africa over the administration of S.W.A. would be the recognition of the self-determination of these nations by the world body.

There is a basis for the UN accepting this. After the Auden-Clarke commission visited South Africa and S.W.A. in the 1950's, it suggested in its report to the UN that the possibility be investigated of allowing the different nations to obtain self-determination ... Although the South African Government did not accept the idea at the time, it said it was willing to investigate the proposal. However, the UN rejected the idea out of hand without investigating its merits.

### *Dr Waldheim's Report*

While in Namibia, the UN Secretary-General, Dr Kurt Waldheim told the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Hilgard Muller, that any useful discussions concerning the future of the territory would have to be based on self-determination and independence of the people of the territory as a whole. This was revealed in the UN report on S.W.A. issued to the Security Council on 20 July, 1972 (6).

After outlining the results of his contacts thus far with the South African Government, Dr Waldheim said in his conclusion the next step would be to appoint a special representative in consultation with South Africa and the other parties concerned. He said the task of the

representative of the Secretary-General would be to assist in achieving the aim of self-determination and independence.

The South African Government would co-operate in the discharge of the representative's tasks by providing him the requisite facilities to go to South Africa and to S.W.A. as necessary and to meet all sections of the population.

It was understood that the representative would have his headquarters in New York and would travel to S.W.A. and South Africa as necessary. He would be assisted by the necessary staff. Diplomatic observers of the UN said that fundamental differences between the UN and the South African Government over the future independent status of the territory, whether as a fragmented group of countries or as an integrated whole, which the world body wants, were likely to present the most serious difficulties during continuing talks.

The UN is adamant on the need to maintain the territorial integrity of S.W.A. The South African Government is equally convinced that tribal differences do not make this feasible.

#### *Mr Vorster's Reaction to Dr Waldheim's Report*

The Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, made an immediate statement in Pretoria to counter the accusation by Dr Waldheim that South Africa was endangering an acceptable settlement by pushing ahead with separate development plans for tribal 'homelands'.

The quickness of Mr Vorster's reaction indicated that the topic was a delicate one. He emphasised that 'no irrevocable step had yet been taken' in the constitutional development of the S.W.A. homelands.

'The choice will be theirs', he added, 'We, for our part, have never in the past been prepared to ignore the wishes of the people. Nor can we do so now. For if we did, we would make a mockery of the principle of self-determination - a principle to which the South African Government, as well as the UN and the Secretary-General, are firmly committed'.

He also said that South Africa would make it possible for the UN representative to act as a 'go between' and no obstacles would be placed in his way to meet all sections of the territory's population. He finally said 'trust and confidence' were the essentials for a solution.

#### *Reaction to Report by an overseas group*

The American Committee on Africa, a private anti-Apartheid group, has come out strongly against a proposal for the UN Secretary General, Dr Kurt Waldheim, to appoint a personal representative to conduct negotiations with South Africa over the future of S.W.A.

The committee said the proposal, expected to be discussed by the

Security Council soon, 'legitimates' or appears to legitimate the illegal South African occupation of Namibia (SWA).

### *Reaction of Security Council to Report*

With China abstaining, the Security Council approved by 14 votes to nil, Secretary-General Dr Waldheim's proposal that a special representative be appointed to continue on his behalf the dialogue with South Africa over the future of Namibia.

The voting followed indications by the Black African countries that they favoured this course.

### **Dr Alfred Escher's Visit**

Dr Escher arrived in South Africa on the 10 October, 1972 and had talks with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Mr Brand Fourie. The following day he had his first round of talks on S.W.A. before he visited the territory.

Besides going broadly into the thorny international issues of how S.W.A. should move towards independence and under whose guidance, the men were expected to reach an agreement (which they did) on Dr Escher's tour management in South Africa and S.W.A. With him was Mr M. Pedanou of Togo, Mr M. Charks of India and Mr J. Noel of France.

### *Dr Escher in S. W. A.*

On the 12 October, 1972, the UN envoy, Dr Alfred Escher, arrived in Windhoek amid political conflict and confusion. He started talks almost immediately with S.W.A. black leaders.

Before his arrival the Federal Coloured People's Party sharpened the confusion with two controversial announcements. It switched its position from acceptance of the official policy of parallel development for coloureds to a demand for a separate 'homeland'. It proposed an alliance of moderate black parties provisionally called the S.W.A. Non-European Unity Movement as a rival to the radical National Convention.

Mr Dirk Mudge, leader of the S.W.A. Legislative Assembly, and Mr Jannie de Wet, Commissioner-General for S.W.A., met Dr Escher at the J.G. Strijdom Airport. Mr Mudge accompanied Dr Escher while he was in the white-ruled part of S.W.A. and Mr de Wet accompanied him on his visits to the homelands.

Dr Escher started a two-day round of talks with black leaders in Windhoek before his departure for the homelands. No fewer than 19 political parties and official bodies wanted to meet Dr Escher. Black politicians were generally confident that the UN and South Africa would reach settle-

ment, but they mostly saw Dr Escher's visit as a last ditch try with time running out for a peaceful settlement.

On the 13 October, a group of 24 business men, teachers and clergymen told the UN envoy in a petition in Windhoek that an interim international Government should take over S.W.A. (7).

The petition to Dr Escher was handed to him on behalf of the petitioners by Canon Richard Wood of the St. George's Anglican Cathedral. The group said it supported the W.C.C. in its stand against racism. It rejected South African rule and demanded 'a unified land with freedom, opportunity and the chance to develop to the fullest'. Blacks accepted the responsibility of sharing in the government of S.W.A. on an equal basis. The petitioners suggested that the interim government should train the people (whites included) to take over the government on a basis of equality.

They said Nationalist supporters and officials victimised and intimidated people who spoke against the South African Government. The white community rejected such people and called them communists and fellow travellers.

'No non-white can seriously support the policy of separate development', they said, 'as it places them in a position of continual humiliation'. They listed 27 forms of discrimination against blacks on political, economic, social, educational and medical grounds.

The petitioners singled out the South African Police for special mention. The police misused their 'authority' and treated blacks in a despicable manner, they said. 'They terrorised people under the official policy of racism ... Non-whites see the police in the same light as the whites see the guerilla fighters on the borders'.

On the 14 October the black 'homeland' of Owambo was troubled and tense as Dr Escher arrived for a two-day visit. On the eve of his flight from Windhoek to Odangwa, police broke up a riot in the Kwayama tribal ward. Demonstrators held aloft posters and threw stones in Kalongo when they angrily rejected the official policy of separate development. The incident took place at a meeting of the Ovambo government's constitutional committee which was preparing proposals for full self-government elections.

A crowd of about 200 shouted down the speakers and held up posters which said 'Go away with your homeland policy'. They threw stones at the police, but nobody was reported hurt. Newspaper-men were refused permission to accompany Dr Escher into Owambo. Quasi-emergency regulations were in force in Owambo with provision for arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention.

Dr Escher was due to hold talks with the executive of the legislative



council. He was also due to visit Oshakati State hospital, Ongwediva College and development projects.

On the 17 October, leaders of S.W.A.'s second largest tribe, the 65 000 Damaras, told Dr Escher that they accepted self-government on the homelands pattern provided the South African Government acceded to their land demands.

In September, the Damara Council of tribesmen had threatened to throw a spanner into the works by rejecting the government's proposal for a unified Damaraland with an Ovambo-type administration. Damara leaders claimed the area mapped for the proposed homeland was no more than 'a chicken run'.

Their qualified acceptance then limited self-government made it that much easier for Dr Escher to promote his organisation's plan for independence for SWA as one unit.

The Damara statement contained one phrase of hope for Dr Escher. The leaders, after a three-hour discussion, indicated they thought the Bantustan type of administration need only serve as an interim system to unified administration for the territory. A spokesman for the council of headmen, Mr Justus Geroeb, told Dr Escher the tribe would be 'quite prepared' at a later stage to enter into a free federation of the various S.W.A. groups - if all the other groups agreed.

Before his arrival at Welwitschia, the envoy talked for four hours at Ohopoho with Kaokoveld leaders and then addressed a spontaneous gathering of 300 people.

On the 19 October Dr Escher held discussions with black political leaders, the Walvis Bay member of the legislative assembly, Mr de Jager, as well as the Mayor, the town clerk and a representative of the Chamber of Commerce. A memorandum was handed to Dr Escher on behalf of the Consultative Committee of the Manoville Coloured Township.

It said the committee feared chaos which erupted in African states after independence, would also break out in S.W.A. if the territory became independent under a majority government of indigenous nations. The memorandum also said the Committee was grateful for attempts by the South African Government to guard the borders of the territory against the incursions of terrorists. The committee was disappointed that the UN was giving a sympathetic hearing to terrorists.

Dr Alfred Escher's travelling opinion poll on the 18 October recorded another strong 'yes' vote for an independent S.W.A. The Council of Chiefs of the territory's 50 000 Hereroes told the UN envoy at the tribal capital of Okakarara that South Africa should be immediately forced to relinquish all control over S.W.A.

A line of placards all carried the same message: 'We want

independence'. Although it is not recognised officially by the South African Government, the Herero Council of Chiefs has a clear majority following in the tribe.

There was only a mild ripple of applause when he told a gathering of more than 700 Hereroes at the local community hall: 'We will try to come to a settlement with South Africa which will provide a peaceful solution to the difficulties at the moment'.

### *Clashes between Dr Escher and the South African Government*

According to newspaper reports, the dialogue on S.W.A. between the South African Government and the UN came dangerously close to breaking point. As the UN envoy flew out of Swakopmund to diamond-rich Oranjemund, it was questionable whether the discussions would survive his visit to the mandated territory (8).

The crisis between the parties came into the open on the 19 October when the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, spoke against a background of intrigue in which private statements by Dr Escher appeared to have been deliberately leaked to the SABC.

Dr Escher denied that he had made any statement which could be interpreted in the way Mr Vorster had done. An aide told newsmen that opinions expressed behind closed doors could not be called statements. Dr Escher reportedly said this was South Africa's last chance to come to a peaceful settlement with the UN. He also said change must come as apartheid was bad.

Dr Escher was quoted as saying: 'The inhumanity of the apartheid policy is not tolerated in the rest of the world. It should not be tolerated in S.W.A.'.

A South African Government official told newsmen that Dr Escher was exceeding his mandate with such statements. His brief was simply to look and listen in S.W.A. and report back to the Secretary-General. It was learnt that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Hilgard Muller, and the Department's Secretary, Mr Brand Fourie, would be flying to Oranjemund to join the UN party. It was not known if they would discuss the dispute.

The clash of views between the UN and South Africa was illustrated again on the 26 October when Dr Escher refused an invitation to watch the machinery of separate development in action in remote Kavangoland. Dr Escher forcefully showed his attitude to the homelands policy.

He indicated that he had no intention of being party to that special session of the Kavango Legislative Council at which the Transkei-type Government for the homeland was to be officially announced.

The question of whether the envoy would accept the S.A. Govern-

ment's invitation to attend the Council meeting, which had been hanging in the air since the itinerary was announced, was finally resolved in an atmosphere of obviously strained relations between the UN party and government officials conducting the tour.

The offer was made and rejected during the meeting with the executive members. Dr Escher gave as reason for the boycott that his feelings on the subject had been clear for some days.

Had he accepted the invitation, he might well have compromised on the stand of the UN - which regards all the S.W. 'homeland governments' as illegal since it claims the South African authorities have no power to bestow such freedom on the various ethnic groups.

### *Dr Escher in South Africa*

On the 30 October, Dr Escher met Mr Vorster that afternoon for what were almost certainly important discussions of his S.W.A. mission. Present at that meeting with the Prime Minister was Dr Hilgard Muller, the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

They held a three-hour discussion about his recent tour of the mandated territory. At the same time, his principal adviser, Mr Mangalan Charks of India, held separate discussions in an adjacent office with the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr Brand Fourie.

### *Report-back meeting between Dr Escher and Dr Kurt Waldheim*

On the 6 October, 1972, Dr Escher conferred with the Secretary-General of the UN, to give a verbal report on the progress made in South Africa and South West Africa.

### *Security Council's Reaction to Dr Escher's Report*

Serious misgivings were reported among UN diplomats on 14 November, 1972, about Dr Escher's findings (9). The search for a solution to the dispute appeared to be entering a precarious stage as details of Dr Escher's report spread through the UN grapevine. Many delegates, especially the Africans, were said to be disappointed with the results of his visit to South Africa and South West Africa.

Diplomats were reported to be pessimistic about the chances of the Security Council extending Dr Waldheim's mandate to seek a solution to the dispute. But this pessimism was seen by other delegates as premature, since the full details of Dr Escher's report were not yet widely known. The final report of the Secretary-General himself remains even more of a secret. According to diplomats closely involved in the briefings on Dr Escher's report, many Africans took the view that he had brought back

nothing from Pretoria to justify further consultations with the South African government.

Some Africans were said to have felt there was nothing in Dr Escher's report to warrant his statement in Pretoria that progress had been achieved in his talks there. They were also said to take exception to his reported statement to Dr Waldheim that he accepted the S.A. view that self-determination in the territory should be approached on a regional basis.

The Africans, it was said, felt that would be contrary to the principles laid down by the UN and that Dr Escher had no right to accept any such view. One African diplomat said he was 'shocked' by this passage in Dr Escher's report.

SAPA-Reuter reported that an African member of the Security Council had predicted that Escher could find himself in diplomatic 'hot water' with the majority of the council when Dr Waldheim issued his report. The diplomat based his objections on study of a two-page summary of the results of the conversations between Dr Escher and Mr Vorster, which had already been circulated among Council members.

He commented privately: 'There is no need for a new interpretation by South Africa of self-determination. We know what it means. They have in mind a delaying tactic'. He also described as 'totally unacceptable' a section of the summary saying Mr Vorster 'believed that experience in self-government was an essential element for self-determination', and adding that he felt this could 'best be achieved on a regional basis'.

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