

BLACK LABOUR

OVER THE YEARS, the question of how to maintain peaceful control of the Black Labour force has been looming over the South African Department of Labour, and its Minister.

The improvement of works committees and liason committees by legislation has done very little to improve the attitude of black workers to the solution of disputes with managements.

This perhaps could be attributed to the fact that Blacks have always held with suspicion any structures introduced by white authorities, however much these can be said to be to their benefit.

At the few places that *Black Review* has had interviews in Durban, Johannesburg, East London and King William's Town, the one thing that has come out clearly is that black workers will not be satisfied with any structures short of legalised trade unions which they can run themselves.

Most of those interviewed have themselves participated in the appointment of works committees, but some have done this because they feared victimisation by the managements, while others deliberately nominated people suspected to be in cahoots with the authorities in the interest of protecting their real leaders.

In reply to a question in the Assembly, the Minister of Labour gave the number of works committees and liason committees which were functioning by the end of 1974 as follows:

	<i>Works Committees</i>	<i>Liason Committees</i>
Cape	61	298
Natal	45	376
Orange Free State	3	58
Transvaal	98	750
	—	—
Totals	207	1482
	—	—

The Minister of Labour had repeatedly emphasised that black trade unions will not be recognised in South Africa. In spite of the non-re-

cognition of worker unions by the Government, quite a number of them have been formed already.

Concern over the uncontrolled growth of African worker organizations has grown in the white industrial sector. A report of similar concern expressed by the Natal Employers' Association appeared in a daily paper in April 1974.

It read: "Concerned at the growth of the number of African trade unions, and the fact that they are not governed by industrial laws like the registered trade unions, the Natal Employers' Association has drawn up a blue-print to deal with the situation..."¹

The recommendations of this body (NEA), which were by no means the ideal trade union organization, served to indicate the dilemma that prevails which both businessman and Government find it difficult to get over.

On the one hand the growth of 'illegal' united worker organizations bothers the industrialist who has to face the test of the strength of such a body, while on the other hand, the idea of 'legal' fully fledged African trade unions is, on the part of the Government, "too ghastly to contemplate".

During 1974 and 1975 there have been much more calls for the advancement of Blacks in the labour field than ever before. Such calls coming from white economists have been interpreted by black labour observers as an indication of the inevitable change in the Government labour policy.

Inroads have already been made by Blacks into several sections of jobs previously reserved for white occupation in the South African Railways, Post Office, mines etc.

Addressing an Institute of Personnel Management Seminar on Black Wages, held in Durban, the chief economist of Nedbank, Syfrets UAL Mr Merton Dagut predicted that 62 000 jobs currently held by Whites would have to be handed over to Blacks in the next 4 years.

Mr Dagut said "With the demand for labour increasing at an annual rate of 3,1 percent, 1979 will see a 62 000 shortage of Whites". He said if this shortage was met by suitably skilled Blacks, unemployment in this sector would fall from 5,6 percent in 1973 to 4,1 percent in 1979.²

According to Mr Dagut the black/white wage gap in industry had widened from R3 566 in 1972 to R4 325 in 1974, but even taking inflation into account, the gap had not been narrowed at all.³

Job Reservation Eased

The South African Railways headquarters revealed on March 3, 1975, that more than 13 000 Blacks were employed in 'white' jobs. Of this number, 4501 were classified as temporary replacements.⁴

A spokesman for the railways said that the main temporary replacements included 1463 black road transport drivers, 816 flagmen, 23 construction machinery operators and 123 crane drivers. These Blacks, according to the spokesman, were supposed to hold the jobs for as long as there were no white applicants for them.

“In fact there is very little chance that any of them will ever have to make way for Whites, in the light of the shortage of white labour”, said the spokesman.⁵

Jobs classified as white in which permanent black replacements had been taken on included 3891 shunters and 1357 sorters.

The Minister of Labour revealed in Parliament that in certain industries, representations had been made either by the white trade unions or employers' organizations to have work reservation regulations lifted.⁶

In his statement, the Minister said that in the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industries the job reservation provisions had been suspended for the currency of certain Industrial Council's agreements whereby such reservation had been entrenched.

In the motor assembly industry the reservation regulations had been suspended in respect of certain firms. The Minister mentioned that in all cases, the specific understanding was that work reservation would again be applied should it appear that the interest of the white workers were not protected.

He further revealed that during May and June, 1974, representations for the abolition of certain work reservation determinations, in so far as they applied to the Liquor and Catering Trade in Natal, were received from Industrial Councils in Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

The Building Industry

The Secretary for Labour announced in January 1975 that job reservation in the building industry was to be eased to allow more opportunities for Coloured workers, as per recommendations made by the Industrial Tribunal which reviewed job reservation in the building sector.⁷

The main recommendations were that job reservation be scrapped in all rural areas, where there were hardly any White artisans; that the same be the case for Kimberley, Grahamstown and Queenstown areas where similar circumstances existed; that more jobs be ceded to Coloured workers in more white areas as well, on condition that the job was normally no longer done by Whites, or that it was not to the detriment of Whites.

The recommendations were to take effect from July 28, 1975. As far as African workers were concerned the Secretary said: “the position

remains unchanged and will, as in the past, be regulated by the Bantu Building Workers Act of 1951".

"The Act places a total prohibition on the employment of Bantu on any skilled building work in an urban area, other than Bantu areas, except with the written consent of the Minister of Labour".

Reacting to the new recommendations, a leading coloured trade unionist, Mr Ronald Webb expressed bitter disappointment that barriers against coloured workers in the metropolitan areas were not to be scrapped altogether. "I cannot see that this new determination will change the coloured workers' position much", he said.⁸

The Bantu Building Workers Act of 1951 referred to above was intended to train African workers to construct dwellings in African areas only. In reply to another question in Parliament, the Minister of Labour disclosed that there were altogether 7 782 African building workers registered in terms of the Act; categorised as follows:—

Blocklaying:	95
Bricklaying:	3812
Bricklaying and plastering:	347
Carpentry:	1368
Carpentry and joinery:	54
Joinery:	1
Painting:	779
Plastering:	646
Plumbing:	641
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Total	7782
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The Mining Industry

During 1974 and 1975 South African mines experienced a wide escalation of labour unrest which was not matched by any other in the very recent years of mining in this country.

The *Financial Mail*, in its special June survey of the business scene, published on June 6, 1975, put it this way: "Things have been relatively quiet in the industrial sectors, compared to the trauma of the Durban strikes which ushered in 1973.

"But the mines have suffered an upsurge of violence costing more than 130 black miners' lives in the last 18 months—a disturbing phenomenon because no one really understands it".

The blame for the miners' violent expression of frustration has gone to all sorts of causes, including drunkenness and disputes over women although mainly intergroup animosities have been singled out for blame.

In its analysis of the situation, the *Financial Mail Special Survey* said: "Whatever the immediate causes, the migrant labour system—

which herds thousands of men into barrack-like compounds—is probably a major contributory factor. If so, this augurs ill for future industrial peace”.

In a statement on the labour unrest in the country, the National director of the South African Institute of Personnel Management, Mr David Jackson, put the blame for the worsening strike situation on the Government for failing to provide a clear lead on labour matters.

Mr Jackson pointed out three main factors for blame:

- Lack of co-ordinated action on wages, communication, job opportunities and training.
- Inadequate use of professional, personnel and training management in South Africa.
- A lack of clear directives and incentives from the Government.⁹

He pointed out that the Government was leaving the initiative for resolving labour matters to industrialists. “Given a clear policy framework this type of strategy is acceptable, but with the atmosphere of double-talk and political intrigue surrounding labour matters in South Africa, it is a step both unwise and unethical,” he said.

Hundreds of Black miners from Lesotho and the Eastern Cape had to go home after some bitter clashes at the mines. Some of the miners met by *Black Review* at the railway station in Umtata did not quite articulate the problem, more than just saying it was general frustration arising out of many factors in the work situation, which tends to come out in the form of violence towards the next man over fairly trivial matters.

The unfortunate result of this was that it often generated support from close associates of both parties involved, which inevitably led to wider confrontations, superficially recognised as ‘inter-tribal animosities’.

Social Responsibilities of Business

Mr Harry Oppenheimer, the chairman of Anglo-American Corporation, in a paper captioned “A defence of freedom itself”, outlined the importance of the industrialist taking a more human look at workers and their lives as people rather than regarding the payment of wages and salaries as just an impersonal aspect of overheads if labour unrest were to be avoided. “Unless the representation of Black workers for discussing and negotiation with management is radically and rapidly improved that unrest is going to have very serious consequences indeed,” Mr Oppenheimer said.¹⁰

The same trend of thought which was expressed by other employer representatives and organizations like the Federated Chamber of Industries called for consideration of a more human and socially oriented policy for Black workers.

Black Workers from Neighbouring African States

An important development in the South African mine labour scene was the decision of the Malawi President Kamuzu Banda to halt mine labour recruiting in Malawi, following an air crash in April 1974 in which 74 Malawian miners were killed.

His decision forced the mining industry to woo more South Africans to the mines. It has been noted that South Africa has, for many years, been providing only about a quarter of the gold-mines' 370 000 black miners.¹¹

An even much more noteworthy development has been the victory of Frelimo in Mozambique which gave birth to a completely changed society in that country. As a result of the change, the South African mining industry has come to face the big question of whether the Mozambique administration will allow continued South African recruiting of men for mine labour.

Observers believed that even if the administrative changes in the newly liberated countries do not result in withdrawal of labour, the rising political aspirations brought about by the advent of power transfer in the neighbouring countries is likely to heavily influence the labour issue in the mines.

Black Workers Charged in Connection with Strikes

The Minister of labour disclosed that during the last six months of 1974, there was a total of 135 strikes involving Africans, 125 of these were caused by wage demands.¹²

During the same period, a total of 841 workers were known to have been arrested and charged. The different charges preferred against them were as follows:—

- (a) Illegal strike—308
- (b) Breach of contract by people employed in public utility service
- (c) Public violence—61 —307
- (d) Intimidation of persons in relation to either employment—23
- (e) Assault on Police—2
- (f) Incitement of others to take part in a strike—2
- (g) Unlawful obstruction of public street—108
- (h) Refusing to obey lawful command of employer—30¹³

REFERENCES

¹RDM 12.4.74.

²*Sunday Tribune* 29.6.75.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Natal Mercury* 4.3.75.

⁵*Natal Mercury* 4.3.75.

⁶1974 *Hansard* 3 Col 187.

⁷RDM 22.1.75.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹RDM 30.30.7.74.

¹⁰Supplement to *Financial Mail* June 6, 1975.

¹¹*Ibid* ro *Financial Mail* June 6, 1975.

¹²1975 *Hansard* 3 Col 204 and 205.

¹³1975 *Hansard* 3 Col 209.