

Medical treatment was either absent on the plantations or highly inadequate and, in complete breach of agreement, the labourers were made to pay for it themselves. There were outbreaks of TB and malaria, and thousands died of 'flu. These conditions were similar to those African slaves experienced in America.

The Indian workers complained. In 1972 what was called a Coolie Commission was set up. They listened to the complaints of the workers and they said they were mostly true. Because of this Report the Indian Government stopped all labour recruiters from Natal coming to India. But the system was profitable for the sugar farmers and they needed labour. So they were able to persuade the Indian Government, after 6 years, to continue supplying indentured labourers.

The sugar farmers looked on 'coolie' labour as a necessity - they wanted cheap 'labour units', and this is what they got. The cost of importing a 'coolie' was about R34. The farmer paid 2/3rds of the cost and the government 1/3rd. The majority of Whites saw the Indian labourers as a necessary evil - they feared that when they had completed their 'indentures' (contracts) they would become successful farmers, traders, and skilled workers, who would compete with them for jobs and business. Their attitude was summed up by a White store-keeper who said: "Indian are conceded to be a necessary evil; we cannot do without them as labourers - we can do without them as storekeepers."

In the next article we will describe how the colonists put obstacles in their way when these labourers left the sugar plantations and tried to start businesses and find better jobs in Natal.

RECENT WORKERS' STRUGGLES

Since the issue of the last Isibenzoni there have been strikes at the following factories: Acme Timber Industries, Balatium Linoleums, Reynolds, Escom Power Station and the Post Office. We can learn something from the efforts of these workers.

At the Acme factory about 80 African and Indian workers were dismissed for demanding an increase of R3,00. Management said they would re-employ only those workers who were needed. The workers then decided that they would all stay away from work. At Reynolds the Management dismissed 90 workers who were demanding wage increases that had been promised. Management then said that they couldn't re-employ all the workers as they had already taken on 20 other workers. They also tried to create disunity among the workers by deceiving them. About 11 workers at Reynolds were standing outside the factory when one of management people asked them why they weren't working since some other workers had already returned to their jobs. This was not true but on hearing this the workers went back and so the Management succeeded in creating disunity among the workers.

During the first week of May, 100 African and Coloured workers from the Post Office went on strike. The reason for this was that the increase from R10 to R15 was not sufficient. The Coloured workers also went on strike for the same reason. This strike disrupted all the Post Offices. In this case although the workers did not receive the wages of R30 they had asked for they did manage to get increases and they also learned the value of the workers uniting.

At the Escon Power Station near Pinetown, 300 African workers went on strike, demanding an increase and also demanding the reinstatement of Mr Khumalo who had been a member of the Works Committee. Mr Khumalo had informed the Management about the wage demands and his dismissal was seen by other workers as victimisation. Management promised that there would be increases in July and also that the reinstatement of Mr Khumalo would be discussed so the workers returned to work.

At the Linoleum factory 180 workers went on strike because Management refused to give wage increases. The workers were earning R60 per month and they demanded an increase of 50c per hour. They were informed that Management could only offer an increase of 2c per hour and that if workers were unhappy they could leave. The workers accepted this offer.

At Tayco 80 Indians and Coloured workers went on strike demanding wage increases. After the Industrial Council had decided on wage increases for all clothing industries, organisers of the Garment Workers' Union said that Management had promised workers bonuses but the Management at Tayco refused to give an increase and a bonus. When the workers felt that they couldn't agree to this offer, Management told them to leave. After negotiations by the Garment Union, Management promised to re-employ the workers with the exception of those they deemed to be agitators. The workers refused to comply, showing their bravery and in-so doing enhanced their unity.

Many Indian workers experience the same problems as those faced by Africans. There are Indian workers who receive lower wages than some African workers especially in the Border areas. They are often maltreated by their employers. That is why they strike - to get better treatment and higher wages.

What is the reason for all these strikes? The cost of living is rising and wages do not increase accordingly so workers become poorer. They then strike, trying to get some more money.

Employers should realise that workers should have Unions so that disputes can be resolved through negotiations. They should also realise that without Unions strikes will continue.