A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF LABOUR ACTION IN NAMIBIA

by A.J. Gordon

Despite the fact that the 1920 Administrator's Report felt that the Native Question is synonymous with the Labour Question, the authorative and influential Odendaal Commission Report dealt with labour in a single paragraph. Indeed, over the years it has become almost axiomatic for the Administrator in his end of the year review of conditions in the Territory to say that 'race relations are harmonious and the labour force is contented'. Jenny, a German commentator, says:

> 'I know no Bantu people in the whole of Southern Africa who the Europeans respect more than the Ovambo. Their soberness, honesty and industriousness are praised everywhere'.

The Ovambo contract labour strike is accordingly seen by Whites to be an exception rather than the rule. The strike of 1971 was certainly remarkable in terms of its wide-ranging collective action and the apparent impact it had on the Whites in the Territory, but it was most certainly not the first manifestation of labour action in Namibia as many commentators believe.

THE HISTORY OF BLACK LABOUR PROTEST

In truth collective Black labour protest against conditions imposed upon them by the colonialists can be said to have started shortly after the Territory was formally annexed by Germany and has apparently been a constant feature of the labour scene ever since. This article describes the first recorded strike we could find and then describes some of the features on the labour front between the years 1950-1970. The events reported here must be seen as only a partial assessment of the situation and the conclusions tentative since research on this topic is bedevelled by certain factors: The relative inaccessibility of official records; the fact that the White chroniclers of the Colonial era tend to view Black labour protest

as 'unnatural' and 'caused' by 'agitators'. Protests were seen as being trivial and treated accordingly. The international situation has also resulted in protests against the labour system either not being reported in the press or being played down.

THE FIRST LABOUR STRIKE

The first labour strike apparently occured during December 1893 at the South West Africa Company mine at Gross Otavi. For a recording of this event we are indebted to Mathew Rogers, the Mine Manager who was evidently a keen diarist. It is worth quoting quite extensively from Rogers' diary because of the historical importance of this event and because it provides grounds for reflecting on how little labour relations in the Territory have changed.

Rogers conducted his mining operations during a period when the Germans had not as yet consolidated their rule and 'subdued' the various indigenous 'tribes'. Thus, while Rogers had the official permission of the German authorities, he also had to deal with the various local chiefs. This was necessary, not only with regard to the mineral rights, but also with regard to labour supply.

THE CHIEFS' REPRESENTATIVES

The jurisdiction claimed by these chiefs was in part based on their claim to have supported mining operations by supplying labour. Accordingly many chiefs sent representatives to protect their interests: to see that the labourers received proper treatment from the whites; to grant the labourers leave where necessary and to generally be responsible for the labourers' living quarters. The whites viewed these dignitaries as a glorified excuse to beg for tobacco, food, liquor and money and accordingly put them to 'work' without due regard to their status. This caused dissatisfaction and was the precipitating factor of the strike. To quote from Rogers' diary:

'We have two classes of workmen engaged with us,

those assisting the mines, who earn 30/- per month, and labourers and jobbers earning 20/- per month. It will be remembered that when Samuel Maherero, the paramount chief sent two of his men here to represent his authority, Kamabazembie also sent two men. In his letter introducing them to me, he begged me to give them work.

Consequently I gave them labourers' work, peying them the usual wages with additional presents. Evidently they were dissatisfied at this rate of wages, as they refused to take it at the regular pay. During the evening, they, the Hottentot Chiefs (who were here to collar the Berg Damaras' pay) and the Ovambos conspired together to cause a general strike for increase of wages, consequently on the 5th December, when some of the native mining force went to their work, the combined force, with threats and cudjels prevented them. They came to me and said: 'They were willing to work but were not allowed'. I informed them I did not wish to force them, but if they care to work, I would protect them..... On reaching their work I stood between the workers and the non-workers'. One of the pickets tried to assault Rogers which resulted in Rogers informing the picket that 'I could not stand that, and should protect myself and those under me, and sent for my revolver.....'

RETURN TO WORK

Rogers writes that the Blacks eventually all returned to work 'when they saw my determined attitude'. 'I am glad the strike ended as peacably as it did, but.....There is still, however an undercurrent of feeling, and they may break out again at any time, and because of this, some believe the late fire to be the result of an incendiary'.

On the 20th December there was a further strike which resulted in a total work stoppage for a few days. This strike was broken by cutting the food

rations *in toto* and by sending away the 'leaders of the agitators'.

WORKER CONSCIOUSNESS OR TRADITIONALISM?

Was this strike the result of 'worker consciousness' or of traditionalism? Rogers felt that it was the latter. He blamed the Hereros (Kama - bazembie's men) : "Doubtless, these Damaras (Hereros) were disappointed at receiving the same pay as others doing the same work, thinking themselves big men". He could not accept that they were dissatisfied with wages at the time of the strike: "I might remark that, never in my experience has the rate of pay amongst native coloured races been so high as it was here."

WHITE IDEOLOGY AND REALITY

In order to resolve this issue, one needs to examine some earlier entries to Rogers' diary. Rogers apparently had continual 'problems' with his labour force, 'problems' which have a familiar ring about them even today, 'problems' which are still manifested in white ideology. He found the blacks to be lazy, unreliable, and drunkards. So 'bad' were they that: "*The only thing I can do under the circumstances is to cultivate that estimable virtue, patience, and in this country there is plenty of scope for its exercise* ". He writes that: "These natives are so slow as to make it impossible to work with any degree of speed". Not only were they 'slow', but they were also 'lazy', taking frequent work breaks (unauthorized) and being absent from work. This was manifested in and attributed to the fact that "they have not sufficient stamina for continuous manual labour and hence frequently give in, complaining they are sick, which only means they are tired and sore from their exertions". However, a few months earlier, Rogers had written: "Throughout the months we had been passing through a rather severe ordeal of sickness. Fever and ague prevailed to such an extent among the native population and especially among our employees as to assume epidemic form". Dysentry, bronchitis, diaorrhea, malaria, opthalmia and influenza were common

afflictions and rampant in the mining camp.

Rogers was apparently subject to incessant complaints about the lack of food, notwithstanding the fact that his workers received five pounds of meat and meal per day and two pannikens of sugar per week. Later, however, reflecting on the strike he notes: "As I have frequently remarked, the food our men get is ample for themselves, but there is always a large following surrounding them, that, doubtless, when divided among so many is not sufficient for all".

THE WORKERS' AWARENESS

The following exerpts from the diary indicate how aware the blacks were of their roles as mine - workers. The blacks could not be depended upon "or in their continuous working, (they) being almost suspicious that they are not being paid sufficiently for this labour". Another entry notes the "great risks" under which black labour was employed: "If an accident occurs (and accidents will appear under the most careful management) we shall be held responsible and shall be held responsible and shall have to pay heavy damages in some way or another, if not with our lives. To employ only all Europeans brings us under the stigma of wishing to strengthen our position for hostile purposes".

POST WORLD WAR II PERIOD

Having shown how old the tradition of labour action is, we now turn to an examination of the post World War II period until events immediately preceeding the 1971 strike. Our information is derived from the files of a Windhoek newspaper, "Die Suidwes-Afrikaner".

The conditions which gave rise to the Great Strike of 1971 have existed for a long time and the Ovambo have been aware of them for a long time. A letter of 20 November 1952 from "Ovambo Male Okuga Jepongo of Ondangua, Ovamboland" complains about the serious malnutrition and underdevelopment in the 'homeland'.

An important factor in contributing to this situation being that "The whole Ovambo-tribe is a fixed property of SWANLA (a human trade firm) and are the cheapest labourers for all the employers". The letter concludes with the statement that "The poor Ovambo tribe has not got a mouth piece to interpret its unsolved problems". Indeed, formal channels for the airing of grievances have been practically non-existent and where they have existed, the Ovambo workers have considered them ineffective.

'DESERTION'

Ovambo contract workers have thus resorted to other means of communicating and transcending their grievances. Probably the most commonly resorted to method was 'deserting'. 'Deserters' as a topic features consistently at the annual Congress of the S.W.A. Agricultural Union. So wide-spread and common was deserting that the farmers apparently nicknamed their contract labourers 'inspectors' because they came to the farm on a contract, 'inspected' the farm and then deserted. So often did deserting take place that most farmers felt that it was not even worth their while to lay charges with the S.A. Police. Despite the fact that in 1958 it was estimated that the farmers were short of 10,817 labourers, they felt that higher wages would not improve the situation. Instead, it appears from the newspaper files that farmers increasingly resorted to coercion in order to maintain their labour force. Thus at the Congress immediately prior to the 1971 strike farmers openly admitted that they resorted to '*bush justice*': when a labourer deserted they personally tracked them down and dealt with the labourers themselves and proudly proclaimed that "they will not desert again". Another method resorted to was to with-hold wages until the end of the contract.

An indication of how bad conditions were on the farms, and the success of the Ovambo strategy can be seen in that at the 1955 Congress a motion was tabled requesting that the contract workers on the way to take up contracts with farmers should be

accompanied by guards right to their destinations since they were deserting even before they took up employment.

In 1962 farmers noted with concern that there was 'increasing organized deserting', while SWANLA reported that there were certain districts to which contract workers refused to go. At the same Congress, a farmer mentioned that in Windhoek alone, there were over 2,000 uncontracted Ovambo. Another report dated 4 June 1965 stated that in the small fishing village of Luderitz there were over 600 'illegal' Ovambo and only 220 'legal' Ovambo resident there.

COMPARATIVE EASE OF DESERTION

In comparison to South Africa, it was relatively 'easier' to desert. It was only in July 1970 that legislation was passed making Population Group Classification compulsory. Prior to this there was no general registration of the population and consequently no-one had to carry and Identity Card (with photograph); neither was the registration of African births compulsory, thus officials had difficulty in disproving a man's claim to having been born in an urban area.

By law all blacks are compelled to carry an 'I.P.' (Identification Paper) in which an individual was identified by his often illegible 'thumbprint'. Since no official was going to take the time to check thumbprints except in exceptional cases, the 'I.P.' often proved ineffective; for example, while no Black man could be issued with a railway ticket without showing his 'I.P.', Ovambo bypassed this problem by either borrowing an 'I.P.' or asking a friend to get the ticket for them. Likewise, this strategy was often used in order to obtain a 'visitor's pass', a'temporary work pass' or a new name; in short, a new identity for those Ovambo who wished to remain in the urban areas.

POPULATION GROUP CLASSIFICATION ACT

The implementation of the Population Group Classification Act from the end of 1970 did much to close this avenue of identity switching, since photograph identification cards were now made compulsory. This act thus did much to heighten the sense of injustice the Ovambo workers felt and probably was a major factor in creating the necessary degree of worker consciousness needed for the 1971 strike to be as wide-spread as it was.

These efforts to desert were mostly individually organized attempts, although there were the exceptions: thus a white construction foreman on 9 October 1964 expressed his surprise that his 21 contract-workers had deserted *en masse* because he would not accede to their request that they only be allowed to work 8 hours a day. Two other similar cases were found in the newspaper files.

COLLECTIVE PROTEST

Our examination of newspaper files brought a total of 43 collective actions by Ovambo contract workers in the white-controlled industrial milieux to light. While desertions can be seen as having the effect of *beating* the 'system', the primary focus of these collective actions was as a *protest* against the 'system'.

The following serves to summarize in a very brief and rudimentary way the emergent pattern of labour unrest in Namibia.

The scenes of these actions tended to occur in the larger towns or where large concentrations of Ovambo were housed. Thus Windhoek had 11, Tsumeb 10, Other Mines 12, S.A. Railways 5, Walvis Bay 5 and Luderitz 2 collective actions. The distribution of these actions is probably more a function of where the newspaper had a correspondent than a reflection of the actual situation.

The number of people involved in these actions ranged from 11 contract workers at the J.G. Strydom Airport who were charged with refusing to obey an instruction and being absent without leave when they went on strike because a Policeman had arrested a colleague for 'deliberately' dropping packages, to over 2,000 Ovambo who on 30 September 1948 went on strike at Tsumeb when a 13 year-old white youth shot and killed a fellow worker. The average number of contract workers involved per action was 313.

THE ISSUES AT STAKE

The issues at stake varied from Police raids on 'kaffir' beer brewing sites (6), to dissatisfaction with a specific white, usually a first-line supervisor (7), to protests about working conditions in general (6), to the wage issue in particular (8), and to what the contract precisely entailed (3). A number were also directed against black policemen or supervisors for what can best be regarded as 'improper interference' (7). Overall, there appears to be a historical change in frequency from actions directed towards individuals and arising from specific acts towards broader, more general issues such as wages or working conditions. This is closely reflected in the actions taken by the workers. Initially actions tended to be more violent and oriented towards individuals. How 'emotional' and 'irrational' these actions were is however subject to interpretation. For example, the workers in the Windhoek Compound (17 May 1966) ran amok in protest against the bad food, and stoned a police-van, but when police reinforcements arrived on the scene they found the 'situation' quiet. It is suggested that the workers had a clear conception of when the odds were in their favour and when they were not.

ACTIONS BECOME MORE ORDERED AND SPECIFIC

These actions became noticeably more ordered and specific. Perhaps the best example of this is the 1968 strike at the Walvis Bay fishing factories when over a 1,000 contract workers went on strike

because they wanted the night shift to be reckoned as overtime. This strike dragged on for three or four weeks before the strikers were eventually repatriated. During the whole period of the strike no damage to property was reported. (It is interesting to note that a short while after the Walvis Bay strike Ratledge, the Manager of Tsumeb Mine, officially denied that there was a strike at Tsumeb. He said however that contract workers had had numerous small group discussions and that he had been approached by a deputation which had requested significant wage increases. He had turned down their request and they had peacefully returned to work). A further incident can be mentioned to illustrate the 'rationality' of the workers while under the stress of a collective action: On 8 June 1954 the S.A. Police made one of their regular raids on a 'kaffir-beer' brewing site in a maize field near the Tsumeb Compound. They left their vehicle in charge of a single white constable and proceeded on foot. The constable saw a group of contract workers and decided to arrest them. The workers however, decided otherwise, and by diligent prodding with sticks they marched the constable into the compound and locked him up in a room for a few hours before releasing the 'redfaced' constable.

COUNTER - ACTION

Counter-action by the authorities was almost always harsh and in most cases the police were called in. Four contract workers were fatally shot and at least six were wounded as a result of these measures. Where the workers were compound based, the almost invariable official reaction was to raid the compound a day or two after the strike in search of illicit alcohol and weapons.

Workers were generally charged under one or two of three headings: Public violence; the Masters and Servants Ordinance or the Mines and Works Ordinance. Where the workers were found guilty, in addition to gaol and/or fine they were repatriated back to Ovamboland. It should be noted that arrestation appears to be selective: where the organization stood to be paralysed if all the strikers were

arrested, only the 'agitators' or 'belhamels' were taken into custody. Sometimes this took place at the strike but often these arrests were made a few days later when the situation was defused. The fines these workers faced were, if viewed against the prevailing wage rates of that period, rather severe. For example, the 55 Otjiwarongo Railway construction men who struck in January 1960 were fined between £1 and £5 the equivalent of between 4/5 month's and 4 months' wages. Not surprisingly, they rather went to gaol for sentences ranging from 14 to 30 days. The Ovambo who went on strike in Windhoek for a similar reason - refusing to work under a specific white, were fined R30.00 or 90 days in 1962.

In this regard what does appear interesting, although the data are insufficient to warrant anything more than a suggestion, is that since 1962 the punishments for striking have become increasingly less severe. This can probably be attributed to the changing international relationships with regard to the territory. Up to 1962, no striker had much choice and generally went to gaol, after 1962 it appears that more and more strikers managed to pay their fines.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, a brief and often elliptical description of recent labour action by Ovambo contract workers has been given. For want of proper and sufficient sources its tentative nature must be stressed. However, it does serve to illustrate two important points: firstly, that labour action has played an important, if on the surface somewhat unsuccessful role in the territory's labour history, especially when viewed against the territory's sparse population and limited industrialization. Secondly, labour action forms a significant part of the Ovambo contract workers' oral traditions and thus played an important role in determining the form and content of the great Ovambo strike of 1971.

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