

# **The Working Class, the State and Social Change in Botswana**

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## **Introduction**

The working class in capitalist society, broadly defined, consists of those persons who sell their labour in order to purchase the means of subsistence. In expending this labour they create the wealth of society, but themselves receive a wage representing less than the value created. That value (a surplus value, in excess of that required for subsistence) accrues to those who employ labour, those who own the means of production, those who have capital. This article is concerned with the working class in more or less full-time employment in commercial and industrial enterprises and in the state apparatus (local and central government) in Botswana.

A major implication of this rough definition of the working class is the obvious opposition of capital (the bourgeoisie) and labour (the proletariat). This opposition takes the form of classes locked in struggles at various levels. But these struggles take place in conditions where capital is dominant. This domination conditions the struggles of the working class and is characterised by the complex mediations of the struggles through the state. The state, in its enactment of laws, use of force, and policies adopted, acts to organise and reproduce the domination of capital and to disorganise the dominated classes.

Generally the working class in Botswana is numerically small, badly educated, divided horizontally in 'economic' sectors, and vertically within enterprises, is poorly paid and lacks an authentic working class organisation. It is generally politically isolated from other classes in society with whom it shares certain objective characteristics. In particular, the 'internal' working class has few links with the peasantry, or migrant workers who work outside Botswana. The working class is dominated by a state which represents capitalist interests including those of the metropolitan bourgeoisie in alliance with a local governing petty-bourgeoisie. The present article briefly examines this situation historically, then looks more carefully at the post-independence era, concluding with some comments on problems and prospects for the future.

## **The Working Class in Historical Perspective**

The history of the working class in Botswana is primarily the history of imperialism in this country. That history has been one of the subordination of the people of Botswana to the requirements of international capital, specifically to British and South African capital. A concrete manifestation of this is the drain of manpower from Botswana to the mines, farms and factories of South Africa, the whole system of migrant labour. 'Bechuanaland' became a 'labour reserve' for the South African economy.

It is important to see that this is something that happened to Botswana. It is not, in other words a 'natural' fact. The natural environment of marginal soils and unpredictable rainfall did not alone cause labour migration; this was mainly the result of the imposition of taxation, the enforcement of internal and external boundaries, and the undermining of then existing productive capacity in agriculture and manufacturing beginning at the end of the 19th century.

The colonial government was the instrument engaged in creating and maintaining this situation. Through the imposition of taxation, and its other activities, the colonial government created conditions causing men to search for work and then facilitated their emigration to South Africa. In particular, virtually nothing was done to develop the productive capacity of African agriculture in the colonial period. The colonial government, throughout most of the colonial period, channeled virtually no resources into developing social services and industrial capacity.

The consequences of this for the development of the working class in Botswana were significant. The total number of workers was very small. As there was little development of manufacturing, there was no rapid growth in the number of workers. Secondly, the working class constituted largely agricultural workers on freehold farms, in commerce and on the railway. All these sections were geographically dispersed and isolated, making it difficult for workers to be in touch with one another. Thirdly, the enterprises tended to be very small, each employing only a few workers. No single enterprise, with the possible exception of the railway, provided a numerically strong base for working class organisational development. Fourthly, throughout most of the colonial period the development of working class organisation would have been viewed with hostility by the colonial government.

The results of such factors were predictable. By 1964 there were only about 31 600 workers in employment in Botswana and this includes self-

employed traders and other petty-bourgeois elements.<sup>1</sup> The first union was only formed in 1949 in Francistown and the first and unsuccessful attempt at establishing a federation of unions came only in 1966, the year of independence.<sup>2</sup> Despite these facts, the urbanised working class did have an impact on politics during the nationalist period. It largely supported the then Bechuanaland Peoples' Party, and was involved in several impressive public demonstrations against the colonial government, notably in Francistown and Lobatse.

### **The Working Class in the Post-Independence Period**

The purpose of this section is to outline some of the leading characteristics of the working class since 1966. In doing so, mention will be made of the size, concentration, wages, and organisation of the working class. There are problems in estimating the size of the working class because most government statistics are based on total number employed rather than figures based on whether this is wage labour, self-employment, etc. One can get a more realistic figure by looking at wages paid, but here again the result will be somewhat imprecise. Official figures of total employment show significant increases over the independence period. Total formal sector employment increased to 47 804 in 1972 and by 1976 reached 71 380.<sup>3</sup> However, if one takes a more realistic look at wage levels, the actual working class component of these figures is smaller. In reality, the clearly identifiable working class in 1973 was roughly 44 000 and in 1976 was roughly 48 000.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in 1976 with a total labour force numbering 373 000, roughly 12% were in the working class properly speaking, i.e., in more or less full-time wage labour in Botswana.<sup>5</sup>

The working class is also geographically dispersed and divided in small units into a variety of different activities. More than half (57%) of the working class live in urban areas, but this is divided into four towns with Gaborone having 27%, Selebi-Pikwe 12%, Francistown 10% and Lobatse 9%.<sup>6</sup> The rest work in villages and more rural areas. The average size of enterprises tends to be small which means that the working class is divided among a large number of small enterprises. In 1976, in the private sector there were 1 368 enterprises some 97% of which had 100 or fewer employees. 68% of enterprises had 10 or fewer employees. Of the 46 enterprises with more than 100 employees, 13 or 28% were in construction (where the work is carried out on geographically dispersed sites), 4 were in mining and quarrying, and 5 were in manufacturing.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the division of work those in employment were distributed

among a variety of types of work. In 1976 of those in formal employment (regardless of wage level), 13,1% were in mining and quarrying, 14,4% in construction, 19,5% in commerce and 19,4% in the industrial class. Only 11,1% were in manufacturing and 8,1% were in (freehold) agriculture. The remaining 14,4% were divided among electricity and water (1,8%), transport and communications (3,5%), finance (5,2%), and community and social services (3,9%).<sup>8</sup> In terms of the division of labour as skilled and unskilled, in 1976 about 52% of all employment was skilled in the formal sector, although this varied from 10% in freehold agriculture, 28% in transport and communications, to 93% in education, 64% in central government, 54% in manufacturing and 40% in mining and quarrying.<sup>9</sup>

The working class as a whole has been paid very low wages. Agriculture, commerce, manufacturing and construction were the least well paid, and in none of these areas did more than 40% receive wages of more than P 50 (1 Pula equals R1) per month. Of those receiving no regular wage, 22% were in agriculture and 38% were in commerce.

In 1976 there were also differences between wages in the private and public sectors. 55% of workers in the private sector, as against 13% of workers in the public sector, earned P 50 or less per month, although at the very top 3,6% of 'private' workers and 1,1% of 'public' workers earned P 151-200 per month. The bulk (88%) of 'public' workers earned P 51-100 per month.<sup>10</sup> The advantage of public over private workers in 1976 is, however, marginal when one compares wages to an arbitrary measure of the standard of living of the working class. Here we find that 88% of workers in the Industrial Class receive wages below the Poverty Datum Line (PDL) and 99% receive wages below the Effective Minimum Level (EML). In the private sector, there are 87% below the PDL and 96% below the EML. The differences are slight and demonstrate the essential similarity in the condition of workers in the public and private sectors.<sup>11</sup> Thus, despite the criticisms of this particular PDL by the Employment Development Adviser,<sup>12</sup> the number below acceptable levels is very large indeed.

According to 1978 figures, minimum wages in the public sector have just kept pace with inflation since 1974 and although the proportionate increase in private sector minimum wages during the period has been greater, in 1978 private sector minimum wages were still only two-thirds of those in the public sector.<sup>13</sup> There are as yet no minimum wages for agricultural workers or domestic servants, who are among the lowest paid (if paid in cash at all) of all workers.<sup>14</sup>

## **The State and the Working Class in the Post-Independence Period**

The above description helps build a picture both of the condition of the working class and of the prospects for its sustaining permanent organizational strength. The former picture is one of poverty and instability; the latter is one of problems arising historically from the size and divisions of the class.

The colonial period created these conditions. It was the interests of British, South African and Rhodesian capital which dictated colonial policy. The effect, was the creation of Bechuanaland as a labour reserve and the reproduction of this through its integration in the Southern African Customs Union, the lack of any development in Bechuanaland, and the domination of the colonial government which represented the interests ultimately of British imperialism. The effect on the working class has been severe as noted above.

This general situation has been reproduced in the post-colonial period where the direct domination of the metropolitan bourgeoisie has been replaced by the domination of that class through an alliance with a dependent but local capitalist class in charge of the post-colonial state apparatus. And this state, through its laws, policies, etc., is principally responsible for the continued political weakness of the working class despite several significant working class struggles. Through this, Botswana as a point of capital accumulation is reproduced, meeting for the time being the needs of the dominant and governing classes.

Organisationally, the domination of the working class is illustrated by the Trade Unions Act under which all unions must be registered and with which they must comply under threat of heavy penalties. The disorganising effect of the post-colonial state is evident in several respects, each of which may have a small impact, but the cumulative effect is devastating. First, the very definition of a 'trade union' in Botswana's law is debilitating. A union is defined as "...any combination of more than thirty persons...associated together primarily for the purpose of regulating relations between employees and employers or between employees and employees in any industry, trade, or occupation..."<sup>15</sup> Where the size of the working class is small, the requirement of 30 persons may prevent organisation. More significant is the requirement that unions must be defined in terms of individual industries, trades and occupations. The Act makes illegal a **single** trade union for all workers in the country. Further on this point the Registrar of Unions "...shall refuse to register any trade union if he is satisfied that...the combination seeking registration is an organisation consisting of persons engaged in or

working at more than one trade or calling, and that its constitution and rules do not contain suitable provision for the protection and promotion of their respective sectional industrial interests..."<sup>16</sup> Where workers are thus divided, individual union membership will be small and being poor, each union's finances will be inadequate. Additionally there will arise individual sectional interests with each union defining itself very narrowly, not clearly perceiving its joint interests with all other workers.

Another area of legal disability is that the Registrar must refuse registration if "...any of the proposed officers of the trade union or any other committee member thereof is a person who is not a citizen of Botswana."<sup>17</sup> In a situation like Botswana's where colonial history denied to the working class any opportunity for formal education and where some of the more articulate and skilled workers are non-Batswana, this provision denies the working class the services in unions of some of its more educated, articulate, and experienced members.

Furthermore, the unions representing the largest numbers, being unskilled workers, were subjected to a severe restriction in 1974. An amendment to the Act provided that "in no trade, industry or occupation shall persons employed in a managerial, supervisory or administrative grade become members of the same trade union as the remaining employees in such trade, industry or occupation",<sup>18</sup> the effect of which was to "...remove from the field of existing trade unions those better educated and more senior employees. In a trade union movement which relies so heavily on honorary officers it has been largely from these categories that the leaders were drawn, ranging from Shop Stewards to General Secretaries."<sup>19</sup> Additionally, this allows management to silence the less skilled unions simply by promoting their leaders to minor supervisory positions.

Moreover, unions may not require an employer to recognise them as the representative body for the employees unless the union "...obtains 25% of the eligible membership in any undertaking."<sup>20</sup> In a situation where unions are weak, the benefits of union membership are not self-evident, and where there are few protections for militant workers, this requirement may prove a stumbling block. "If the objective is to facilitate the development of strong trade unions it could be argued that prior recognition could be more beneficial...very often workers will only join a trade union after it has demonstrated its worth...Granting unconditional recognition could thus break a real vicious circle and open the door to union membership growth."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, by way of illustration, there is no closed shop which limits the

ability of unions to compel membership by those who benefit from union activity, constrains the ability of unions to achieve financial viability, and to speak effectively for all workers.

Capital through its control of the state imposes such laws on the working class introducing divisions and severe organisational problems. It is therefore, not surprising that the trade union movement in Botswana remains weak and divided. In 1971, the President of Botswana said

‘We have made considerable progress over the last two years in establishing industrial unions which are hopefully in a position to advance the interests of all workers in a given industry – skilled, unskilled and semi-skilled, and irrespective of tribe or region. The Government would like to see...a united central organisation develop in Botswana.’<sup>22</sup>

But the fragmented unions did little about forming a federation; in fact it was not formed until 1977 and then two of the five founding member unions were the Bank Employees and Diamond Sorters, unions which represented petty-bourgeois interests in alliance with the local governing class. This was not lost on the latter which argued that such unions “...have a special responsibility to brother trade unions in assisting to educate workers in the meaning of trade unionism and its role in the development of the country.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the unions are invited to form a united front from a divided base (reinforced by the Government), to be led by the ‘white collar’ unions who would then negotiate by itself tripartite decisions dominated by a coalition of government and employers.

In direct contrast, such legal disabilities affecting the working class do not apply to capital which is able more or less to organise as a united block without serious divisions and is able to seek out the most effective leadership. Capital is organized in the Botswana Employers’ Federation (BEF) membership of which is open to all employers regardless of ‘industry, trade or occupation’. Capital is indivisible, Labour is not. Elected leaders of the BEF need not be citizens and frequently are not. How can this possibly be reconciled with the disabilities imposed on the working class? The simple answer is that it cannot.

These conditions against which the working class must fight are not isolated; they form part of a more general pattern of ‘industrial relations’. Important in this regard is the government’s response to union strikes. The general fact is that strikes have often been met with force, threats, and little

sympathy from the state. For example, in 1974 a strike at the Orapa diamond mine was caused in large part by the state's negative attitude toward a wage increase although the mining company was prepared to increase wages. The 1974 bank workers' strike was broken by the government's declaration of the action as illegal and the threat of dismissal of the strikers. In 1975, the then equivalent of the army (the police mobile unit) broke up a strike at the Selebi—Pikwe mine. Subsequently, the government allowed the company to dismiss workers and rehire selectively. In addition, scores of workers were put in jail by the state.<sup>24</sup> In 1978 the meagre rise in minimum wages was met by protests from the working class which were ignored by the state.

Given these facts, it is not surprising that the trade union movement has not prospered. In 1971, there were 8 unions with a total membership roughly of 6 722<sup>25</sup> and in 1978 there were 11 unions while estimated membership dropped to 5 772.<sup>26</sup> Of the 11 unions in 1978, four represented 'public' sector workers including the industrial class, the Botswana Meat Commission and the non-academic staff of the University College of Botswana. It is also clear that unions represent only a small proportion of all workers. Further, three of the eleven unions (bank workers, diamond sorters and cooperative managers) clearly represented white collar workers whose interests are closer to those of capital than to the rest of the working class.

For the time being, domination of the working class is quite comprehensive and this domination is materially reproduced in the operation of laws, policies and administrative activity. Ideologically, this domination is represented by the specifically petty-bourgeois idea of the 'labour aristocracy' in Botswana. The urban manual worker is told he/she is 'privileged' to have a job at all, regardless of the wage, in comparison with the rural farmer. If the worker is so ungrateful for the job he/she can easily be replaced by someone from the labour reserve hinterland. This is reproduced as well in the intellectual gymnastics accompanying the political act of setting working class wages. The so-called legal minimum wages policy for the unskilled "...is that it should equal the average rural income of farmers with an allowance for any differential in the overall costs of urban living,"<sup>27</sup> a policy which has two major problems. One is that it means that minimum working class wages are more or less unrelated to the value produced by that working class, which means that exploitation of the working class is almost certainly increased. Secondly, it is the case that historically 'the average rural income of farmers' has been one of marginal subsistence. Agriculture has historically paid part of the cost of reproducing the 'urban' or 'formal sector' working class. This is the meaning of the labour reserve as a source of 'cheap' labour.



Thus, urban and rural 'wages' are not comparable and separate things. They are closely tied together. Whatever other inducements force people to work for wages, the induced marginality of the average rural farmer forces members of his family into wage employment to supplement agricultural production. At the same time it is made to appear as if the returns to agriculture are somehow an adequate 'wage' against which to independently compare the 'urban' wage.

The hypocrisy involved here is evident when one considers the fact that such wage determinations are not applied to capitalist aligned bourgeois classes. Outside of the working class, wage determinations depend upon constituting an arbitrary 'high' cost of living and comparing salaries against it as well as comparing income with other bourgeois classes in southern Africa and beyond, not with 'the average rural income of farmers' with whatever due differentials might be appropriate. For the capitalist classes, for example, the 1978 Salaries Commission "...had also to consider how competitive salaries and conditions in Botswana are in the international market." <sup>28</sup> For the working class this means of wage determination was most certainly not used!

### **Conclusion: Notes on Working Class Strategy**

It is appropriate to conclude this very brief review on a 'down-to-earth' note, as it were, because of several serious practical issues arising out of the substance of what has been said above. Such practical issues have serious implications for the political strategy of the working class, both short- and long-term. However, such comments as can here be made can be nothing other than 'pointers' or notes for consideration; the real struggle is on-going within a changing situation and that struggle's concrete course will be determined by those engaged actively in it. My intention here is to highlight a few general issues that provide a continuing basis for political decisions.

The two general issues highlighted here are those of organizational struggles and the question of class alliances. The working class will and must continue the struggle to build a genuine working class organization. A major device is to persist in building worker solidarity across the artificial divisions in existence. Increased inter-union contacts, formal and informal, should be encouraged in the interests of political solidarity. All efforts should be made to develop common positions on issues of wages and conditions of work. Unions might consider, for example, bearing in mind very limited resources, involvement in organizing community action programmes in working class living areas specifically for the purpose of political mobilisation. Institu-

tionally, the struggle for more effective organizations must continue. Consistent pressure for changes in the law must be brought to bear to change those aspects of the Act which are divisive. One should have no illusions about the short-term prospects of success, but unless such pressure is exerted there will certainly be no change. Here the working class must look carefully for allies in Parliament and the public service and should very instrumentally choose whom to support or not. In other words, more generally, the working class needs to look very long and hard at its condition and the reasons for this condition and formulate some very specific responses to this.

The second general set of considerations has to do with the question of class alliances. There are a variety of exploited classes in Botswana and as yet very little political contact among them. The working class in particular, being small and weak, has not sought in any consistent way to examine its position with a view toward developing alliances with other exploited classes. In large part, this is because of the induced division among the exploited by the activities of the state, but to the extent that these divisions are induced they can be overcome. The working class cannot allow itself to develop in antagonism with or separately from the peasantry (i.e. the migrant workers). It can and should seek to develop close ties and joint strategy with it. In like manner, the exploited classes must evaluate carefully the nature of petty-bourgeois classes and what, if any, identity of material interest they have with the capitalist-aligned classes. Such an evaluation may lead to the real possibility of developing alliances with fractions of the petty-bourgeoisie under working class and peasantry leadership.

Finally, but not least important, there are issues of class alliance that extend beyond the borders of Botswana. Here the issue is two-fold. On the one hand exploitation is an international phenomenon. It is metropolitan non-Botswana capital that imposes certain relations of production in mining for example, though in alliance with certain local capitalist classes and working class struggles must take this into account. Secondly, there is a danger that the exploited classes will adopt a wholly nationalistic outlook and in doing so fail to seek alliances with other exploited classes across national boundaries, e.g. in South Africa, classes often exploited by the same capital. Such issues need to be explored in detail and appropriate strategies formulated.

There is nothing easy in all of this, nor are the issues simple no matter how superficially they can be stated. But at the same time, such issues cannot be wished away or ignored. They exist in concrete reality, are a matter of day-to-day struggle and it is up to those whose vision is a better life for all to pursue these and other issues as a matter of urgency.

## Footnotes

1. Charles Simkins, "Labour in Botswana", **South African Labour Bulletin**, Vol. 2, No. 5, p 28.
2. **Ibid.**, pp 28-29.
3. **Employment Survey 1976**, (Gaborone: The Government Printer), Table 1, p 4. Domestic servant figures are included from the **National Development Plan 1976-81**, (Gaborone: The Government Printer, 1977), Table 1.5, p 10.
4. Computed from **Employment Survey 1973**, **Employment Survey 1976**, and the **National Development Plan 1976-81**, and inclusive of all citizens with incomes of P 100 or less per month in 1973, and P 200 or less in 1976.
5. Labour force figure from **National Development Plan 1976-81**, Figure 2.6, p 32.
6. **Employment Survey 1976**, Table 7, p 11.
7. **Ibid.**, Table 8.
8. **Ibid.**, Table 5, p 9.
9. **Ibid.**, Table IA, p 5.
10. **Ibid.**
11. **Ibid.**, and **Poverty Datum Line for Urban Areas of Botswana**, (Gaborone: the Government Printer, 1976), Table 1, p 11.
12. See Michael Lipton, **Employment and Labour Use in Botswana**, Volume II, Footnotes and Appendices, (Gaborone: The Government Printer, December 1978), particularly appendix 5.3, p 164.
13. **Ibid.**, Volume I, Final Report, Table 5, p 42.
14. In 1976, 94,4% of agricultural workers earned P 50 or less per month and 22,5% were paid 'no regular wage'. **Employment Survey 1976**, p 9.
15. **Trade Unions Act**, (TUA), Section 2(1).
16. TUA, Section 8(1)(g).
17. TUA, Section 8(1)(j).
18. Act 3 of 1974, quoted in John Price, **Industrial Relations in Botswana and the Role of the Botswana Employers' Federation**, International Labour Organisation, Nairobi, January 1977, p 9.
19. **Ibid.**
20. **Ibid.**, p 10.
21. N: Moyo, "Some Aspects of the Trade Union Law in Botswana" **Pula**, (Botswana Journal of African Studies), Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1978, p 173.
22. Sir Seretse Khama, "Trade Unions in Botswana" **Africa Today**, Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring, 1972, p 15.
23. Report of President Khama's speech on the inauguration of the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions, **Daily News**, 5 April 1977, pp 1 and 4.
24. See, for example, James Cobbe, "Wage Policy Problems in the Small Peripheral Countries of Southern Africa, 1967-1976", **Journal of Southern African Affairs**, Vol. II, No. 4, October 1977.

25. **Simkins, *op cit.*, p 30.**
26. **Department of Labour Interview, 14 April 1978.**
27. **Republic of Botswana, National Policy on Incomes, Employment, Prices and Profits, (Gaborone: The Government Printer, 1978,)p 6.**