

Job Reservation — Part 2.

“EVERY WHITE MAN A GENTLEMAN”

by **ELI WEINBERG**

(The first part of this article appeared in our last issue)

When the Nats came to power in 1948, they appointed a Commission with the task of redrafting the industrial legislation, so as to include these new principles of Nationalist Labour relations. In the laboratory of this Commission was concocted the new I.C. Act with its anti-trade union principles, its negation of workers' unity, its deliberate purpose of removing the power of collective bargaining and with — as a logical addition — Section 77, the reservation of jobs.

Section 77 of the I.C. Act enables the Industrial Tribunal appointed under the new Act to recommend that certain specified occupations be reserved for particular racial groups.

Shortly after the promulgation of the I.C. Act the Minister of Labour appointed the Industrial Tribunal, making sure that its members would be loyal followers of the so-called Labour Code (?) of the Nationalist Party. Almost immediately the Tribunal was also given the task of “investigating the desirability of making a determination under this section” (Section 77 — Job Reservation) in the Clothing Industry. For the purpose of this investigation five assessors were appointed by the Minister to assist the Tribunal in an advisory capacity. The assessors were:—

- Mr. J. C. Bolton (Garment Workers' Union, Natal)
- Mr. L. A. Petersen (Garment Workers' Union, Cape)
- Miss A. Scheepers (Garment Workers' Union, South Africa)
- Mr. M. H. Emdon (Transvaal Employers)
- Mr. E. R. Savage (Natal Employers).

The Tribunal received evidence from all Industrial Councils, Employers' Organisations and trade unions in the Industry. It also consulted the Central Native Labour Board and the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs. It visited a number of factories and held a number of public meetings.

Eventually it appeared that not one assessor, not one trade union, not one employers' organisation nor any industrial council could be found who considered job reservations in the Clothing Industry either desirable, necessary or sensible. With one voice all those really concerned with the Industry declared their opposition to any kind of job allocation on a racial basis.

It would be interesting to know what the views of the Central Native Labour Board and the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs were. After all, the hundreds of thousands of workers whose fate is in the hands of these authorities have some right to know how their "protectors" were reacting to this threat to the livelihood of their "protegés". But the Tribunal keeps significantly silent in their report about this aspect of the matter!

Only a small section of white workers from Germiston were persuaded to express themselves in favour of job reservation. In the last resort the Tribunal relied on this puny clique for justification of its decision to recommend job reservation, contrary to the overwhelming evidence and in the teeth of opposition of all the people actually engaged in the Industry.

It is difficult to find any real justification in the report of the Tribunal for their recommendation. In fact, the Tribunal admits that "there is considerable substance in the objections raised by the organised employers' association and trade unions against the reservation of work in the Clothing Industry." Nevertheless the report proceeds in a mass of verbose sophistries to argue that job reservation is necessary, for the following reasons:

- a) Europeans in the Clothing Industry must be protected, because their departure from the industry may be a "progressive progress" and ultimately there may be no Europeans left at all.
- b) Europeans must be protected against the possible effects of an economic depression.
- c) Europeans must be protected against encroachment by an alternative and cheaper source of labour from the racial groups, particularly in view of the existence of two different wage rates for the same work in the Transvaal.

DEPARTURE OF THE EUROPEANS FROM THE INDUSTRY

To some extent it is true that there has been a flight of Europeans from the Clothing Industry. Although the figures show that between 1938 and 1953 the number of Europeans grew from 11,114 to 13,083, it must be admitted that during 1953 to 1957 there has been a sharp decline in the number of Europeans. This, however, is explained by the following factors:

- 1) There are many more attractive avenues of employment open to Europeans. Other industries compete for the limited European labour source and offer more advantageous terms of employment.
- 2) Young European girls consider it beneath their dignity to work in factories. They generally prefer commercial jobs as clerks, typists etc., which do not carry with them the stigma of "fabriekmeisie".

The basic factor in the decline of the number of Europeans, as compared with the enormous growth of the Non-European labour force, is the rapid expansion of the industry. Between 1938 and 1953 the number of establishments in the industry doubled from 280 to 566 and the total number of employees grew from 18,250 to 45,837. Naturally, the white labour supply could not possibly meet this demand and consequently more and more Non-European labour had to be drawn in. A complicating factor has been the imposition through the Factories' Act of separate amenities, such as cloak rooms, lavatories etc., for the different races. This com-

pelled many employers who might have continued to employ a multi-racial labour force, to employ in preference Non-Europeans only, because it obviated the economic burden of expensive structural alterations and also because Non-European labour was more plentiful.

It is interesting to note that despite the gradual reduction in the share of Europeans in the total labour force, productivity continued to rise rapidly. Thus in 1938 productivity per worker was about £321, whilst in 1953 it was £1,073 per capita. Thus it was largely the Non-European workers who were responsible for increasing the productive capacity of the Clothing Industry from about £6 millions in 1938 to about £50 millions in 1953. For this they are now to be rewarded with deprivation of their skilled jobs, with a continuous threat to their livelihood!

(Incidentally, it is also criterion of the exploitation of the workers in the Clothing Industry that between 1938 and 1953, whilst production increased, according to the Industrial Tribunal, by 738 per cent, average wages rose from about £2.17.0d. per week to about £5.0.9d. per week, an increase of approximately 75% !)

If it is true that Europeans are leaving the Clothing Industry, it does not seem to have affected the growth of the industry. Nor has it had any effect on the economic position of Europeans who have managed, largely by their own preference, to secure other more advantageous positions in other industries. It must be clear, therefore, that the Tribunal's recommendations, insofar as it is based on this premise, has no foundation whatsoever.

In several instances throughout its report the Tribunal makes a show of benevolence towards the Non-European workers. It speaks of the need to protect the rightful claims of other racial groups whilst "protecting" the Europeans and it generally disputes any intention of driving Non-Europeans out of industry or out of skilled positions. But the mask of benevolence is off the moment the Tribunal faces the problem of the threatening economic depression. Here it makes no bones about it that it is its intention that Non-Europeans shall be "the last to be hired and the first to be fired". At all costs the privileged position of the white workers must be maintained. All the better if, in the process, it leads to racial friction and estrangement between different sections of the working class.

Miss Anna Scheepers, President of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa and one of the Assessors appointed to assist the Tribunal, points in her submission to the dangers of this policy. She says, that with large numbers of qualified workers driven out of the industry, out-work may become a real menace. "These workers have to live and certain manufacturers will make use of this opportunity by giving work out to be done in private homes where unhealthy conditions of employment exist over which no control can be exercised". She concludes that far from protecting white workers, this will lead to an undermining of their standards.

THE THREAT TO THE WHITES BY DIFFERENTIAL WAGE RATES

The most important premise on which job reservation is based is the existence of differential wage rates which, it is argued, enables Non-Europeans to encroach on European precincts. Here the Tribunal glee-

fully pounces on the deplorable mistake of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, led by Johanna Cornelius and Anna Scheepers, who signed a wage agreement this year which provides for two different wage rates for the same kind of work.

During the past thirty years, in which the Clothing Industry grew up and developed, the Garment workers of the Transvaal, by reason of superior organisation and a militant fighting policy succeeded in raising their wages and conditions of employment well above those prevailing in the coastal areas. During these years the employers in the Transvaal tried to resist these advances of the workers. In all these struggles the employers claimed that they were unable to compete against the coastal (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban) industry, who had the advantage of lower wage rates and inferior working conditions. In reply the Transvaal workers set themselves the task to organise the coastal workers and to raise their wages and conditions of employment. In this they succeeded in a measure, most of the improvements in the coastal towns being due to frequent "pepping up" campaigns by Transvaal organisers. However, a considerable disparity always remained, which was met by Transvaal employers in the competitive struggle for markets by superior factory organisation and more modern methods of production. Ultimately, in the struggle for the common market the Cape capitalists caught up with the technical advances of the Transvaal, too. From then on the Transvaal capitalists began to seek new ways of maintaining high profits and found it in the flight from the Transvaal. Gradually, first one, then in larger numbers, Transvaal Clothing manufacturers opened up factories in platteland dorps, where wages were lower, the workers were unorganised and competition for the supply of labour less severe. One of the pioneers in this trend was a firm of clothing manufacturers, established and controlled by Nationalist interest, who moved their factory beyond the jurisdiction of the Transvaal Wage Agreement and employed largely cheap African labour.

This tendency worried the Transvaal Garment Workers' leaders. The obvious remedy was, of course, to concentrate all their efforts and resources on organising the workers in the new industrial areas and on leading them in a militant struggle for higher wages. But this seemed too long and difficult a process, particularly as the majority of the workers affected were Africans and any organising activities amongst them would meet with all kinds of strenuous local and governmental opposition, including the very considerable opposition of the more backward section of the white members of the Union who were led by Nationalist camp followers.

In this situation the employers subtly suggested to the leaders of the Transvaal Garment Workers, that they might be induced to refrain from fleeing from the Transvaal, if some concession on wages was made. To satisfy the conscience of the wavering trade union leaders, the employers offered a guarantee to employ at least 4,000 workers at existing wage rates, if a secondary class of machinists was created at a lower wage rate. The trade union leaders fell for this bait hook, line and sinker and for the first time in 30 years the glorious militant tradition of the Garment Workers of the Transvaal was thrown to the winds and an agreement was signed — without a fight — providing for two wage rates for the same job. One of these rates was a considerable cut of the existing rate, in fact a cut of about 25%.

What the Trade Union leaders apparently failed to realise was the elementary fact that the employers never intended to stop there, that in the long run they would only be content with the lowest rate prevailing in the country, as only that would even out their chances of competition against their more favoured fellow-capitalists in the platteland and the coastal towns. It was also clear that the guarantee to retain 4,000 higher paid workers (obviously intended to be whites) was quite worthless, as there was no way of enforcing this provision, there being no formal ratio for factory.

It is on the basis of this mistake of the Trade Union that the Industrial Tribunal is to score a point. They argue that the lower wage rate favours the Non-Europeans and that the enforcement of the guarantee of 4,000 higher paid workers is only possible through job reservation. Thus the Industrial Tribunal set themselves up as the protectors of the hard won wages of the "European" workers of the Transvaal against their own trade union and against the employers. Naturally, the benevolent Nationalist Government and its Minister of Labour is included in this association of true defenders of the workers, because they would ultimately enforce job reservation. In his minority recommendation, the Chairman of the Industrial Tribunal, Dr. A. P. du Toit Viljoen says: "It is indeed true that because of the introduction of two separate scales for machinists in the Transvaal European operatives are in need of protection". This is followed by an assurance that Dr. S. P. du Toit Viljoen is prepared to be the protector.

The hypocrisy of this claim becomes obvious when it is remembered that the same Dr. Viljoen was Chairman of the Wage Board during the many years during which the Transvaal Garment workers were fighting for higher wages for the coastal workers and that it was this same Dr. du Toit who consistently refused to level up the wages of the lower paid coastal workers in order to protect the higher wages of the Transvaal workers.

As for the Nat. Government's role as protector of higher wages for European workers, one needs only to refer to the encouragement given by them to Nationalist employers who in recent years fled from the towns, where they employed higher paid white workers, to the platteland where they engaged cheaper African workers. This went so far that the Nationalist Minister of Labour recently issued a wholesale retrospective exemption from the wage agreement for this particular firm, when they were found to have underpaid their African employees to the extent of £15,000!

WHY JOB RESERVATION?

It has been said that the Nats could not possibly be serious about job reservation, particularly in the Clothing Industry where in present circumstances it was so palpably impractical and senseless. The fact that the Tribunal and the Minister of Labour were prepared to soften the blow by issuing wholesale exemptions of the Industry and by maintaining the so-called status-quo, i.e. allowing Non-Europeans to remain in the positions they at present occupied seemed to indicate to some that at most the Nats wanted to use job reservation for the purpose of capturing extra votes during the recent General Election.

This view completely ignores the general economic policy of the Nats which follows the well-known Fascist trend of central control and direction of both labour and capital by the Fascist State. The Nats openly advocated this in the form of a Central Economic Council and in general outlines this is the trend that runs through the Report of the Industrial Tribunal.

On pages 19 and 20 of the Report the Tribunal speak of "allocating European labour in such a way that "they can maximise the national income and economic welfare". The Tribunal admits that one way of attracting European labour to an industry where it was most needed, would be "by improving the scales of pay", but hastily discards this idea as having "a cumulative effect" and creating a "vicious inflationary spiral".

By implication the Tribunal concludes that job reservation would assume the necessary number of whites in the industry in dominant positions. The purpose is obviously to preserve the division between European and Non-European workers, to play the one against the other. The White workers are to be discouraged from making common cause with their fellow-workers by investing them with racial privileges.

However, lest the white workers think that the Nat Government will protect them unconditionally, the Tribunal issues a warning in the form of a quotation from the mouth of the Great White Chief himself. Says the Minister of Labour, Senator de Klerk:

"Whatever the theoretical approach to this matter may be, I want to say clearly that the employees in our country must not expect the protection of this clause if they do not carry their weight. If as a result of laxity or any other reason within their control (underlined by us) they are replaced, they must not apply to us for protection."

In other words: You had better behave yourselves! If you play the game, we shall protect you. But if you strike, or oppose our policies, or worse still — if you unite with your Non-European fellow workers — then may the Lord protect you — we certainly will not!

The ultimate danger of job reservation is, therefore, in the drawing of a sharp gulf between White and Non-White workers, in the intensification of racial conflicts, particularly in times of depression. For the Non-European workers it also carries the certainty of unemployment, starvation, degradation and social humiliation.

WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

The recommendation of the Tribunal has aroused bitter opposition in many quarters, not only amongst Non-European workers, but amongst many European workers, amongst employers in the Clothing Industry, amongst many other industrialists who fear similar encroachments on their domain, and generally amongst all people with a sense of justice. This opposition found expression in many forms, and culminated in the strike of Garment Workers in the Transvaal. The Cape and Natal Garment Workers have decided to take legal action to test the validity of the Determination.

On the whole, however, and considering the extremely serious implications of job reservations, the protest actions have been comparatively feeble and have not seriously perturbed the Nat. government.

The reason is to be found in the fact that the present leadership of the protest movement is ideologically not equipped to conduct a really militant fight on this issue. Both Miss Anna Scheepers and Miss Johanna Cornelius, whose position as leaders of the protest movement is maintained by tens of thousands of Non-European workers, are inclined to allow that in certain circumstances "there would have been justification for this by investigation" (Submission by Miss Anna Scheepers to the Industrial Tribunal). They do not attack job reservation because it is wrong in principle, but because it is "unrealistic" and "impractical" and because it may

endanger the continuation of "the industry". Miss Cornelius goes so far as to commit herself to a demand that "social justice for our members, irrespective of their race, shall be maintained in the event of any determination reserving jobs for European workers" thus almost accepting the principle of job reservation. In effect, De Klerk very subtly satisfied that demand by wholesale exemptions and, therefore, cut away any further serious opposition from that source. This weakness expressed itself clearly during the strike of the Garment Workers, when the leaders warned the workers against associating with their natural allies, the masses of other Non-European workers and the Congress Movement.

The Nats. are not particularly perturbed by the tactics of the leaders of the opposition to job reservation. As long as they can succeed in localising the struggle to the Clothing Industry, they can regard the battle as half-won. The wholesale exemptions will enable the industry to carry on, will lull the opposition into a feeling of temporary security, but in the meantime the principle of job reservation will have achieved a beach-head and a precedent will have been created. Even the threat of legal action to test the validity of the Determination will not worry the Nats. over much. In the first place, the kind of legal action contemplated implies partly the acceptance of Section 77. In the second place, the Nats. themselves have come across certain legal difficulties in the present formulation of Section 77, and intend amending the law anyway.

The principle of job reservation cannot be successfully fought as an isolated attack on one particular section of workers or on one industry. It must be clearly recognised for what it is, namely a vicious attack on the rights of all Non-European workers, a policy designed to perpetuate racial animosity between black and white workers, and part of the general plan of the Nats. to relegate the majority of the people of South Africa to a permanent position of inferiority.

If this is clearly seen, then the method of counter-attack is obvious. The struggle against job reservation must cease to be the domestic concern of a few thousand garment workers. Every worker in every industry must be made to see that: "It is the garment workers today, it is everybody else tomorrow!" The Congress Movement must assume full responsibility for organising large-scale resistance to the plans of the Government to extend job reservation to other industries. The immediate withdrawal of the Determination for the Clothing Industry and the repeal of Section 77 must become a focal point around which a mass movement of workers, intellectuals, industrialists, liberals, of every type of opponent of racial discrimination should be organised. In launching the attack on the Garment Workers, the Nats. were calculating on isolating them and defeating them piecemeal. Their plans can yet be made to misfire and can, in fact, be turned to a serious and possibly fatal defeat of the Nat. Government itself if bold and determined leadership combines all the forces threatened by job reservation into a concerted, purposeful attack on this vicious piece of racial discrimination.

There can be no doubt that the mass of the workers would follow such a lead with enthusiasm, as they have shown conclusively on June 26th last year.