

The latest wave of strikes by Black workers in South Africa has been the subject of wide comment in newspapers all over the world. In South Africa itself it is on the lips of many a household. It has struck a feeling of deep concern, almost panic amongst the White herrenvolk. This is not surprising for the industrialists perceive it as the tip of the iceberg. Europe can read the signs from her own history. Though separated in time by centuries, the events in South Africa recall all too clearly the turbulent history of the early development of capitalism.

With the rise of trade, commerce and manufacture in England, the powers that be instituted a series of Enclosure Acts on the populace. These Acts deprived the people of their inalienable rights to the commonages and the strips of land they cultivated from time immemorial. The ever-increasing looms and spindles demanded more and more bales of wool. Humans had to be pushed off the land to give way to sheep. Men had to be released from the shackles of feudalism, driven to the towns where they were to be enchained by the machine as slaves of capitalism. This was the period that presaged the rise of industrial capitalism. As a condition for its growth, capitalism had to destroy feudalism as a system with all its feudal relationships.

When the British conquered South Africa and imposed a capitalistic system, they grabbed the land, robbed the people of their cattle and other stock, and ~~seized~~ created "reserves" wherein they impounded the Black population leaving only one escape route from these enclosures - the route that led to the shackles of farm labour and the enslavement of capital invested in trade and commerce. These same "reserves" were later to serve as labour reservoirs to feed the industrial machine and the mine Moloch. The development in South Africa was however different from that of Europe.

In addition to the English, there were also the Dutch conquerors, the Boers who brought their own system into the country, the feudal system. Thus a partnership between the White conquerors was formed for the joint exploitation of the Black people and their land. A compromise was reached which resulted in a strange deformation of the development of capitalism. It is this deformation of the development those all too common excesses resulting in periodic explosive situations that plagued the country throughout the development of capitalism in South Africa. It gave rise to intensive exploitation yielding super-profits on the one hand and dire poverty on the other, a situation that called forth the use of fascistic methods, long before the internal dynamics of capitalism demanded the imposition of fascism. The British struck a compromise with the feudalism of the Boers who had established feudal relations in the form of a squatter system on their large farms, a system which became the norm for the whole country.

In addition to this, the accident of colour was exploited to serve as a convenient dividing-line between the Black serf and the White overlord. Thus racism was built into the social, political and economic fabric as an instrument of super-exploitation. Racialism is not natural to man. It is deliberately cultivated to facilitate and intensify exploitation as well as to blur the class divisions between the exploiter and the exploited. The marriage of convenience between the capitalism of the English and Boer feudalism was not without its stresses and strains. With the expansion of manufacturing and mining industries, a demand for ~~it~~ a greater supply of labour arose. The 1913 Land Act was passed which inter alia abolished the Squatter System. This was the capitalist method of releasing labour from the land to make it available for industry. In 1922 the White mineworkers launched a successful strike for the introduction of apartheid and job reservation in the mining industry. Smuts acting in the interests of international finance capital shot down the White workers. As a result his party lost the elections to a coalition of the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party who proceeded to enshrine job reservation and

/apartheid.....

apartheid in the mining industry in the Statute Book. This set the pattern for the whole of industry and for the whole of economic ~~in-~~ activities in the country. Every government thereafter pursued this policy and gradually extended it to all spheres of life, social and political. When the Nationalist Government once more returned to power in 1948, it applied the same policy with a ruthlessness, typical of a fascist mind, untrammelled by any need to pay lip-service to democratic principles. This is the setting in which capitalism developed in South Africa from a mercantile system to an industrial economy. Throughout this development the ruling class managed to maintain feudal relationships between Black and White. Indeed, they tried to turn the clock of history still further back. At the time when they were building heavy industry on the basis of migrant Black labour they were ~~re-~~ recreating tribalism by legislation. The Bantu Authorities Act passed in the second half of the 20th century required that every African, including those residing in the towns and employed in industry, shall belong to one or other of the ancient tribal units and shall come under the jurisdiction of a tribal chief whose seat is in the "reserves" or Bantustans. This alone is a complete negation of any form of democracy in all spheres of life.

Through a series of calculated legislation, the Black man was reduced to a being without any rights of any kind, not even elementary human rights. The Group Areas Act deprived him of the right to belong to South Africa. He was legally presumed to belong to the enclosures, the "Reserves" which he did not own for they are "crown lands". By this Act, every Black man, woman and child became foreigners in the country of their birth. The Settlement of Disputes Act and other laws, including the Anti-Communism and Terrorism Acts denied him all rights and privileges of a worker. By definition, ~~whether he is employed or not~~ a Black man or woman is not a worker but a work-seeker whether he is in actual employment or not, who must register with a Labour Bureau from the age of sixteen. He is not permitted to form trade unions. Any strike by Africans is illegal. By law, he is not allowed to sell his labour power to the highest bidder. He may not seek work. He has to report at a recruiting ~~agency~~ labour agency which decides where he shall work. These agencies are situated in the tribal reserves. In short, an African in South Africa is regarded as a non-human, an anthropoid whose sole purpose of existence is to hold the plough, mine the minerals and turn the wheels of industry, that is to say, create wealth and make super-profits for his masters. This, in brief, is the background to the present wave of strikes by Black workers in South Africa. It will be seen therefore that the wave of strikes cannot help but raise the basic and fundamental questions of political rights in general and in particular, the whole status of the Black man and woman in industry as workers with all the rights that pertain to their position in the economy.

The recent strikes were confined to Natal, specifically around Durban. There were about 50,000 African and Indian workers involved, affecting well over a hundred factories. It was the unexpectedness and the ease with which the strikes rapidly escalated covering a whole range of economic activities, including municipal employees, domestic workers and airport labourers that created panic, not only amongst the ruling fascist clique and employers in general, but also amongst the white ~~working~~ class. Stanley Uys reporting for the Guardian (1/2/73) writes: "Panicky White employers in Durban are reporting more stoppages by their Black workers every day. The strikes have spread so rapidly that employers in other cities are wondering when it will be their turn. Most of them have realised belatedly that they have lost all contact with their workers... The wide-ranging nature of the strikes shows how general is the labour unrest. All the strikes are illegal, but the police have avoided mass arrests, because they fear this will provide further troubles." He also adds: "South Africa's industrial 'peace' has not been disturbed on such a scale for 12 years."

/ With their gaze....

With their gaze fixed on the ever-mounting profits, the employers lived in a state of euphoria in the belief that the draconian laws that ring around the Black workers will ensure industrial peace for the foreseeable future. They woke up one morning from their Rip van Winkel slumber to discover that their idyllic world had vanished. They shrieked: What has gone wrong? What has happened to "our natives"? No one had the answers. No one had ever bothered to think how the Black workers managed to exist on the pittance they receive for wages; how they survived the brutality of the laws that govern them. Now something had to be done and done quickly. But what! For the first time they were face to face with the monumental problems they themselves had helped to create over the years.

What were the problems? The overall effect of every government's policy was to reduce the whole Black population to a state of penury with the express purpose of forcing the people to seek employment at depressed wages. The whole economy was ~~built~~ built on the basis of forced labour. It flourished, ^{and} industry grew by leaps and bounds. As international capital came pouring in to reap super-profits, more Blacks were sucked into the ~~labour market~~ ^{labour market} so that today they constitute fully two-thirds of the labour force and it is estimated that in the next 20 years they will be in the region of nine-tenths. With the steep rise in the cost of living, due to spiralling inflation, the whole Black population is in a desperate plight. Ruling-class sociologists are forced to admit this fact although they try to cover up its nakedness, underneath the jargon of ~~poverty-datum~~ ^{poverty-datum} lines. They arbitrarily fix ~~an~~ ^a figure which is supposed to be the amount necessary for a family to live on. Its arbitrariness is revealed when they fix one figure for a Black family at 70 Rand, 62 cents and another for the Whites at 170 Rand (a Rand = 10 shillings) as though food and other necessities cost less for the Blacks. Even on their basis, the picture that emerges is bleak. "Of the thirteen sectors of the economy, only two pay Africans above the ~~poverty-datum~~ ^{poverty-datum} line (PDL) and these are insurance and banking" which pay an average of R77 and R71 a month respectively. The number of people employed in these two sectors is so negligible that one wonders why it was mentioned at all except to hide the fact that the whole Black population exists (not lives) on less than starvation wages. That they hold up these as an example of an acceptable rate of pay, is in itself an indictment of the whole wage system for the Black man. Let us take a concrete example. The gold-mining industry is the biggest employer in the whole country. In 1972, ~~its~~ ^{its} bill of wages for Blacks, according to the Financial Mail, was R95 million. Its profits before tax were R548 million and this was R212 million or 63 per cent more than that of 1971. Profits made by the industry is more than five times the bill of wages paid to the Black employees. The increase alone in profit over the previous year is more than twice the wages of the Blacks. The mines pay their employees an average of R21 per month. There is an unwritten law in South Africa that all wages paid to the Blacks in whatever industry must be related to the wages paid by the gold mines to its Black employees. The rationale is that if the gap is too great, the mines, the mainstay of the economy, will be deprived of labour.

An important point to remember about the economy of South Africa is that, although secondary industry provides by far the biggest share of the national income, it is not able to maintain itself in that it cannot earn foreign currency to purchase its own raw materials. For this purpose it relies entirely on the mining industry and the heavily subsidised agriculture. As it happens, these two are the biggest employers of Black labour and depend almost entirely on cheap Black labour. Any meaningful increase of wages to provide even a semblance of a living wage would require a ~~complete~~ restructuring of the country's economy and a completely different approach to it. Vorster, the racist prime minister, has already given a stern warning that any big wage increase in wages, White or Black, will send inflation rocketing to uncontrollable proportions and will create a crisis of unemployment. But the fact is, there

/is a crisis.....

is a crisis now of stark starvation amongst two-thirds of the working population caused by the ever-~~increasing~~ mounting and uncontrollable inflation.

There is yet another running sore in the sick economy of South Africa—the critical shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labour resulting from expansion. The Job Reservation Act forbids the Blacks from entering the skilled trades. The Act was intended to protect the position of the White labour aristocracy, while at the same time buying over the White working class whose trade unions invariably connived at or vigorously supported the colour-bar laws against the Blacks. Job Reservation has now recoiled on the economy with a vengeance. Unwilling or politically unable to abolish the Act, the Government has been forced to resort to the tactic of granting mass exemptions to employers for the hire of Blacks where White workers were not available. White trade unions see this as a threat to their protected position. There is at this moment a battle raging amongst the White trade unions. The Afrikaner die-hards demand stronger measures against the dilution of skilled labour, arguing that if this process is allowed to go on, it must lead to Black and White working at the same bench. The others, realising that they are unable to stop the process and conscious of the fact that the White workers constitute a ^{small} minority of the labour force and that their bargaining power is thereby diminished, advocate a new policy. They demand the right to organise Black workers into trade unions that will become adjuncts of the White trade unions.

The employers on their part, are highly disturbed at their new discovery that there is no contact or communication between them and the vast majority of their workers. There is no machinery for negotiation in times of need. At a meeting called by the Natal Employers' Association, the Rand Daily Mail (29/11/72) reports that businessmen and industrialists showed deep concern at the lack of communication with Africans and felt that "the vacuum in the field of labour relations is precipitating an inflammable and unpredictable situation." The chairman, Mr George Palmer, editor of the Financial Mail summed up the concern of the meeting in these words: "I would not like to predict what could happen today if we were to have another bus boycott in Johannesburg and again find that we have no leaders, no representatives, no spokesmen with whom to negotiate." Dealing with the spiralling inflation he said: "What will happen to the unprotected, unrepresented African worker in a situation where prices are going to rise at 8 percent a year? How long will he tolerate that situation, when he finds it difficult enough to pay his municipal rent. We are playing with fire if we do not introduce machinery now to deal with this situation." Mr Palmer ended his speech by saying that the employers together with the White trade unions should work out some form of representation for the African workers. "Only then will there be any hope of influencing the Government to change its policy."

And what is the Government's policy on this issue? It is to create Homeland unions in the reserves, with labour diplomats from thebantustans negotiating labour problems with the White racist Government. A pipedream! Out of this world. This may seem a light-minded refusal to face realities on the part of the racist Government. The reverse is the truth. For the first time the Broederbond has come face to face with the realities of life; with the concrete and dire consequences of their apartheid policy. Vorster knows that any change in the direction of liberalization in industry, must of necessity, lead to a liberalization in all spheres of life, political, economic and social — a negation of the apartheid policy. He knows too, that the present situation must lead to industrial chaos. The fact is, Vorster with his regime, is caught on the horns of a dilemma. What stands out clearly is that change cannot be held back much longer. Historical forces are battering the walls of apartheid. The only question is: What kind of change is on the order of the day?

The racists have played all their trump cards. They have nothing left

/in their hand....

in their hand but brute force which they know all too well how to use. But brute force has never been known to stop the march of history indefinitely. On the contrary, it tends to hasten it. The ruling class has few alternative choices. Racist South Africa has little reserves to fall back on. Her position vis-a-vis the world leaves her little room for maneuvering. Consequently, the crisis that faces her is much more likely to intensify rather than diminish. The world crisis of capitalism - imperialism finds her exposed in her position of isolation. Britain, her chief trading partner and biggest importer of her products, is forced by her ~~economic~~ economic difficulties to turn to the European Common Market. But the condition for joining it, is that she must sacrifice South Africa and other members of the Commonwealth which had previously enjoyed a position of favoured nations. Gone are the days when South Africa was the Eldorado of international finance capital which must now take flight in search of calmer climes. Dark clouds now loom over the horizon of the once sunny South Africa.

There is yet another sword of Damocles that hangs over the South African ~~economy~~ economy from Black Africa. As a highly industrialised state, South Africa needs ~~foreign~~ foreign markets to survive. Her natural trading partners should have been the independent states of Africa to whom she could export all her industrial products. But her apartheid policy is anathema and an insult to the dignity of Black Africa, an impudent arrogance that makes even dialogue impossible at this stage. Her backing of the Rhodesian racist regime has further complicated her problem. Smith's irreversible blunder in closing the border will have dire consequences not only for Rhodesia but for South Africa itself. It was a monumental piece of stupidity which confirms the saying: "Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad." By that act, Vorster's protégé sealed the fate of the two racist regimes in the Southern tip of Africa. In closing the trade routes, he also cut off all means of communication, all commercial intercourse with the South. If Zambia weathers the storm and successfully establishes viable trade routes to the seas via other African states, it will be a matter of time when Botswana will find it a feasible proposition to loosen South Africa's deadly grip on her economy and link up with her Northern neighbours.

This brings into sharp focus another aspect of the boycott weapon in the hands of Africa. We have mentioned above that gold-mining is the mainstay of ~~South Africa's~~ South Africa's industry. It is often referred to as the flywheel of the country's economy. For many years South Africa has had to recruit as much as 60 percent of her mine labour from as far afield as what were then Northern Rhodesia, Tanganyika, Angola and Mozambique, to make up for the shortage in the country. According to an official of the Chamber of Mines, the percentage of foreign labour has risen to 80 per cent. Independent Tanzania and Zambia have put a stop to such recruitment of their nationals. Portugal which is under contract to supply 100,000-150,000 labourers a year from her colonies may soon find it difficult to fulfil her part of the bargain due to the intensification of the liberation struggle by the colonial peoples. This by the way is one reason why the South African soldiery is fighting in Mozambique and Angola to maintain Portuguese colonialism. In this front too, the prospects for South Africa are not very bright. But she has a powerful army and the means to dig in on this front especially if she has the tacit support of Western imperialism, ~~which~~ an imperialism which is fully aware of the repercussions on the South African economy of a victory of the liberation forces in that part of Southern Africa.

It is within the framework of all these forces that we must assess the meaning of the strike wave by the Black workers in South Africa; its specific weight and direction, its immediate aims as well as its long-term ~~strategic~~ perspectives. In pre-industrial Europe, all class struggles were fought under the banner of religion. In present-day South Africa the class struggle dons the visage of a ~~stagnant~~ tickety increase, thereby giving the impression of being straight-jacketed in ~~the narrow limited confines of economic gains~~ the narrow limited confines of economic gains. The truth is that the unbearable economic pressures have served as a trigger, a call to enter the lists in a battle whose aim is far wider than it appears to the superficial observer. In the given conditions of South

/Africa....

Africa where the Black workers are hemmed ⁱⁿ by a mass of apartheid laws, any struggle assumes the nature of a political struggle. For the Black man, a demand for equal pay for equal work is a political demand, for it implies equal status for all workers, regardless of colour. The act of striking ~~itself~~ in itself calls into question the laws that make it illegal for him to do so. Thus any strike immediately puts on the agenda of the day, the denial of his rights as a worker and his status as a member of the society. In short, it raises the whole question of his democratic rights. This is the unstated long-term objective that is clearly understood by the contestants on both sides of the barricades. It is worthy of note that in the last couple of years, the waves of workers' strikes have alternated, and sometimes taken place simultaneously with the waves of strikes and mass protests by the students. The latter have been consistently explicit about their aims, namely, the abolition of apartheid in education. One thing in common in all the strikes is that all the non-White sections of the oppressed, African, Coloured and Indian made common cause. On the student front, the White students, too, in Cape Town and Wits. Universities came out in the face of police brutality, not in defence of their own privileged position but in support of the Black students' demands.

It may seem strange to some that we call attention to so natural a phenomenon, ^{namely that} people of different ethnic groups standing side by side in a struggle against a common enemy. But if we know the history of the policy of divide and rule in South Africa, its crippling effects on the minds of the old leaderships, the devastating consequences of such a policy on the struggles of the oppressed, we shall appreciate the extent of the political development and the terrain that has been conquered. This is not by accident. From its inception, in 1943, the Unity Movement of South Africa carried on an intensive campaign for (a) the eradication of the slave mentality and (b) the breakdown of the racial walls that separated the oppressed. The Movement believed that these were some of the main barriers to the development of a truly national movement. "Oppression is indivisible and no one section can achieve ~~itself~~ liberation without the others," the Movement taught. But, ^{emphasized} that unity is meaningless, even dangerous, if it is not based on principles. It is clear that these lessons have been absorbed and have become the thinking of the population. Amongst the students today it is a matter of pride to them that they use the term "Blacks" to designate all the sections of the oppressed people.

The boldness of action on the part of the workers during the strikes throughout the country reveals that they have sloughed off the slave mentality and this ^{is} true of that whole area of Southern Africa including Namibia which is subject to the same racist laws. The strike of the Namibian workers was not merely an economic strike, neither was it carried out by only one tribal group - the Ovambos, as the newspapers tried to make out. It was a protest by the workers of Namibia against occupation by a foreign power - South Africa, with all its pernicious apartheid laws. In other words, ~~it~~ it was a step in the direction of self-determination. The striking workers in South Africa did not raise unequivocally the demand for the right to form trade-unions. The students still only raised the demand for the abolition of ~~apartheid~~ apartheid in education but the direction is unmistakable and it was indicated by the mother body of the Black students organisation (SASO) when in a different context, they roundly condemned the Bantustans in the clearest political terms. There is no doubt that the immediate objective of the present struggle is the attainment of full democratic rights. This is confirmed also in a negative way by the quislings who serve in the various "states" and also in the various Baboon Parliaments. Even they are no longer able to defend their positions. When addressing the public, they inveigh against apartheid, "demand" at the very least, self-determination and with tongue in cheek "demand" full democratic rights. But it must be understood that there is a difference between the objectives of the struggle in South Africa and that in Namibia.

In Namibia, the people are fighting to get rid of foreign rule in the same way as the rest of Black Africa. If and when they achieve their goal, they, like most of Black Africa, will be faced with the problem of welding the country into a single national state. South Africa is

is already a national state, a capitalist bourgeois state. But the vast majority of the population in the country have never enjoyed those rights which belong to a capitalist state. They are at this moment fighting for them. In other words, the immediate objective of the struggle is the acquisition of bourgeois democratic rights which are enjoyed only by the White minority. But if the struggle for the attainment of these rights cannot be carried out under the leadership of the bourgeoisie. Only the proletariat working in conjunction with the peasantry, the petty shopkeepers and the intellectuals can lead the struggle to a successful conclusion. That is to say, that though the political content is bourgeois democracy, its methods of attaining it will be proletarian.

Bourgeois democracy can be consummated in the process of the developing proletarian revolution. This will be a transient stage. In the period of decaying capitalism, it cannot stabilise itself. If it did, the revolution will be a failure for it will mean the ushering in of neo-colonialism, in which the people will lose those rights they had fought for with such heroism and self-sacrifice. In fact, the chances are that the revolutionary leadership will be destroyed in the wave of reaction. The only safeguard against neo-colonialism and counter-revolution is a continuous revolution leading to a successful proletarian revolution which will abolish exploitation of man by man. Only then will the vast majority for the first time experience democracy. Only then will they be able to control their own destiny.

It will be seen from the above outline that such a struggle presents problems of the greatest magnitude. It raises questions of the seizure of power; who seizes power and how; what to do with state power once it is seized. All this requires a leadership that understands the historical necessity and the role of the different classes in society, what their real interests are and what they are capable of doing. It requires a leadership that knows the role of a state and state machinery; that knows the difference between a bourgeois state and a proletarian state and above all that knows that a bourgeois state machinery was created as an instrument of domination of the majority by a minority. It is therefore not possible to use the same machinery for the purpose of freeing the masses.

It is evident that without a leadership that has a clearly defined ideology, a socialist outlook, it will not be possible to achieve the desired revolution in South Africa.

~~We have deliberately contrasted the struggle in South Africa with that in Britain.~~

As we have indicated, the Black workers in South Africa have no rights whatsoever, not even the right to form trade unions, even though they constitute by far the largest majority of the work-force. They are treated as though they were nameless beasts of burden, identifiable only by numbers. Through the strikes they asserted their manhood and womanhood. The employers themselves are already talking in terms of granting them trade-union rights or at the least, creating some machinery for negotiation. Overnight they became men and women, capable of wielding power by virtue of their position as producers. The industrialists are already accusing them of holding the country to ransom. The Blacks have entered the stage as a working-class recognised as such. Conscious of their power and their class interests as a proletariat, they will play their proper role in the developing national revolutionary struggle for democratic rights. But even as the struggle unfolds and draws nearer to its goal, it will become clear to them that democracy under a capitalist-imperialist system is a mockery and a sham. Their class interests demand the abolition of the exploitation of labour by capital and the establishment of a workers' state which alone can create a basis for democracy for the majority.