

THE ROLE OF THE WAGES COMMISSIONS

by Mark Dubois

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South African society has so much that provokes protest that the poor would-be student dissenter knows not where to begin. Specialization within protest has been deemed necessary to render dissent effective. Hence the Wages Commission is a specialist committee whose focus of attention is the inequality of wages and job opportunities imposed by mere colour of skin.

The aim of this article is to inform people about the Wages Commissions which have sprung up at the English speaking universities in South Africa. The Pietermaritzburg Commission's activities will be described, since it is a typical example of wages commission activity. A brief section on the need for such action will conclude the article.

The idea of a Wages Commission was first mooted in Durban some 2½ years ago, and as a result of student discontent about protest methods, the first commission was formed under Mr C. Nupin (the present president elect of NUSAS). The Pietermaritzburg commission was founded at the beginning of 1972. The need, amongst other things, for finances and information led the commissions to join NUSAS under the affiliated NUSWEL wing.

At present the Pietermaritzburg Commission has some thirty members with a hard core of approximately 12. The structure is a loose one and other than the chairman, members elect to take on different tasks as the need arises. Members have often been accused of "bungling" and "meddling" without having the necessary experience really to know what they are doing, or to do it properly. Like most ill-considered accusations this is unfounded. Members are keen and dedicated and include many post-graduates or senior students. At present seven post-graduates are active, drawn from the fields of economics, accountancy, law and the arts.

The chairman of the commission is an ex-officio member of the S.R.C. and reports back to that body regularly. In addition to NUSAS funds the commission receives a small grant, for running expenses, from the S.R.C.

The question "What exactly is the Wages Commission?", can best be answered by describing what the Commission does.

One of the first projects to be tackled by the Pietermaritzburg Wages Commission was a survey of campus wages. Low wages, in many cases far below the Poverty Datum Line (P.D.L.) were uncovered and following some press publicity the wage structure of semi- and unskilled workers at the University was reviewed and substantially improved in April of this year. The Salaries and Wages Committee of the University stated that they were working towards P.D.L. salary levels for 1974.

The second research project was that into Wattle Farms of the Natal Mist Belt.¹ As reported in the 1972 Survey of Race Relations, some 20 farming establishments were visited and it was found that the majority of workers received an average of R3,17 per week, while in some cases the wages were as low as R2,06 per week. Rations were supplied, and on company-owned estates, housing as well. However, rations usually fell short of the level recommended by the South African Timber Growers Association.²

The Saligna Forestry and Development Company's Estates at Eston³ and the Government Timber Plantations in south-west Natal⁴ were the focus for subsequent research projects. In each case low wages, lack of rations in some instances, poor housing and surprisingly enough for a Government enterprise, wages that varied between estates, were uncovered and documented.

It is mainly these research activities that were spotlighted by the press in the first half of 1973. Public interest was aroused as a result of the "Guardian" articles on conditions on Midland Wattle Estates, owned by the Natal Tanning Extract Company, a subsidiary of Slater Walker, an English Company. It must be pointed out however that all major newspapers in South Africa received copies of the report long before British newspapers, and failed to show any interest until driven to do so by overseas rivals.

The result of overseas press publicity on all aspects of British investment in South Africa, was the establishment of a British Parliamentary inquiry which is still in session. Immediate benefits were also obtained for the workers, in that both Slater Walker and Courtaulds (who own the Saligna Forestry and Development Company) announced substantial improvements in wages, rations, housing, medical and educational facilities. Both announced their intention to raise salaries and rations to at least the P.D.L.

The example of Slater Walker and Courtaulds must be followed by other farmers. For unless they do, they will lose their best workers to the more competitive employers. A great number of agricultural workers should therefore be shortly enjoying a higher standard of living. Naturally this improvement works in both directions, for who will benefit more from a healthier, better fed, better housed

and more satisfied work force than the employer himself? Some individuals have seen fit to challenge such wage increases, maintaining that they will not be able to afford to employ all their present labour force. Prices for agricultural products are in many cases at an all time high. Farmers, like any industrialist, should always be aiming at efficiency, and hence we can assume that the labour has been fully employed in the past. To dismiss workers because of increased wage levels, is to reduce efficiency, which must in turn affect productivity. Such an approach it is hoped, will not appeal to the "backbone of our country". In addition the benefits of economic stimulation, resulting from higher wages, will be enjoyed by farmers and industrialists alike; indeed by all of us.

Another aspect of Wages Commission activity is research into the various industrial wage levels being investigated by the Wage Board. Information concerning the state of the industry and the wages paid are gathered and formally submitted to the Board. Where demanded, oral evidence is also given. While not much significant success has so far resulted, the future of such research looks promising, and it is hoped that following a new, "model for presentations" developed by the commission, some cognizance will be taken of our submissions. In addition the informing of the workers of the hearings, and of their right to attend and to voice their grievances has yielded interesting results.



Pre-dawn scene at Howick, Pietermaritzburg: student enrolling factory workers in Trade Union. (Photo: J. Alferts)

The need for the dissemination of information, e.g. Wage Board sittings, is paramount, and to this end a workers newspaper was begun earlier this year. The paper runs to 8 000 copies an issue, and contains a variety of articles of interest to workers. The members of the commission help to write articles, print and distribute the paper. This is a mammoth task which often strains the commissions' resources. The paper is however, enthusiastically received.

Perhaps, the most important of the commissions activities, is in the field of labour organization. To this end a full time organizer is employed. 1972 saw the formation of a benefit society, and this year the Metal and Allied Workers Union was formed. Commission members give voluntary help in running these two organizations and perform many useful services for them. These organizations offer benefits to workers (free medical treatment, funeral benefits, and legal assistance with pass law problems) and to date, have a membership of 7 500 in the case of the Benefit Society, and 700 in the case of the Union.

At the July Congress of NUSAS in Johannesburg future activities were fully discussed. Research is planned into certain aspects of sugar farming and into Border industries. However all the commissions will concentrate on labour organization and the formation of Benefit Societies and Trade Unions.

So far, this article has largely been a commentary on the activities of the Commission in Pietermaritzburg. However the need for such a commentary was felt and hence undertaken with a view to informing the public of the nature of Wages Commission activities. There remains only one question to answer.

"Why are such activities necessary?"

Hamilton Fyfe quoted the following before World War I, "What are we going to do about the natives? Are they to be shut off by themselves in reserves? No, because the country cannot do without their labour. Are they to be taught to work with their hands at technical trades? — No because that would bring them into competition with the white man."⁵ This has been the constant theme of South African policy since that period. The White Trade Unions as well, have aided this policy. Professor J.L. Sadie in his Presidential Address to the Conference on Economic Development and Planning in August 1971 said, "Whatever the functional nature, and therefore the merit of the inequalities of incomes in the past, the growing inequality, at least between Bantu and non-Bantu during the sixties, is for the most part the outcome of the monopolistic power of the trade unions, which created unfilled vacancies and a good deal of overtime work in the more skilled occupations."⁶

Thwarted in the past by both Government and the White Trade Unions, the black worker has been at the mercy of White South Africa. Difficulties of organization, administration, and finance as well as fear of discrimination, have hindered the development of Black Unions. White legislation has done its best to nail the lid on this struggle.

A close analysis of statistics reveals the need for Black Unions, in order to try and reduce the ever increasing wage gap, and hence, to ease the suffering of Black South Africans.

Population and Wages of White and Black in South Africa in 1970⁷:*

	Total population	Econ. Active pop.	Average wage per month in		
			Manuf.	Mining	Central Gov.
White	3 751 328	1 471 000	R315	R341	R293
Black	15 057 925	4 972 000	R 52	R 19	R 52

(*African only)

Per capita real increase in White and Black wages 1960-1967 and Trade Union membership 1967⁸:

	Annual per capita real increase in wage (%) in			No. of Unions	Membership
	Manuf-turing	Mining	Central Gov.		
White	4,9	3,3	2,2	98	365 854
Black	2,8	1,5	1,3	14	16 040

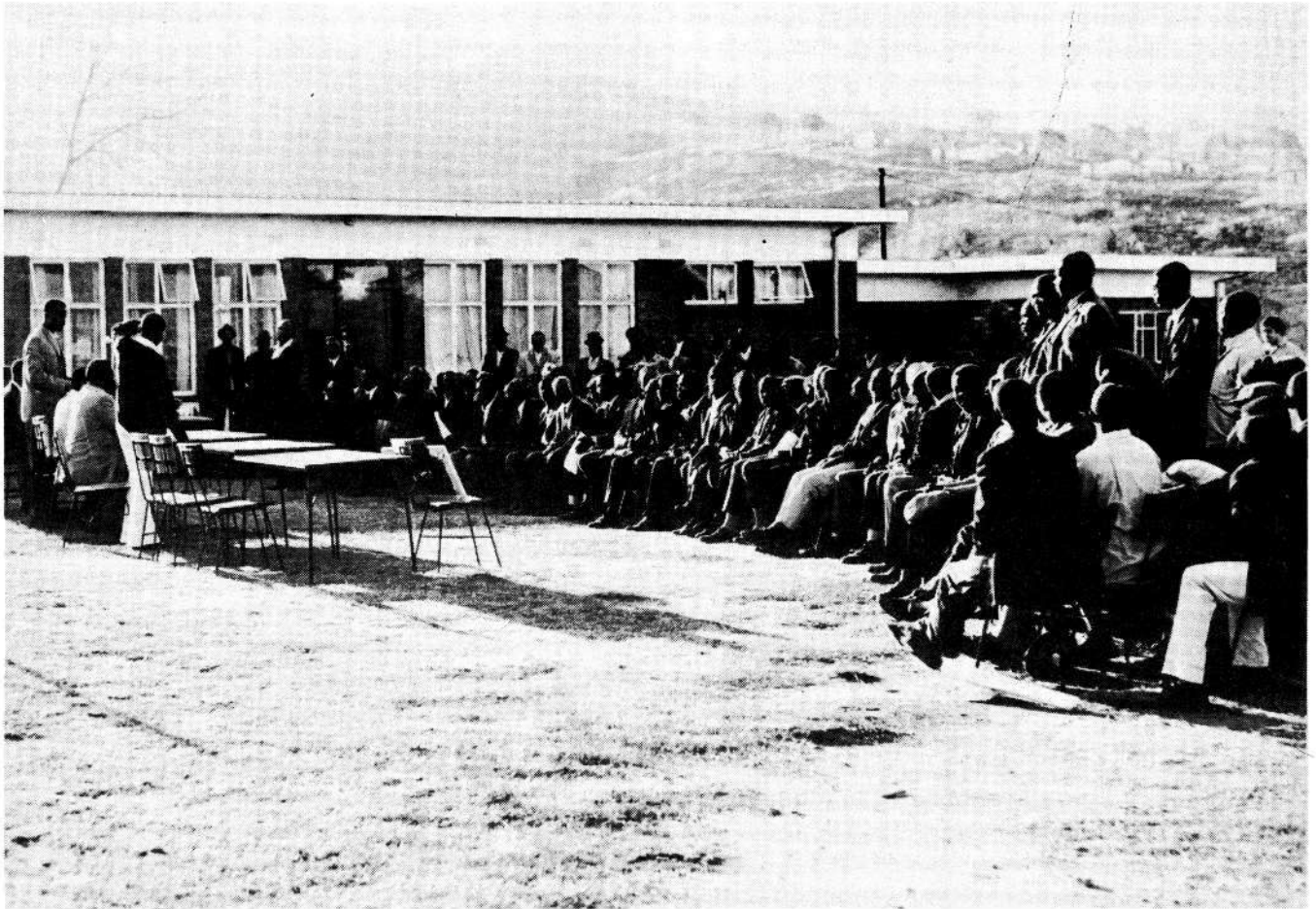
The two tables reveal the frightening reality of population, wages earned, the increasing wage gap, and the lack of trade union activity in South Africa. Whites have entrenched their position and are enriching themselves, at the expense of black workers. This policy, which is resulting in an increasing wage gap, can only lead to disaster.

The reason for Wages Commission involvement in the activities outlined above is its sincere desire for practical action in an attempt to reduce the wage gap and thus avoid disaster. While such a statement would have been laughed at a few years ago, it is our submission that many South Africans are today tending towards this point of view.

Government legislation has created machinery which is a hopeless failure. Remember the statements of industrialists following the Durban strikes and the press photographs of labour officers (there are 14 in the whole of South Africa) negotiating with strikers in the presence of armed police and with riot vans in the background. In fact only 10% of the firms questioned in this regard are on record as saying that labour officers helped in resolving disputes.

The Wage Board is not able to regulate wages in the light of Company Profits, trends and performance. The Minister of Labour said, "There is the case of a specific employer in a specific industry who at a Wage Board inquiry during the past year (1972) maintained that the basic wage for the worker could not be increased by

Trade Union meeting in Edendale. (Photo: J. Alferts)



92 cents per week. They opposed the increase which was proposed only last year by the Wage Board. But just before the strike was imminent, the same concern was prepared to increase the wage immediately by R2 per week."⁹

A glance at Wage Board determinations for unskilled labour is enough to show the unrealistic nature of their determinations. In fact their increase hardly keeps pace with the rising C.O.L. and inflation in South Africa.

Unskilled Labour Wage Rates per Week (Determined in April 1973¹⁰):

Area	Designation	First Year(R)	Second Year(R)	Third Year(R)	P.D.L. (R)
Durban and Pinetown	Male	13,00	14,00	15,00	18,03
	Female	10,40	11,20	12,00	
Pietermaritzburg	Male	12,00	13,00	14,00	17,68
	Female	9,60	10,40	11,20	
East London	Male	10,00	11,00	12,00	17,68
	Female	8,00	8,80	9,60	

The worst aspect of these wage levels however, is that even after three years of work a man will not be earning a P.D.L. wage. Another disturbing trend is the differentiation between male and female wage levels. At a time when most western countries are lessening this gap, South Africa appears to be entrenching and enlarging it. The final point to make is that wages at this level exclude workers from the benefits of the Unemployment Insurance Act. The above points serve to show the inadequacy of existing machinery to safeguard workers rights and to improve their lot. The commission is of the opinion that in the light of this failure, the solution lies only in the creation of Black Trade Unions.

What are the results of the low wages that Black Workers receive? Many are migrant workers and so the statistics of Dr A. Barker are relevant. In the Nqutu District the population has increased from 46 000 in 1962 to 80 000 in 1972. Not only is the land overloaded, but on average homeland families receive no more than between R10 and R20 per month from migrant workers. This has resulted in widespread malnutrition and disease. Dr Barker maintains that 30% of all his patients have pellagra and 74% of all children who come to the hospital are below the 3rd percentile on the Boston Scale."

What is the importance of this to the Industrialist? Horner states, "It is logical to assume that poverty breeds

malnutrition and that productivity of unhealthy workers is low, There is evidence to support the view that this is the situation in South Africa."¹² By reducing the wage gap the industrialist will therefore have a more productive labour force.

The absurdity of the arguments that "productivity must precede wage increases" has long been evident. A man whose subsistence needs are pre potent, (i.e. living below the P.D.L.), a man whose wage increases are no more than a few cents a week, and who is expected to increase his productivity will not have any motivation to work at maximum efficiency level. Only by increasing wages, substantially reducing the wage gap, ending poverty

and adequately motivating the worker can South Africa hope to survive.

The Wages Commission is involved in labour organization and research in an attempt to put into practice the argument set out above, for the breach in the defences of South Africa is the hunger of the masses which, unless satisfied, may have repercussions that will endanger all of us. The very nature of this article has meant that all ideas and activities could not be fully described. However it is hoped that this article satisfies some of the curiosity that surrounds the Wages Commission and the rationale behind its activities.□

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- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *Race Relations News*, June 1973. South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg.
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- 11 Dr A. Barker, Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital, Nqutu. (Speech given in Pietermaritzburg on 9.4.73).
- 12 Horner, J. A. *op. cit.*

CHIEF GATSHA BUTHELEZI SPEAKS TO COLIN GARDNER

Gardner: What are your present feelings about the whole question of the allocation of land to KwaZulu? And a sub-question: when whites who are discontented with the present plan say that you are discontented too, are they not in fact being hypocritical? Are they not discontented for opposite reasons?

Chief Buthelezi: I don't regard them as my allies. If they reiterate what I am saying, it is with completely different motives. They use us as a whipping-boy, as far as the whites are concerned. They like to say that this Government is irresponsible - that they are creating a black state, and blacks cannot be trusted, and this is going to be a nest of communism, and so on. I really dislike that very much. I don't consider them my allies in any sense.

Gardner: In fact they are almost at the opposite pole?

Chief Buthelezi: They are the worst, actually. We do not accept what the Nationalists are offering; but **they** are much worse than them. They are not saying this out of benevolence for the Zulu people at all.

Gardner: What do you feel is the present position in regard to the land issue in KwaZulu? What is going to happen?

Chief Buthelezi: I honestly cannot prophesy what is going to happen. Mr Vorster said to me in March that he cannot go further than what he has proposed. In other words, the consolidation map as it stands now is all he offers. And he has said that if we don't want to take what he is offering, independence on his terms, then we can remain as we are - which is rather interesting to me. Does he mean that his policy has failed? This was supposed to be a solution. Now if he says that we may