

Case Studies in African Labour Action in South and South West Africa

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It has been widely argued that in a political system as tightly controlled by a dominant minority as in South and South West Africa, one of the few points of leverage at the disposal of the dominated majority lies in the use of what here can be roughly termed 'labour power'.¹ Within this broad thesis there are several, radically different positions which can be discerned. One influential argument suggests that, through mechanisms never precisely specified, the increased participation of African workers in the South African industrial process will necessarily result in some significant shift in political power.² Implicit here is a rather crude economic determinism, in which the enlarged productive and consumer strength of black workers is conceived to call forth a modified white attitude towards blacks, resulting in some more or less mutually agreeable compromise over the issue of political rights. Thus, the South African industrial system is seen as an overriding motor of relatively harmonious socio-political change, undermining white fears for their material position and at the same time accommodating black aspirations towards improved status.

In radical opposition to this argument is the position which asserts the irreconcilable antagonism of the interests of whites and blacks *within the present system*, and the necessity for a revolutionary transformation of the whole society through, for example, a "strategy of insurrection, guerrilla warfare and armed invasion."³ From this, an explicitly class-based, dialectic perspective, systematic theory specifies the black proletariat as one revolutionary element within the total system, exerting its labour power through collective action and merging the economic struggle with the wider political struggle through tactics such as the general strike. Finally, one can sketch a position more or less intermediate to the two. Here the analysis of African labour power can be directed towards the multitude of collective labour activities of the black majority which could provide the momentum for

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¹ See, for example, H. Adam, *Modernizing Racial Domination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 153-55; F. A. Johnstone, "White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today," *African Affairs*, LXIX, 275 (1970), pp. 132-3.

² See, for example, M. C. O'Dowd, *The Stages of Economic Growth and the Future of South Africa* (Johannesburg, n.d.).

³ R. A. and H. J. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 625.

change—of a reformist or revolutionary kind—in a whole variety of spheres. Whatever the general evaluations to be made, they would be more open-ended, and less theoretically coherent, than in the previous two cases.

By and large this last is the perspective adopted by the present authors. We feel that it is premature to foreclose predictions on possible future developments. Recent events make it clear that widespread processes of worker awareness and action are changing the situation of the past ten years or so, in which the black urban masses responded relatively quiescently to the events around them. Leadership groups and worker strategies are still in the process of crystallization: the process itself points to increased activity among black workers and the possible re-appearance of African assertion as a major factor within the system. On the other hand, the ability of the white-controlled system to channel, even suppress, these processes, remains evident. The discussion which follows is an attempt to assess the present position in the light of available evidence, and to provide a description of recent events and trends. In presenting case studies of African industrial action in this region, we attempt to describe and evaluate the problems and possibilities facing collective African labour action in particular situations.

Before presenting the individual studies, some remarks must be included in order to provide the context for an understanding of the single cases. These remarks apply only to South Africa; they are, however, of relevance to South West Africa, governed as it is by the South African regime which seeks to implement the policy of apartheid or separate development which was formulated for South Africa. Where necessary, divergencies between South and South West Africa will be made clear in the individual study itself. The following remarks take the form of a consideration, at a very general level, of some of the major constraints, internal and external, facing attempts by Africans to organize and to exert their labour power.

A Low-Wage, Low-Skill, Low-Status Labour Force

Despite a hundred years of involvement in the South African industrial system, the African labour force remains remarkably little differentiated across the categories of wage, skill and status. Average monthly cash incomes for Africans in 1969-70 in manufacturing, construction, Central Government employment and mining were R52, R49, R52 and R19 respectively. (The average wage for whites in these sectors varied from R293 to R341 per month.)⁴ Further, figures from a recent survey covering 188,233 African workers in the private sector, indicated that the African wage structure displayed relatively little dispersion of the mass of workers around the mean wages cited below.⁵

4 J. A. Horner, *Black Pay and Productivity in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1972), p. 3.

5 *Wage Survey, 1971-1972* (Johannesburg: Productivity and Wage Association, 1972), p. 3.

	R40 a month or less	Between R40 and R60 a month	Between R60 and R80 a month	Over R80 a month
%	32	47	14	7
N	59,404	89,069	25,552	14,208

From calculations of the bare minimum needed to cover essentials of urban household expenditure (the so-called Poverty Datum Line), it was estimated that 60% to 75% of urban African households received an income which would not put them above this minimum.⁶ Such poverty is a significant obstacle to the creation of viable workers' organizations.⁷ On the other hand, the existence of low wages, coupled with falling or static real income in an inflationary situation, appears a classic setting for outbursts of worker discontent, and this factor does indeed seem to have been one underlying cause of recent labour unrest in South Africa. Like most other industrial countries, South Africa has been suffering from comparatively high rates of inflation in recent years, a rate which has been calculated to have reached 9.1% in 1972.⁸

With respect to skill levels, the same survey cited above revealed at the same time that out of the 188,233 Africans included in the survey, 60% fell into the two lowest grades of skill (covering labourers who require little or no training and education). A further 28% occupied semi-skilled jobs of the simplest and most routine type. Training of Africans in terms of the Apprenticeship Act in South Africa is against Government policy (although not strictly illegal), and the only African workers officially recognized in the skilled manual trades are some 5,000 or so building workers forbidden in terms of the Native Building Workers' Act to perform skilled work in scheduled (i.e., white, urban) areas, and some three to four thousand pupils receiving a form of trade training in trade schools located almost exclusively in the African 'homelands'.⁹ Craft unionism among Africans of a type found elsewhere in the world is thus not to be expected in South Africa.

Along with the low-wage, low-skill character of the African labour force has gone the tendency of employers to treat African workers as relatively uniform and undifferentiated. One unit of African labour has been considered very much like another by employers (with some laudable exceptions). Further, even where African workers did acquire the skills which would have entitled them to skilled status, the recognition of this status by employers has often been withheld, and the frequent phenomenon has arisen of Africans performing quite highly skilled work but receiving the status, and often the pay, of

6 *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1971* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R., 1972), p. 179.

7 See, for example, the difficulties African workers found in paying even relatively low subscriptions, Report of African Affairs Section in *TUCSA Annual Report, 1966*.

8 *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 March 1973.

9 The South African Minister of Finance, however, has announced (in his budget speech in 1973) that consideration is being given to the industrial training of black workers outside the 'Reserves'. No firm details of this programme were available at the time of writing although hints by Cabinet Ministers suggest the extension of industrial training in existing schools. *The Star*, 21 June 1970.

their unskilled colleagues.¹⁰ Employer practice, Government policy and white labour protectionist strategies have combined to help lock the African worker into his low-skill, low-status role.

Marginal Urban Status and the Constriction of a Free Labour Market

Of immense, if often intangible, consequence for the organization of the African worker in South Africa is the ever-tighter network of laws imposed on him by a Government seeking to implement its declared policy of apartheid or separate development. The main thrust of the policy at present is the creation of the legislative framework (through such laws as the Bantu Labour Act and regulations issued under its authority, the Physical Planning Act, the Urban Areas Act and the Bantu Affairs Administration Act) whereby most, and perhaps all, Africans in the 'white' areas of the Republic are to be assigned official domicile in one of the African homelands and permitted to work outside such homelands on a contract or migrant basis alone. Such 'guest workers', as the official euphemism has it, already number some 1.3 million, and are recruited through an extensive system of labour bureaux in the homelands, and only through these bureaux. Once in the 'white' industrial centres, such migrants are housed on a single basis in the growing number of barrack-like hostels springing up around South African cities.¹¹ The future of several million Africans who have a qualified right (under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act) to remain in the urban areas must be seen in the light of the declared intention of the policy to create more and more contract, as opposed to settled, urbanized Africans. Africans qualifying under Section 10 are permitted a free choice of available jobs going in the urban areas for which they are registered, and receive preference for such jobs above migrant work-seekers. Perhaps most secure in status is the African worker who lives in a homeland but crosses every day into the 'white' area to undertake work in one of the recognized 'border areas' industries, since in theory all he stands to lose by collective industrial action is his job, rather than, as could happen, his whole urban residential and household tenure. But such border area workers do not, as yet, make up a sizeable proportion of the urban African work-force.¹²

It is impossible to assess precisely the impact of this marginal urban status on the ability and willingness of the African worker to undertake labour organization. On the face of it, and as several writers have suggested,¹³ the rightless homeland migrant living in one or other hostel, and the Section

10 See for example, L. E. Cortis, *et. al.*, *The Utilization of Bantu Labour in the Building Industry* (Johannesburg: National Development Fund for the Building industry, 1962), p. 79.

11 For an extensive survey of the position of migrant workers, see F. Wilson, *Migrant Labour* (Johannesburg: Spro-Cas, 1972).

12 See *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1973* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R., 1973), p. 279.

13 J. Rex, "The Plural Society: The South African Case," *Race*, XII, 4 (1971), pp. 408-9; S. Trapido, "South Africa in a Comparative Study of Industrialization," *Journal of Development Studies*, VII, 3 (1971), p. 319.

10 African with his problematic urban status, do not offer the most favourable field for stable unionization. Nor, as will be seen, is it Government policy that it should be so. On the other hand, resentment against the contract system and pass laws is a major potential source of African collective action in South and South West Africa today; and as the section on South West Africa indicates, provides grounds for industrial-cum-political action among migrant workers at least, which cannot be ignored. But such action is not likely to be undertaken within the framework of orthodox trade union institutions.

Exclusion of Africans from the Industrial Relations System Created for Whites, Coloureds and Indians

The cornerstone of the South African industrial relations system is the Industrial Conciliation Act, which bestows statutory recognition on trade unions, affords them recourse to conciliation and arbitration machinery at their request, and provides for the setting up of statutory collective bargaining institutions termed industrial councils. From this system, Africans are explicitly excluded. Trade unions organized by and for Africans are not illegal; they are, however, assigned to an institutional vacuum. Joint employer/employee industrial councils lay down wage rates and other working conditions for over one million workers, the majority of whom are Africans; but no Africans are allowed to sit on the councils.¹⁴ Complementary to the industrial councils is the Wage Board, a Government body empowered to lay down minimum wage rates in occupations not covered by industrial council agreements. African workers may give evidence before this Board at its sittings. But it is widely agreed that the Wage Board has failed to effect any marked rise in African wages, much though it may have done to eliminate the lowest gross inter-firm and regional discrepancies in the wages paid to the lowest grades of workers.¹⁵ Space prohibits a full elucidation of the whole effect of the existing complex of industrial legislation; suffice it to say that discriminatory provisions of greater or lesser impact are also embodied in measures such as the Unemployment Insurance Act, the Mines and Works Act, the Factories Act and the Shops and Offices Act. And where the law does not explicitly discriminate, administrative action frequently achieves the same effect.

Restrictions Imposed on Africans Due to the Separate Industrial Relations System Designed for Them

Excluded from the established legal system of industrial relations for the most part, African workers are expected to have their interests served in terms of the 1953 Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act. This act has recently been amended (see Conclusion), but until 1973 operated as

14 Changes in industrial legislation which affect this and other statements here are discussed in the conclusion to the article.

15 See, for example, A. Spandau, "South African Wage Board Policy: An Alternative Interpretation," *S.A. Journal of Economics*, XL, 4 (1972).

follows: strikes by Africans were prohibited, thereby severely circumscribing in law at least, the role of African trade unions; African labour interests were the province of the Central Bantu Labour Board, consisting of appointed white officials, together with a series of regional boards; these boards were charged, first and foremost, with the settlement of work disputes, and the aim of officials appeared generally to be to get the workers involved in a dispute with management back to work with as little fuss as possible; the prosecution of Africans involved in a work stoppage having been usually resorted to only when workers proved more than usually obdurate.¹⁶ Officials of the Bantu Labour Board were also given sitting on industrial councils, where they were directed to represent the interests of the African workers in the industry concerned. The act recognized a limited form of African labour representation in the form of 'works committees', consisting of elected employee representatives. The functioning of the works committee system, in the wake of the recent labour unrest, was conceded even by the Government to have been a failure. Few were established in terms of the act, and employers, by and large, did not encourage their formation. Slightly more successful were non-statutory committees set up by employers.

Neutralization of the Politicization of African Trade Unionism

From its earliest days, African trade unionism and worker action in South Africa acted as a vehicle for the articulation of both economic and political grievances. In the 1920s, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union under Clements Kadalie gained a wide following among the incipient black proletariat, and functioned, as a recent study suggests, as trade union, political pressure group and mass movement.¹⁷ With the fragmentation and ultimate disappearance of the ICU after 1929, small trade unions arose among Africans, gaining much of their organizational drive from the activities of white and black radical opponents of the white Government.¹⁸ Indeed, fear of the potential force for violent change exerted by an African mass labour movement under strong communist influence was claimed to be one of the main reasons for the passing of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950.¹⁹ Executive action in terms of the act did not, however, immediately remove the radical activist influence over a section of African trade unions, which after 1954 made up the main affiliated membership of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). In the sequence of events leading up to Sharpeville, the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress, and the subsequent decision of the Congress Alliance leadership to switch to violent tactics, SACTU itself occupied a

16 See *Annual Reports of Department of Labour*, and statement of Minister of Labour, *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 June 1973.

17 S. W. Johns, "Trade Union, Political Pressure Group, or Mass Movement? The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa," in R. I. Rotberg and A. A. Mazrui, eds., *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

18 See E. Roux, *Time Longer Than Hope* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), and R. A. and H. J. Simons, *Class and Colour...*, op. cit., passim.

19 *House of Assembly Debates*, columns 9178 ff., 1950.

central role, and many of its leadership personnel were simultaneously involved in trade union activity, the work of the underground Communist Party and the sabotage campaign of the military wing of the Congress Alliance, *Umkonto we Sizwe*.²⁰ With the smashing of this underground network by 1964, SACTU itself and most of its affiliated unions ceased to function in all but name inside the Republic.

Side by side with SACTU had arisen a body of African trade unionists, most successfully represented perhaps in the African 'parallel' union of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, the National Union of Clothing Workers, who eschewed the political commitments of the SACTU leaders, and who argued in favour of a "bread and butter politics" approach of reform within the existing legal system. Such an approach is probably the only one which has enabled, and will enable, present African trade unionists to avoid State repression in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. The point to be made here is, therefore, that given intensive police surveillance and Government antagonism to African trade unions, African unionists are, as a matter of organizational survival, forced to accept a role which restricts the function of a trade union to economic and work-place activities. At present, African unionists in office bitterly resist the importation of a politically activist orientation which they consider to be ill-conceived and, under present circumstances at least, detrimental to the immediate interests of their membership. A recent, and not very successful, attempt to politicize African trade unionism resulted in the banning of the two leaders most closely involved (see the next section). African trade union leaders, aware of their high visibility for the organs of State security, are thus for the moment not likely to take the lead in movements which place a broad political interpretation on the role of African labour action.

Antagonism or Indifference of the Registered Trade Union Movement Towards African Labour Organization

Traditionally, white labour has shared the general prejudices regarding Africans which have permeated white society as a whole, and has added to those its own sectional fears of the competition of black labour for its jobs. With some oversimplification, two broad strands can be discerned. The first consists either of an outright rejection of, or a lack of concern for, the possibility of the organization of African workers, a position taken at the moment, with some internal differences of opinion, by the Confederation of Labour, an all-white co-ordinating body with affiliates mainly in the public and mining sectors. This body has generally taken up the stance that it represents the interests of white workers only, and recently refused to reconsider its position despite urgings from more moderate elements within its ranks. The other stand is represented by the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), the other major co-ordinating body with an affiliated

20 E. Feit, *Urban Revolt in South Africa* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), pp. 163-6.

membership of white, Coloured and Indian workers. The leadership of TUCSA has campaigned for the admittance of Africans into existing trade unions, and, as the latest step in its campaign last year, asked for, and obtained, a mandate from the overwhelming majority of its affiliated unions in favour of asking the Government to allow Africans into registered trade unions. It is, however, widely accepted that there is no chance of TUCSA's aim being achieved as long as the present Government is in power. Nor would it necessarily be in the interests of African workers if it were. Unions dominated by white artisans inside TUCSA, and several not affiliated but still sympathetic to the organization, in the main seek the unionization of Africans on grounds basically of self-interest: they wish to control the growing work-force of blacks moving into their industries in the interests of their present membership. These artisan unions have stated that they would bring Africans into their unions on restricted voting rights which would retain the control of unions in white hands.²¹ Unthinkable as any other step may appear to white union leadership, this policy indicates the severe limitations which even relatively 'liberal' white unionists would impose on the expression of African worker interests. The point is further supported by the failure of most white-dominated unions to make any effort to exploit the possibilities for African labour organization which exist even under the present restrictive conditions: such unions are not interested in fostering, for example, non-recognized 'parallel' unions, since these would not be under the direct control of the registered union itself. Again, despite their nominal adherence to TUCSA's non-racial union policy, Coloured unionists within that organization have sometimes acted in direct contradiction to the spirit of the policy in the face of African competition for jobs performed by their members.²² Some exceptions do exist to the pattern outlined above, but most of the unions affiliated to TUCSA do not comprise a force on which African workers can rely for wholehearted backing.

Employer Resistance to Effective African Trade Unionism

In a recent article it has been remarked that South African employers as a class have generally opposed barriers on African geographical and occupational mobility, since these have hindered the most efficient exploitation of existing labour resources. They have, however, not opposed the denial of African trade union rights or the differential wage structure for Africans doing the same work as whites.²³ On the whole, this would appear to be an accurate assessment of the situation. In the main, South African employers appear to think that by expanded company welfare and personnel policies, and possibly through greater interest in the newly-amended works committee system, they can hold the line against African trade unionism, helped in this by the determination of the present Government to resist demands for the inclusion of Africans within the established system of industrial relations.

21 J. Lever, "Bringing in the Black Worker," *New Nation*, November 1972.

22 See, for example, TUCSA, *Special Conference Report, 1967*, p. 31.

23 Johnstone, "White Prosperity . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 130.

The above, then, can be considered the major constraints with which any African labour organization and collective action in South Africa must come to terms. They go some way to explaining why sub-Saharan Africa's largest and oldest industrial proletariat is at the same time perhaps the least organized. Before turning to a more detailed consideration of African labour action in particular circumstances, we refer briefly to the limited survey evidence which is available on the attitudes and orientations of urban African workers.

THE ORIENTATIONS OF URBAN AFRICAN WORKERS—SOME EVIDENCE FROM SURVEYS

Very little research into the attitudes of urban African workers in South Africa has been undertaken. This is partly due to the climate of fear and suspicion which makes valid enquiry extremely difficult. Also, some of the few more recent studies conducted among Africans have covered themes not closely related to our present interest.²⁴ One worthwhile study undertaken by Durand,²⁵ a missionary in Port Elizabeth, concentrated, *inter alia*, on the attitudes of African workers in that city towards their occupations and towards industrial work in general. The information was collected by means of both individual interviews and group discussions, and the impression gained was that effective rapport was established between respondents and interviewers. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of workers (65%) considered that their wages were inadequate to meet the costs of living. The majority of the remaining workers tended to reply as follows: "It is very difficult but we can only try."

One noteworthy feature was the very high level of labour stability. Some 75% of workers in the sample had been in their present jobs for five years or more. Only 8% were highly mobile workers changing jobs in rapid succession. Yet, only some 15% said that they chose their jobs because they liked them. Quite clearly, these results reflect an 'artificial' labour stability, and the author sought the reasons for this pattern. Obviously, the influx control laws referred to earlier, and in particular the requirement that an African has to remain with one employer for 10 years or remain in town long enough to work continuously for 15 years, are relevant to this artificial stability. It should be noted that any African who has not yet qualified for permanent urban residence can be 'endorsed' out of the urban areas if he or she is unemployed, or can lose the right to rent a house in the urban township. In this respect African labour in South Africa is most definitely 'unfree' labour and the respondents were very conscious of the legal constraints on job mobility.

24 M. Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); M. L. Edelstein, *What Do Young Africans Think?* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R., 1972); P. Mayer, *Urban Africans and the Bantustans* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R., 1972).

25 J. J. Durand, *Swartman, Stad en Toekoms* (Cape Town: Drakensberg Publishers, 1971).

However, the legal constraints, important though they may be, appeared not to be the only causes of the artificial labour stability. Over 60% of those who had qualified as permanent urban residents considered that their choice of work was forced by circumstances. Over 50% of those who had not yet qualified for permanent urban residence said that they would not change their jobs, even if laws allowed them to do so. A more fundamental problem emerged to explain this. The Port Elizabeth workers felt that for an African one job was as good as another. They considered that wherever they worked their wages would be inadequate, they would experience harsh discipline, be subjected to unsympathetic supervision with an ever present danger or summary discharge, and would have no promotion prospects and virtually no benefits. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of particular jobs pale into insignificance in relation to these general conditions of employment. Another major factor was found to be intense inter-individual competition. This is inevitable in a situation of unskilled labour surplus such as exists in South Africa. The respondents were painfully aware not only of a shortage of jobs, but also of a spirit of intense competitiveness among Africans in the urban area which makes it essential for a person to cling to the employment he or she has.

Before discussing the relevance of these empirical findings, we should consider the findings of another study which covered some attitudes of relevance to the potential for labour action among African workers. This study was conducted by L. Schlemmer in 1971-72, among African men living in three townships in Durban. The study covered a random sample of 350 African men of working age living in family quarters, over 85% of whom had semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. In view of the understandable fears surrounding frank political discussion, an indirect method of questioning was employed. Trained African field-workers presented respondents with hypothetical conversations on political and related topics and asked respondents to indicate with which of two opposed arguments "most of the men living and working around you would agree". In giving reasons for their answers, the respondents invariably spoke for themselves and not for their associates. In this way very frank answers were obtained in a context of complete anonymity. For this discussion three of the many hypothetical conversations have been selected for analysis. These three conversations relate to Africans' perceptions of their own relative poverty, their perceptions of the appropriateness of collectivistic or individualistic (egoistic) responses to their situation, and their awareness of the latent bargaining power which inheres in their dominance in the labour market. Thus the items relate to three important conceptual bases of class consciousness. The three hypothetical conversations were the following (for each a choice between alternatives and open-ended reasons for the choice were sought):

1. One man says: "Africans are poor because they are badly treated and given few opportunities"; the other man says: "Africans are poor because they are backward and lazy, or have no education."

2. "A man must think for himself and not worry about the problems of the African people", versus "I struggle because the African people all have a struggle in life. I must think of them as well as myself."
3. "Africans could be very strong in South Africa, because without us the factories would not have workers to keep going", versus "Africans are very weak in South Africa because they will always have to do what the white man wants in the white man's areas."

In the open-ended discussions following the first statement, roughly 65% of the respondents revealed a clear awareness of the 'relative deprivation' of Africans. A majority in this group mentioned either discrimination in wages or in employment opportunity, and substantial minorities mentioned discrimination in employment despite suitable educational qualifications or the oppressive political climate. All those in this group signified a more or less complete non-acceptance of their present circumstances. On the other hand, some 30% of respondents rationalized their position of disadvantage by self-blame or acknowledged inferiority. The reasons included laziness, lack of education, lack of initiative, lack of a modern orientation, as well as apathy, drunkenness and a lack of money sense. Some 5% of respondents were ambivalent or could not be adequately classified. Hence, perceptions of 'relative deprivation' tend to predominate but there is still a significant minority whose perceptions of the situation seem to be functional for the maintenance of the present order—something akin to 'colonialism of the mind'.

The reactions to the second statements reveal a picture which is far less clearly defined. Some 27% of respondents revealed an awareness of the need for a commitment to shared struggle, the setting of group goals, unity and solidarity, and mutual encouragement in the face of discrimination and fear. Among roughly 44% of respondents the desirability of mutual self-help was expressed on the basis of sentimental reasons (pity, etc.), moral and humanistic reasons, personal expediency, or on the need to maintain quiet respectability and lack of community rivalries. There did not appear to be much in the way of a strategic or a collective action orientation in these responses, and a strong religious frame of reference lurked behind many of the answers. Roughly 28% of respondents gave answers which suggested an egoistic, individualistic or competitive orientation, presumably revealing attitudes of a type which would tend to characterize atomized communities. Thus, a small but perhaps a significant minority of roughly one-quarter of the settled township residents would appear to be orientated towards strategic collective action directed towards economic and political goals.

In the third conversation, the open-ended responses focus more directly on the issue of black labour power. Some 48% of respondents reveal some degree of recognition of the potential strength of black labour. Roughly one-fifth of these respondents, or 10% of the total, express their awareness in terms which are directly related to either labour action or broader political

action. On the other hand, roughly 40% of respondents gave answers which suggest a sense of ultimate powerlessness or an unwilling acceptance of inevitable domination by whites. Some 6% gave typically 'Uncle Tom' answers and some 2% see the 'homelands' as the only hope for an escape from domination. The remaining answers could not be classified.

What are we to make of these results in terms of assessing the African working stratum within the framework of a class-conflict model? First, we should assume that the results given above are to an unknown extent influenced by fear of giving frank answers. On the other hand, however, it is unlikely that respondents would have been moved to deny and contradict their true attitude—ample opportunity was given for non-committal answers and the impressions of interviewers were that this is what happened among the very cautious respondents. Therefore, the proportions of respondents orientated towards positive (and controversial) forms of action and communication are likely to be somewhat higher than the figures reflect. On the other hand, the proportions giving answers which reflect an attitude of acceptance of, appeasement of, and/or internalization of white supremacy and relative exploitation can probably be assumed to be fairly valid.

In the light of this, then, the results suggest that *two out of three* or slightly more Africans in Durban see themselves as seriously deprived of opportunity and fair wages. Among these, roughly *one out of three* Africans have an orientation which would approximate to what one would expect of 'a class for itself'—a consciousness of shared economic and political interests and of the need for solidarity. While *one out of two* Africans (or somewhat more) seem to recognize the potential economic leverage which overwhelming dependence on them for labour imparts, only *one out of ten* would publicly translate this into talk of strikes and action. The last proportion probably is an underestimate of those orientated in this way, but is not likely to exceed 35-40%, judging from the tone of replies.

The findings of the previous section suggest that in any unequal but more tolerant society than South Africa, the activist-orientated nucleus revealed by the survey would at least constitute an effectively large basis upon which widespread popular organization could grow. But in the case of South Africa, the overall picture suggested by these survey findings, if fairly representative of the urban African working class as a whole, indicates that the internal constraint presented by large numbers of passive acceptors of the system must be added to the existing external constraints in assessing the potential for labour organization of the African working class.

As Durand's study shows, the external constraints are not limited to those present as a result of industrial legislation or political restrictions. The extent to which influx control legislation causes insecurity of tenure in the city must cause urban African workers to be additionally cautious before doing anything which might place their jobs and accommodation in jeopardy. This insecurity in the city is heightened by intense inter-individual competition for jobs which, in addition, creates a further internal constraint in

the sense that an individualistic rather than a collectivistic orientation is encouraged. In view of the serious curbs placed on African political and labour leadership, the need for a firm collectivistic orientation as a pre-condition for concerted long-term labour action is strong.

Both studies discussed above were conducted before the strikes in Durban and elsewhere which we shall discuss presently. Before the strikes occurred, and more particularly during and after the strikes, popular attitudes among urban Africans may have changed considerably. These studies are, however, of some significance since they do provide a picture of the range of internal and external constraints which have made and might continue to make African labour organization more difficult than it would be if the wider political and economic framework for action were different. Furthermore, the constraints which these studies reveal might also mean that labour action might be limited to a temporary manifestation of intense frustration at a given point in time, in the sense that the political and economic background, as well as attitudinal factors, discourage a sustained development of worker consciousness.

AFRICAN LABOUR ORGANIZATION ON THE RAND

When the situation is considered from the point of view of the hundreds of thousands of African workers employed in or around the Witwatersrand (the major industrial centre in South Africa), only marginal importance can be attached to the role of the handful of African trade unions active in the area. And yet, since these, until recent months, were the only African trade unions in the whole of South Africa, some discussion of their problems and prospects merits attention. Mention was made earlier of the decline of unions grouped under the umbrella of SACTU; as a consequence of this situation African unionism in the Republic faced near extinction. One union, however, the National Union of Clothing Workers (a non-SACTU union), did maintain a viable existence throughout this troubled period. In addition, since 1962, attempts have been made to revive existing African unions and to promote new ones on the Rand. The purpose of this section is to discuss the position of, firstly, the National Union of Clothing Workers and, secondly, the renewed interest in trade unions which is now manifest among African workers on the Rand.

The National Union of Clothing Workers

With a paid-up membership of 18,000 African employees in the clothing industry in the Transvaal, the National Union of Clothing Workers provides an example of one possible mode of adaptation of African unions to the restrictive conditions under which they may function: namely, the position of the union as a 'parallel' body to that of a recognized union which is sympathetic to the idea of African unionism. The NUCW originated in the decision of the leadership of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, a mixed union of White, Coloured and Indian clothing workers, to organize African women in the clothing industry who, because of a loophole in the

Industrial Conciliation Act, were allowed to belong to recognized trade unions. When this loophole was closed with the passing of the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act in 1953, African members of the GWU were formed into a separate body, the National Union of Clothing Workers. The former GWU African organizer, Mrs. Lucy Mvubelo, was elected General Secretary.

The NUCW cannot be registered in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act and thus may not participate in the official decision-making process of the Industrial Council for the Clothing Industry in the Transvaal. Nevertheless, employers afford a degree of recognition to the work of the NUCW, and work through some 300 shop stewards who belong to the Union. The Union is able to help members to find work, to assist them with such matters as unemployment benefit applications, and administers a death burial fund. Difficulties in the way of collecting subscriptions (the check-off is illegal for African unions) have been partially overcome by the device of an administration fee for the burial fund. The Union is now so established in the industry that when, for example, employers are faced with work-disputes, the Industrial Council requests the NUCW officials to assist in settling the matter.

Notwithstanding this relatively favoured situation in comparison to other African unions, the NUCW faces a number of problems which illustrate the disadvantageous position of the parallel African union. Firstly, the Union operates from offices in the Garment Workers' Union building in Johannesburg which is in a 'white' area. Its location in a white area has made it difficult to hold annual general meetings of the membership, since facilities for this are no longer readily available. More important however is the lack of official status of the NUCW within the whole institutional complex of an industrial council. In South Africa these bodies perform many of the services for union members which might elsewhere fall within the ambit of the union. For example, it is the Industrial Council, directed by its executive body on which sit employers and representatives of the registered union, which runs such services as technical training schemes, sick pay, medical benefit, slack pay, provident fund membership, as well as processing under-payment claims and investigating grievances raised under the ruling industrial council agreement for the industry. (It is to the credit of the GWU that it has seen to it that these benefits are extended to NUCW members.) And of course the agreement itself is negotiated in the absence of NUCW representation. What can be achieved is close and continuing contact on a non-official administrative level between officials of the GWU and the NUCW, and greater use of NUCW officials in the administrative activities of the council. There is room for doubt that the GWU has done quite as much as it could have to exploit the full potential of this situation. The relationship between the GWU and the NUCW tends to be that of the 'mother' and 'daughter' union, in part due to an understandable caution on the part of the GWU leadership, in part due to the continuing reliance on the recognized union by the leaders of the NUCW. There are some signs that this is changing, that the NUCW is now more insistent on its status as a 'sister' union.

The relative success of the NUCW is evidence of the need filled by African parallel unions which emphasize their functions of improving the material conditions of the membership. But even here the role of the NUCW is sharply constrained by its unofficial status, and by the cautious approach which union officials are obliged to assume in fulfilling their functions. Recent events in the Transvaal clothing industry illustrate both the strengths and the weaknesses in the position of the NUCW. In March and April of 1973 widespread work-stoppages occurred among African workers (together with a smaller number of Coloured workers) in the industry, provoked by expectations regarding a promised cost of living increase to be awarded by employers. In a three-week period some 21 work-stoppages embracing some 4,608 African garment workers occurred in clothing factories, mainly the larger undertakings, on and around the Reef. It seems clear that workers were spurred by the example of earlier strikes in Natal (see next section) and also, on a more restricted scale, on the Rand, to organize work-floor stoppages in support of their demands over the disputed cost of living increase. In half of the cases, the stoppages occurred after the early morning tea-break, and workers would refuse to return to work, after having discussed their grievances together inside the factory. Only in two cases did the stoppages last more than five hours; usually intervention on the part of either or both GWU and NUCW officials, and the announcement of concessions by employers over the cost of living award, were sufficient to get the workers back to work. The existence of an established union such as the NUCW enjoying the confidence of the workers, was undoubtedly one reason for the speed in which the disputes were settled. It is also true that the NUCW had not been able to take the lead in pressing the workers' demands, and thus was confined to an intermediary rather than a leadership role—a position which in part was a function of the NUCW's unofficial status as a parallel African union. Finally, it is to be noted that the ability of the NUCW's officials to act as intermediaries depended to a considerable extent on the discretion used by Department of Labour officials who were present at nine out of the 21 disputes. In several cases these officials, following the spirit of Government policy, pointedly excluded the NUCW's spokesmen from the negotiations between workers and employers.²⁶

Emerging Worker Awareness Among Africans

In 1962 the Trade Union Council of South Africa, having decided at its annual conference to accept the affiliation of African unions, established an African Affairs Section, charged with the work of organizing African workers. Five small African unions were established by the section, in the face of considerable difficulties. Regarding the external environment of these unions, little help was given by the registered trade unions affiliated to TUCSA. It was the experience of the African Affairs Section personnel that the officials of recognized unions would promise to help, for instance at the

²⁶ Information from trade union officials and industrial council agents.

level of the industrial council of the industry concerned, but that nothing came of such promises. TUCSA affiliates were contacted by that organization's sub-committee on the organization of unorganized workers, but no response was forthcoming. Internally, and for reasons which it is difficult to assess, little response was obtained from African workers themselves to the idea that they could further their interests by trade union activity. One reason for this state of affairs was probably the introduction on a wider scale than previously of company personnel policies aimed at providing greater security and status. In 1968, at a time of acute crisis within the ranks of TUCSA itself over the issue of African unionization, brought about by attacks by the Minister of Labour on the policy, the African Affairs Section was closed down and its personnel dismissed. Internal divisions within TUCSA finally forced the organization to end the affiliation of African unions, and since this time TUCSA itself has not attempted to organize African trade unions.²⁷

In 1970 the Urban Training Project was founded by a group of people, both white and black, who had been involved in the attempts of the African Affairs Section to organize African workers. Again, for reasons which are difficult to pinpoint, the Urban Training Project appears to be making a greater impact in propagating worker awareness of the value of unions than did its African Affairs predecessor. One reason for this new awareness possibly lies in the stirrings of a 'black consciousness' movement in the Republic which emphasizes the need for independent black organizations, as opposed to the mixed white and black bodies which have functioned, but with little success from the point of view of real improvements for blacks, over the past years. The founders of the Urban Training Project aimed to establish an educational body which would publicize the existing rights of African workers under the present labour legislation, and assist Africans who wished to form a trade union or workers' organization of any sort. The Urban Training Project is not a trade union in itself, nor a co-ordinating body in the sense that TUCSA and the Confederation of Labour are. Instead, the Project aims to foster independent African unions by lending secretarial, organizational and other trade union training where possible. Workers in the laundry and dry cleaning, the chemical and the transport industries have received help in establishing unions. Shop steward courses and seminars on labour legislation have been provided for interested workers.

Within its first year of operation, the executive of the Urban Training Project was faced with an issue which forced it to define its stance regarding its trade union educational activity, and the potential for politicization to which the existence of African unions can give rise.²⁸ In brief, the situation arose in which one of the organizers for the Project, Mr. Drake Koka, was active in the foundation of the Black Peoples' Convention, a body with strong 'black power' overtones and a militant political stance. A unanimous

²⁷ See TUCSA, *Annual and Special Conference Reports, 1967-1969*.

²⁸ See here also B. A. Khoapa, ed., *Black Review*, 1972 (Durban: Black Community Programmes, 1973), pp. 120-25.

decision of the Project's executive (containing both black and white members) decided that Mr. Koka's activities were incompatible with his work as organizer for the Project, and he was finally dismissed after indicating his unwillingness to forego his political involvements. Mr. Koka subsequently announced the formation of the Sales and Allied Workers' Union, which was intended to act as a general union to which all black workers could belong. This union never really got off the ground, but Koka's activities, in which he was joined by another African unionist who had worked for TUCSA's African Affairs Section, appear to have led to his banning in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act in February this year. The incident reflected both the dangers inherent in black militancy and the fact that militants do not command a great deal of support from among African trade unionists, if partly for tactical reasons.

African awareness of the constraints of the system within which they function when organizing themselves, is reflected in the decision by the Project to give particular attention in 1973 to the idea of 'workers' committees' and the possibilities which these offer for African labour action. The idea of the workers' committee, as opposed to that of the Government-sponsored works' committee, is to establish independent workers' organizations on a factory-wide basis before negotiations are entered into with employers. It can be argued that the idea of a workers' committee is only marginally different from that of a trade union but in the present political climate it appears that African workers themselves are aware of the prudence of drawing a distinction between the two, and attempting to exploit the little leeway which the present system gives them.²⁹ Since they are intended to be independent workers' organizations, and not joint employer/employee boards, the workers' committees fulfil much of the function of an orthodox trade union. But, being organized only on a plant-wide basis, they will not, for the moment, enjoy the advantages which inter-firm organization gives the trade union as such.

In June 1972 an event occurred which appears to have given considerable stimulus to African awareness of the possibilities of joint labour action. African bus drivers employed by the Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO) on the Reef went on strike to back their wage demands. An offer from the employers of 2% was rejected. Three hundred of the drivers were jailed in Johannesburg, some of them after they had gone to the jail where their colleagues were being detained and demanded that they also be arrested. The PUTCO drivers thereupon formed a Drivers' Committee charged with collecting money for the defence of the arrested men. The Attorney-General subsequently declined to prosecute the men on the charge of striking, and the drivers received a pay increase of 33½% from the

²⁹ Workers' committees do, however, lack explicit organizational structure, for example, formal membership records, subscriptions and so forth. The latter have been found effective in engaging greater membership involvement than otherwise was the case.

employers.³⁰ One result of the PUTCO strike was that the PUTCO Drivers' Committee was converted, after advice had been gained from members of the Urban Training Project, into a new union for African transport workers, the Transport Workers and Allied Union. (It is perhaps significant that the members of the Drivers' Committee, in discussing their proposed constitution, rejected the term 'Black' in the title of the Union.) The new union is open to all African drivers, conductors and related workers in the transport industry. The executive committee consists of workers in the employ both of PUTCO and the Johannesburg City Council. The PUTCO strike, together with strikes and other collective action among Durban dockworkers both in 1969 and 1972, proved to be forerunners of a widespread movement among urban African industrial workers in the Republic, a movement directed in the first instance against the depressed living standards of black workers and the unresponsive structure of South African industrial relations. In December 1972 and February 1973, strikes occurred among African municipal bus drivers in Pretoria and Johannesburg; in the former city the stoppage resulted in the arrest of 57 drivers and the conviction of 13 for participating in an illegal strike. A number of drivers involved lost their jobs as a consequence.³¹ In Cape Town over 2,000 stevedores staged a work-to-rule campaign during October and November 1972, after a dispute over changed conditions of employment.³² After the widely publicized Natal strikes in early 1973, sporadic work-stoppages occurred on the Rand in the clothing industry, newspaper and milk delivery services and engineering concerns. While lacking the widespread nature of the Natal strikes, the events on the Rand indicated a renewed willingness on the part of black workers to resort to collective action in support of their demands.

LABOUR UNREST IN NATAL

In January and February 1973, South African secondary industry experienced its first-ever large-scale labour action on the part of its African work-force when some 60,000 or so black workers took strike action in the industries of the Durban-Pinetown-Hammarsdale complex. Possibly 150 firms in all, covering the whole spectrum of secondary industry, were affected. Indications that labour unrest was likely among the African work-force in the area had not been altogether lacking before the strikes occurred. On the docks, the traditional centre of labour militancy in Durban, worker discontent had been smouldering in the wake of strikes in 1969 and 1972 among the large number of migrant workers employed as stevedores there.³³ More specifically, officials of two registered trade unions, the Garment Workers' Industrial Union of Natal and the Textile Workers' Industrial Union

³⁰ Khoapa, *Black Review*, 1972, op. cit., pp. 114-16.

³¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 June 1973.

³² *An Assessment of the Work-to-Rule Carried Out by Stevedores in Cape Town During October and November 1972* (Cape Town: Economic and Wage Commission, Students' Representative Council, University of Cape Town, 1973).

³³ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1969* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R.), p. 112; also same source for 1972, p. 325.

had received several intimations of worker discontent. Where the officials felt that management might be responsive, an attempt was made to convey the feelings of workers. The Textile Union, for example, warned the manager of cotton mills belonging to the Frame Group three months before the strikes that workers were becoming impatient and had asked the Union to take up their complaints. This warning had no effect, apart from increasing hostility between management and the Union. At another textile plant in Pinetown the manager said he was "too busy" to discuss the demands of African workers, two days before a strike broke out at the plant. In all cases where management had been warned by the Textile Union of potential labour trouble, the approaches were snubbed. Under the circumstances, as a registered union for whom African workers were officially beyond its province, the Union was unable to push the matter further, fearing that it would be blamed for subsequent labour unrest and that it would be called upon to reveal its sources of information.

Starting in the middle of January with two isolated stoppages in Durban,³⁴ the strikes snowballed towards the end of January into what threatened at one time to develop into a general strike. The first factories to be affected were those with the worst conditions, but once the step had been taken by one group of African workers, the strikes spread by force of example. Whole streets were affected: in Gillitts Road in the industrial complex in Pinetown, for example, the strike started at the lowest paying factory on the street, Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mills, but then spread back and forth along the street, engulfing in the process a firm such as Smith and Nephew where wages were considerably higher than in other textile firms. Picketing and incitement to strike is illegal in South Africa but much the same effect was gained by the presence of thousands of workers pouring out of factories and moving *en masse* past neighbouring concerns chanting the old war-cry of the Zulu armies, "*Usuthu*". Social conditions of the mass of African workers helped communicate the mood of the strikers. In some cases, for example, the congregation of migrant workers from different firms in single quarter hostels and compounds undoubtedly served to facilitate the exchange of information;³⁵ a situation also served by the packed and gregarious circumstances of the public transportation on which African workers find their way to and from work. African beerhalls also served as venues for discussion among workers regarding strike action. Paradoxically, the absence of trade union institutions and of recognized worker leadership also contributed to the remarkable inter-firm, inter-industry solidarity manifest among the strikers. With limited progression possibilities and lacking the directness which trade union involvement could have bestowed, it proved remarkably easy to pull out workers from widely unrelated enterprises. It was sufficient that African workers recognized their common plight in low wages and their inferior status throughout industry as a whole. Lacking

³⁴ *Financial Gazette*, 19 January 1973.

³⁵ An important factor in the earlier dock-workers' dispute, and also in the later brick-workers' strike which sparked off the whole strike wave.

leadership recognized by management, and unwilling for fear of victimization to push forward spokesmen who could have undertaken negotiation before strikes proved necessary, African workers had few alternatives to making their demands known than by mass strike activity.

By and large, the following pattern can be suggested for those factories whose work-forces were among the leaders in the ripple of strikes which ensued:

- (a) low wages, below R10 a week, for many or most of the African work-force;
- (b) poor labour relations with, for example, a distant and impersonal management; opposition to communication with workers through the efforts of sympathetic officials of registered unions; and the absence of possible management/worker linkages of a direct type, such as the works' committee;
- (c) an oppressive personnel and labour control policy signalled by high turnover, frequent recourse to dismissal, and victimization of potential spokesmen or leaders.³⁶

No company in the region was without one of these conditions, and the strikes caused even factories with a more enlightened management (such as Dunlops in Durban) to collapse once the example had been set by other workers. A further factor which appears to have played a role in the strikes was the fact that the work-force of the area was largely Zulu-speaking, and did not exhibit the very mixed ethnic conditions of, for example, the work-force on the Reef. It is perhaps the combination of the ethnic homogeneity and the consciousness of a common interest arising from the industrial and wage situation which accounts in some part for the solidarity displayed in the course of the strikes.

Because most of the strikes centred on Durban, observers have sought the cause of them in the level of wages in the area. However, the low wages paid to Africans in Durban do not answer the question why it should have been this area and not another which was affected. A useful comparison here can be made by drawing a line between those workers earning R10 and more a week, and those earning less. The R10 line is of significance in that it was (in the form of the slogan "£1 a day") the desirable wage level popularized by SACTU in the late 1950s. More tangible however is the fact that workers who earn less than R10.50 a week do not qualify for benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act, and are thus highly vulnerable to loss of income from illness or redundancy. It is evident that judged by this standard, Durban is by no means the worst paying area in South Africa. While 20% of the African workers in the Durban-Pinetown complex earn less than R10 a week, the figure in Bloemfontein is 85%, in East London 48%, in the Vaal Triangle 42% and on the Rand 20%.³⁷ Thus wages by themselves fail

36 Conditions which marked in particular the textile industry, especially hard-hit by strikes in January and February.

37 PWA, *Wage Survey, 1971-1972*, op. cit.

to explain why the strikes broke out in the Durban region and not elsewhere. Nevertheless, wages, and more particularly the falling real income due to inflation and particularly food price rises, provided the focus around which worker discontent in the area mounted. It has been calculated that the level of the Poverty Datum Line has risen in the Durban area from R61.74 in 1966 to R83 at present. Increased publicity to figures such as these has undoubtedly broken through to the awareness of the African industrial worker. (In one factory visited in the course of the strike, African workers waved a pamphlet summarizing the views of Professor H. L. Watts of the University of Natal, who has conducted research on the PDL, in support of their demands). In January, at a time when workers had exhausted their holiday pay, they faced increased expenditure on school uniforms and books for their children, and a rise of 16% in rail fares to and from work. The strikes brought some immediate relief to workers. Increases ranging from R1.00 a week to R2.00 a week were awarded in the textile industry. Several thousand municipal workers received R2.00 a week extra, and in one large motor assembly plant an escalating increase of R4.50 was introduced. Voluntary increases were also granted by managers not affected by strikes seeking to ward off labour unrest.

A feature of the strikes was the relative absence of officials from the registered trade union movement. J. A. Grobbelaar, General Secretary of TUCSA, did advise the firm of T. W. Becket, one of the two concerns whose African workers were the first to go on strike in mid-January. But having neither the resources nor the prestige for mediation among African workers, TUCSA was unable to play any prominent role. The most active trade union intervention was undertaken by the two TUCSA affiliates (by no means typical of TUCSA affiliates in general on this score) who, before the strikes, had had sufficient contact with African workers to realize that labour unrest was sooner or later inevitable. Officials of these two unions, the Garment Workers' Industrial Union and the Textile Union, undertook the job of negotiating between African workers and management in a number of firms. Apart from this, the role of the registered trade unions was peripheral or non-existent. This anomalous situation, where the recognized trade union movement sat on the side-lines while large-scale industrial action was undertaken by the major part of the work-force, was due in part to the indifference of many unions to the interests of African workers in the plants in which they were operative, and in part due to the fear of warnings from the Department of Labour had sympathetic union officials acted on behalf of workers who were not members of their own unions. And to indicate the uncertainty of the authorities' attitude towards third-party intervention in the strikes was the presence of the security police: a researcher was followed by two cars containing security policemen when he visited strike-bound factories.

Similarly impotent were the officials of the industrial councils in the industries where these institutions were functioning. Officials made few attempts at mediation, and frequently sided openly with management. In one major case, that of the Industrial Council for the Textile Manufacturing

Industry, the attitude of Council officials arose from the employer orientation of the body. The Secretariat of the Council is operated by the Natal Employers' Association, and workers complain that the institution does not cater properly for their interests. In some cases, firms were in fact paying precisely those minimum wages which had been agreed to for African workers by the industrial council itself. As a result, industrial council agreements, in which are embodied minimum wage scales for African workers, have no legitimacy whatsoever for Africans, who protest that they are bound by agreements reached by management and white or Coloured unionists.

The only statutory, recognized organ through which Africans could have expressed their grievances were works' committees functioning in the Durban area. There were three such committees in the Durban area in 1970 (in a region where several thousand would have been necessary to cover the African work-force). In 1973, the situation had not changed: only three works' committees constituted in terms of the act, existed. More numerous were works' committees not established in accordance with the provisions of the act: there were around twenty of these committees in the area. For the most part, however, these unofficial committees were tightly controlled by management and in most cases were not allowed to discuss the subject of wages. During the strikes the works' committees proved to be entirely ineffective as channels of communication and as negotiating agents. When the workers had come out on strike the elected representatives faded away. At one factory, workers shouted: "We want money first, then we will talk about committees."

For the most part, caught completely unawares by the intensity of feeling revealed by the strikes, employers in the area desperately cast around for the appropriate response. Consultations were held as far as ministerial level with the Department of Labour. Employer associations, such as the Durban Chamber of Commerce and the Natal Employers' Association, in general were anxious not to let workers think that they had gained a position of strength by striking. Members of the Durban Chamber of Commerce were told to grant wage increases but not to negotiate with workers. Similar in tone was the advice contained in a ten-point plan to employers: Do not attempt to bargain as this will "only encourage the Bantu to escalate his demands".³⁸ Many managers were totally nonplussed by the situation, and some admitted to the writers that they were frankly terrified by the sea of black faces whose thoughts were suddenly revealed to be completely unknown to their employers. Most employers remained aloof from the workers, called in the police and waited for the savings of workers to dry up and draw them back to work. Others tried to address the strikers, but were shouted down; in one case a more successful attempt at communication was made when the managing director of a concern moved among the workers, talking with small groups at a time.

It is difficult to assess what the long-term impact of the strikes on

management will be. The Natal Employers' Association adopted a particularly anti-worker stance and urged a "take-it-or-leave" approach on employers. The Director of the Association has thrown doubt on the validity of the PDL at meetings with employers in an attempt to evade the issue that African wages are poverty wages. One strong current of thought among management which has emerged is strongly against an attempt to move wages up to the PDL, and instead recommends wages between R12 to R15 a week. Further, it is evident that some employers took advantage of the strike to rid themselves of older workers and 'agitators', and even to dismiss workers who were then offered re-engagement at lower rates than before the strike. Whether in fact employers will take action to remove the much publicized 'communications gap' between themselves and their workers, must remain an open question for the time being.

Central to the strike situation were the police who appeared automatically at the disputes. The press, and in particular the normally critical English-language newspapers, were profuse in their praise of the 'low-profile' presence of the police during the strikes. No workers were arrested for being on strike as such, though striking by Africans was illegal. In fact, the police had little choice. In a 'leaderless' situation such as that in and around Durban, the only alternative to arresting selected 'agitators' was to put the whole labour force of 60,000 workers on strike in jail. There can be no doubt however that the deployment of police even at completely peaceful strikes served to enforce settlements in an atmosphere of State power. At one factory, for example, the police officer reported to the manager and asked: "What do you want us to do?" When it was apparent that the strikes were spreading widely, police contingents were flown to Durban from Pretoria, and were deployed at strikes dressed in para-military combat uniform, causing workers to fear that they had provoked the State into calling out the army.

Since the strikers were, according to Government policy, all either actually or potentially 'citizens' of the future 'State' of Kwa-Zulu, the official home of Zulus, it is of interest to note that the homeland authorities themselves appear to have played only a minimal role in the January and February strikes. Discontented dock-workers in Durban had appealed to the homeland authorities in the previous year, but had been unable to secure the intervention of the Zulu Chief Executive Councillor, Gatsha Buthelezi. During the strikes themselves, the Paramount Chief of the Zulus acted as mediator between some of the strikers and the employers, but this appears to have been against the wishes of the Kwa-Zulu executive under Buthelezi. A more active role was, however, undertaken by Buthelezi and one of his executive council colleagues, Mr. Barney Dladla, at a strike at the Alusef aluminium smelter on the North Coast of Natal in March. Dladla himself visited the strikers and supported their demands, while Buthelezi threatened to withhold Zulu labour from the plant should wages not be increased.³⁹ (Buthelezi

was warned by a South African Cabinet Minister, Senator Owen Horwood, not to meddle in matters outside Kwa-Zulu). While severely limited in their ability to intervene on behalf of Zulu workers' interests, it does, however, appear to be the case that Buthelezi and his councillors have gained added stature among urban workers by their efforts.

In Durban itself the strikes are reported to have greatly increased the interest of black workers in the possibilities of organization and collective action. The work of Central Administration Services, a body similar to the Urban Training Project on the Rand, under the aegis of the Natal Garment Workers' Industrial Union and the Textile Workers' Industrial Union, has benefited considerably from heightened awareness among urban black workers.⁴⁰ One concrete result has been the formation, in June 1973, of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union for black workers in the engineering industry in Natal.⁴¹

SOUTH WEST AFRICA: THE OVAMBO STRIKE AND ITS AFTERMATH

In the years following the granting of the mandate for South West Africa in 1920, employers in the territory formed recruiting agencies for black labour. For the most part this black labour lay dispersed to the north of the territory having been driven off the central high plateau during the German organization to make way for white occupation. In 1943 these agencies were amalgamated into the South West Africa Native Labour Association, SWANLA, along the lines of the well-tryed monopsonistic gold-mines recruiting system throughout Southern Africa. The contract labour system which was established became known as "*omtete uokaholo*"—"to queue up for the identity disc"—to black workers. Recruited in the African reserves for work in the southern or 'white' part of the territory, black workers were presented with service contracts and identity permits, while labels bearing the name and address of their prospective employers were hung around their necks. They were then sent south by train to work for periods of twelve to eighteen months before being returned to the Reserves.⁴²

At present, there are at any one time around 43,000 African contract workers in the southern territory; some 11,000 in farming, 13,000 in mining, 14,000 in Government service, commerce and industry, 3,000 in fishing and under 3,000 in domestic service. Of these, some 40,000 are workers from the country's single largest ethnic group, the Ovambo.⁴³ South West Africa's economy is heavily dependent on these workers, but their indispensable contribution to its development has brought them minimal gain. The economy is characterized by high levels of consumption among whites, by its marked export orientation, by the large gap between Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Income, and by extreme disparities in *per capita* income between the southern commercialized sector and the Reserves to the north.

40 On Central Administration Services, see L. Douwes Dekker, *Management* (June 1973), p. 8.

41 *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 June 1973.

42 *Supplement to Financial Mail*, 2 March 1973.

43 *Sunday Times*, 13 February 1972.

Something like one-third of GDP accrues to foreigners, while the gap between black and white per capita income is much larger than it is in the Republic.

As in South Africa, the workings of the contract system in South West Africa served several purposes at once. From the point of view of employers, it rationalized the supply of labour by the creation of a single recruiting system which eliminated a free and competitive labour market by providing only one channel through which men could sell their labour. Employers were therefore able to keep wages very low. The restricted stay of the contract worker limited employer and local authority responsibility for ensuring decent living conditions for the labour-force. Contract workers could also be conveniently conceived as merely 'supplementing' the income which they were supposed to be able to make from their land in the Reserves. The system reconciled the twin policy objectives of meeting the white-controlled economy's demand for labour while at the same time keeping to a minimum the number of non-employed Africans in the 'white' areas. Africans were thus allowed into the 'white' areas only as long as they were employed by whites, and they were therefore denied permanent residential rights in areas officially allocated to whites. Again, as in South Africa, the practical outcome of the policy for the black contract worker was that his sojourn in the 'white' area was typically spent (outside the farms) in large, all-male compounds. In Katutura, the black township outside the capital city of Windhoek, the compound there housed 6,000 men; in Walvis Bay, centre of the fishing industry, the compound accommodated 7,400 workers. Women were not allowed in the compounds. It was indeed extremely difficult for any women from the Reserves to gain the right to leave them to live in the white areas.

It was these same compounds, inevitably perhaps, which were to prove the centres of the strike which broke out in December 1971. The first reported signs of unrest were in the municipal compound in Walvis Bay,⁴⁴ where workers had been expressing dissatisfaction for some weeks, and had reportedly written letters to workers elsewhere urging them to strike.⁴⁵ The men, through an elected committee, demanded an end to the contract system, failing which they wanted to be repatriated. They drew attention to an earlier remark by a Government official to the effect that the workers freely accepted the contract system because they allowed themselves to be recruited voluntarily. Accordingly, they now wished to show that they rejected the system and were therefore freely handing in their contracts. The men were effectively on strike: police moved into the town, and about a thousand men were repatriated to Ovambo.⁴⁶

Discontent also appears to have been endemic at the compound in Katutura. In June 1971 riot police had moved into the compound in search

44 *Windhoek Advertiser*, 10 December 1971.

45 See generally *South West Africa—a labour repressive society* (NUSAS Press Digest, February 1972).

46 For this and the following two paragraphs, see generally J. S. Kane-Berman, *Contract Labour in South West Africa* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R.R., 1972), and *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1972*, op. cit.

of illegal residents, and over 500 men had been arrested. In November, compound inmates had rioted against the proposed erection of guard towers. News of the threatened strike in Walvis Bay was widely reported in the South West African press on Sunday, 12 December, and a mass meeting in Katutura that day resulted in a strike by 5,500 men the following day—the first major walk-out of the great strike. Government officials, the headmen brought from Ovambo, tried to persuade the men to return to work, pending possible discussions on reform of the contract system scheduled for February. The men, now sealed off in the compound by police, refused; they were then repatriated at their own request. Within a week some 12,000 workers at a dozen centres were on strike, and by mid-January the number was about 13,500 at different centres. Nearly all the strikers were repatriated. The economy was severely affected; while office workers and school-boys struggled to maintain emergency services, and employers made largely fruitless attempts to recruit other contract labour from places as far away as Lesotho and the North Western Cape.

The strike appeared to take the authorities by surprise, although during the course of the preceding year warnings of black dissatisfaction had been issued by African leaders. The leaders of the two Lutheran Churches, which have a very large following among the Ovambos, had strongly condemned the system in an open letter to the Prime Minister of South Africa in mid-1971. The warning deserved serious attention, for the Lutheran Church in Ovambo is perhaps the one organization in close touch with the feelings and aspirations of the Ovambo people. (It is, in fact, largely due to the work of the Lutheran missionary in Ovambo, Rauha Voipio, that we have even the limited authentic information on Ovambo feeling that we do. From her research, and from the few written statements of strikers themselves, it is possible to gain an idea of the Ovambos' attitude toward the contract system).⁴⁷

The Ovambos' word for contract is "*odalate*", a corruption of the Afrikaans word "*draad*", meaning wire. Ovambo workers talked in terms of being handcuffed by the contracts, whose terms were established unilaterally by the employers' agency, SWANLA. Workers entered into contracts because they had no other means of earning money. The wages themselves were so low as to be a major source of grievance. The Ovambos objected to being recruited by SWANLA instead of being allowed freely to seek employment themselves, and were resentful of the pass laws which strictly controlled movement outside the Reserve. In particular, they objected to the fact that they were compulsorily repatriated to Ovambo when their contracts expired instead of being allowed to stay in the 'white' areas to look for new work.

These were the grievances articulated by repatriated strikers who elected a strike committee and held a meeting of 3,500 men in Ovambo on 10 January 1972. Workers at the meeting described the contract as a form of slavery

⁴⁷ Rauha Voipio, *Kontrak—Soos die Owambo dit sien* (Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-kavango Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1972); same author, *Die Arbeidsituasie in Suidwes-Afrika* (Johannesburg: S.A.I.R., 1973).

because blacks were "bought" by SWANLA and forced to live in "jail-like" compounds.⁴⁸ The meeting approved a delegation to represent the strikers at negotiations on the contract system between Government employers and the Ovambo authorities at the rail-head outside Ovambo, Grootfontein, on 19 and 20 January. Just what occurred at Grootfontein is not entirely clear, but it appears that minor concessions were hammered out between white employers and the South African Department of Bantu Development, and that the revised contract terms were then submitted to the homeland leaders (and one representative of the strikers) for approval. The approval was evidently obtained, and a revised contract system was introduced.⁴⁹ Despite the approval which had been obtained from the official African representatives, it is clear that the revised contract system differed little in essentials from the previous one.⁵⁰ The Ovambos had gone on strike in order to gain the right of freedom of movement (for themselves and their families) and a free labour market. But the Government could never allow this since it ran contrary to the essentials of apartheid and the contract labour system. What the strikers obtained was the abolition of SWANLA, whose recruiting functions were henceforth to be undertaken jointly by the (white) South West administration, the Department of Bantu Administration, and the homeland government (still largely run by white officials). It is arguable that this was a retrogressive step from the Ovambo point of view, since the Ovambo authorities would themselves now have to shoulder the burden of administering a system largely unchanged from SWANLA times, and apparently just as unpopular. The major concessions to the strikers were that contract workers could renew their contracts with the same employer at the place of work instead of automatically being repatriated to their homeland at expiration, this renewal to extend for not more than 30 months (for single men). They were also apparently given to understand that they could terminate their contracts by giving in their notice and then looking for other jobs in the same area without being first compulsorily repatriated, as happened under the SWANLA system. However, conditions were laid down before a worker could legitimately give notice to end the contract; any failure to meet these conditions meant that a worker would be viewed as being illegally in the area concerned, and liable to summary repatriation. Should the worker succeed in meeting these conditions, then, under the Employment Bureaux Regulations of 30 March 1972, he was required to register at an employment bureau within 72 hours of becoming unemployed. The bureau could then direct him to a potential employer, but could also, if it was satisfied that the worker had irregularly left the homeland, or had not met the conditions of service of his previous contract, refuse to sanction his employment.⁵¹ These legal provisions notwithstanding, when the contract system was revised

⁴⁸ The minutes of the meeting appear in Kane-Berman, *Contract Labour, 1971-72*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ *Windhoek Advertiser*, 21 January 1972.

⁵⁰ Details of the contracts appear in Kane-Berman, *Contract Labour, 1971-72*, op. cit.

⁵¹ Proclamation R63 of 1972, *Government Gazette*, 30 March 1972.

(and apparently relaxed) many workers were under the impression that they could go south on contract and that if they were not satisfied with their jobs, leave them, and freely seek better jobs.⁵² Employers, and farmers in particular, were seriously affected as workers attempted to do this. Desertions from farms have been widespread as Africans have moved to the towns in search of better-paid jobs in commerce, industry, and the public sector.⁵³

However, it was far from the intention of the revised system to allow such a state of affairs and controls were consequently made much more rigorous,⁵⁴ especially regarding 'deserters'—workers who were alleged to have broken contract—and police action resulted in quite large numbers of Ovambos being expelled from the 'white' areas. In addition, it was stipulated that in the event of desertion by an Ovambo contract worker, the Ovambo Legislative Council would refund to the employer the recruiting costs and then recover the money from the deserter.⁵⁵ The functions of SWANLA were also in effect revived by the formation of employers' associations after the strike, with the purpose of combining to offer uniform wage rates to recruited workers. In February 1972, for example, a committee of the principal employers in Windhoek was formed to eliminate wage competition in commerce. Similarly, farmers formed an association in March to handle recruiting and ensure uniformity of wage rates. But, despite all the attempts to restore in effect the pre-strike system, it was reported in March 1973 that the contract system was by no means operating efficiently.⁵⁶ Farmers in particular were suffering a serious shortage of labour.

On 20 March 1973 a secret meeting of the SWA and SA administration and employers was held in Windhoek to tighten controls even further. In future, deserters and vagrants were to be blacklisted by both white authorities and homeland governments. The implication is, presumably, that they will be permanently deprived of employment opportunities. The meeting also established an all-white advisory and co-ordinating committee to eliminate bottlenecks and problems in the labour system.

Nevertheless, the strike did partially achieve one objective: some wage rates were revised. According to official sources, black wages have risen by between 66% and 100% since the strike.⁵⁷ Other sources have found wages as low as R4.50 a month for shepherds, and between R6 and R8.50 on farms. In the hotel industry they range between R15 and R30 a month, while the average wage of domestic servants in Windhoek was found by Voipio to be R22.17 a month. Unskilled construction workers get R7 to R22 a week in cash, and unskilled railway workers R6.50 a week. The USA-owned Tsumeb mine pays a minimum of about R17.60 a week.⁵⁸

No African trade unions exist in South West Africa; although they are not illegal, their formation is hardly encouraged by the authorities. The

52 *Financial Mail*, 25 August 1972.

53 *Financial Mail*, 23 March 1973.

54 *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 August 1972.

55 Labour Enactment for Ovambo, *Government Gazette*, 18 August 1972.

56 *Financial Mail*, 23 March 1973.

57 *Financial Mail*, 25 August 1972.

58 *Financial Mail*, 19 January 1973.

successful organization of the strike thus relied to a great extent on an appeal to grievances which were recognized and shared by Ovambos throughout the territory. As a result of the strike and the revised contract system, the homeland government, the Ovambo Legislative Council, is in an invidious position. Early in 1972, during the strike, there were reports from Ovambo that the kraals of Ovambo headmen in the area were being attacked, and rumours of widespread violence were also received from the homeland. The exact extent of this unrest was, however, never allowed to reach the outside world, as police were sent to the territory, emergency regulations providing for detention without trial were promulgated for Ovambo,⁵⁹ and non-officials barred from access. Hundreds of people were detained under the regulations, and some eighty people charged with offences ranging from murder and arson to robbery, assault and the possession of dangerous weapons. In the circumstances, it is impossible to say with certainty what the origin and extent of the unrest was: it may well be, as Rauha Voipio and other church authorities have subsequently stated, that it arose from attempts by the Ovambo Legislative Council to fulfil its side of the Grootfontein agreement and enforce the "hated system" of contract labour. Coming hard on the heels of the strike action and the meetings of strikers inside Ovambo itself, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the widespread discontent articulated in the course of the strike had spilled over into the homeland itself. It can be suggested that the strike had the effect of politicizing the strikers and, once back in the territory, labour discontent generalized to the political level. Given the highly political context of the oppressive labour regime under which the Ovambos existed, this was perhaps inevitable. At any rate, these events have called into question both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Ovambo Legislative Council (which consists of twenty-two traditional tribal leaders and twenty commoners, all designated by the tribal authorities). The South African authorities in the past have relied heavily, in their justification for the policy of separate development, on the claim that the Ovambos at least supported the system. These recent events suggest that this can no more be taken to be the case, and that an open expression of popular wishes would find many, if not the majority of Ovambos, in opposition to continued South African control of the mandated territory. The head of the Ovambo strike committee, Johannes Nangatuuala, has formed a political party, the Democratic Co-operative Development Party, in Ovambo which advocates a unitary constitution for South West Africa and rejects the creation of separate independent States as envisaged by the policy of apartheid. (His party has been prohibited from holding meetings in terms of the emergency regulations). And, perhaps more indicative of the mood of workers within the territory, a riot broke out in the Katutura contract labour compound in March 1973 fourteen months after the Ovambo strike. Workers in the compound, who appear this time to have consisted not only of Ovambos, but also Kavangos, shouted down a Kavango homeland government representative

59 Proclamation R17 of 1972, *Government Gazette*, 4 February 1972.

who had come to support the proposal by the South African Government for a multiracial advisory council for South West Africa. Workers caused damage to the compound estimated at R20,000 and reportedly destroyed records kept on contract workers.

It is clear that the contract system is operating far from smoothly and it seems doubtful whether it will ever work properly again. Since the strike, the situation in SWA has been complicated by other developments. In the first place, political consciousness appears to have been generally heightened, and partly to have manifested itself in opposition to the Ovambo Legislative Council. Secondly, the greater attention which SWA is receiving from the United Nations both limits options open to the South African Government and appears to increase options open to black South West Africans.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is as yet too soon to assess whether recent stirrings among the black proletariat of South and South West Africa presage an enduring and effective movement to make use of collective labour action to further their position. So often in the past have Africans mustered an impressive show of collective solidarity, only for it to peter out in the face of police repression on the one hand and minor concessions on the other. Certainly, some concessions have been wrung from the white oligarchy: wages have risen considerably for relatively large sections of the labour force (accompanied, it would seem, by reductions in African employment levels in many firms). Many employers have been brought to realize that previous treatment of their African staff left much to be desired, and the numerous conferences, symposia and employer statements of policy, testify to a certain crisis of conscience. Finally, the Government has revised the twenty-year old Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act; something which seemed inconceivable even a few months before the strikes.⁶⁰ The amended act now grants legal strike rights to some African workers under conditions partly modelled on those enjoyed by the rest of the labour-force. (Briefly, Africans may now strike if they are not employed in 'essential' services or by local authorities; if the matter giving rise to the dispute is not covered by a wage determination less than a year old or by a current industrial council agreement; if the matter has not been referred to the Wage Board for attention; if the dispute has been referred to a 'liaison' (see below) or works committee, where one exists, or to a Bantu Labour Officer where one does not, and where thirty days have elapsed since notice was given of a dispute). It is to be doubted whether these cumbersome strike provisions will in fact function successfully, or that they will be satisfactory to the workers concerned. They are after all modelled on the provisions first introduced for white, Indian and Coloured workers in 1924 in the aftermath of the 1922 strike, when white labour was unable to prevent this emasculation of its strike rights. In addition, it is by no means clear at the moment whether urban contract workers fall under these provi-

⁶⁰ *House of Assembly Debates*, June 1973.

sions, and other categories of workers such as agricultural and domestic workers definitely do not. The existence of even these limited strike rights does, however, hold out promise for a certain legal shelter for some groups of African workers whose interest in trade union activity seems to be growing. The amended act also gives greater encouragement to the formation of committees representing workers in individual plants. Most emphasis has, however, been placed on the new concept of 'liaison' committees, which are joint employer/employee bodies likely to be dominated by the former, though works committees consisting only of workers must be formed if the workers themselves ask for them and no liaison committee exists. Finally, the act provides that for the first time Africans may sit on industrial councils to represent African worker interests, although not as an automatic right, and only Africans designated by Regional Bantu Labour Boards.⁶¹ These are still important changes of principle in legislation which originally was modelled on what even for the National Party were ultra-paternalistic lines. Thus both employers and Government now seem more open to the idea of institutionalizing of black workers' demands, and creating means whereby a more adequate response can be made. At this micro level, the prospect is not altogether inconceivable that change will ramify throughout the system and in its course bring about a degree of incorporation of the urban African worker into industrial relations decision-making at the level of factory, industrial council and so on.

But the short-run gains remain of problematic value and the most significant longer-term effect of recent events would seem to lie not with the adjustments made by whites but in the renewed sense of solidarity among urban black workers. The strikes themselves have acted as a demonstration of grievances which employers were not willing to recognize until the workers themselves took action. For the most part the strikes were of short duration, and hardly at all resolved into a trial of strength between employers and workers. The relative success of the strikes as a demonstration leaves open the question of collective labour activity in circumstances where workers face a choice between complete capitulation to employers and a prolonged trial of strength. The issue thus needs to be raised of the prospect for a more permanent basis for African labour organization. The survey material discussed earlier suggests that until the strikes at least, African workers did not view an important collective goal to be the establishment of the power of African labour in the medium to long run. It is, however, possible that the strikes have changed this position. What would now be necessary would be an investigation into what African workers perceive the costs of such more permanent labour organization to be. Such costs are likely to include worker perceptions of what resources (time, money, leadership, personnel) are available from within their own ranks, and what the response of employers and the authorities to such attempts to strengthen African labour power

⁶¹ Provisions of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Bill (A.B. 71-73).

might be. On the latter score, workers may consider that attempts to institutionalize labour activity might be to give hostages to fortune. Leadership which in the strikes was effective because it was informal and not visible to employers and the State, may find itself rendered ineffective if it emerges to view in the form of articulate workers' representatives in trade unions and works' committees.

While the lessons of experience have undoubtedly not been lost on black workers, no clear workers' ideology has shown signs of emerging. It may well be, as young militant black intellectuals have claimed, that:

The classical western elements of trade unionism have had to be modified to accommodate the fact that black worker interests extend beyond the factory; they extend to the ghetto where black workers stay together in hostels under squalid conditions; to the crowded trains and buses that carry workers in and out of town often at the risk of serious accidents; to the absence of amenities for black workers in and around town; to the stringent, irksome and humiliating application of influx control laws that result in a lot of blacks losing their job opportunities...⁶²

Such a stance places African collective labour action once again squarely within its political context. It is indeed hard to see how such linkage of economic and broader political issues can be avoided in the long run, hazardous for the proponents of this stance as it may be. Here the possibility is raised of a renewed direct connection of African political movements and worker action, propagated by radicals for much of this century. Inevitably then, much will depend on events in the political arena, both within and outside South Africa.

On a final very speculative note, we conclude that recent events suggest two possibilities inherent in the situation. On the one hand, greater willingness of Government and employers to respond to black workers' interests could result in the creation of linkages across the major line of conflict in South Africa, and steer the colour/class conflict on the level of the urban black worker into a pattern of fairly constrained, institutionalized bargaining, with political issues deferred for some time, or contained within the limits at present set by Government policy. Both sides may see something to be gained hereby; in particular urban Africans may obtain real material improvements. On the other hand, the strikes and African assertiveness may prove to have had only minimal influence on improving the lot of the black urban masses, while stimulating the growth of working class solidarity. The pattern exemplified by recent events could continue and intensify. Periodic build-ups of popular grievance and hostility could recur, to be expressed in large-scale strikes, and could move political issues to the forefront. Police action may be less restrained if the authorities perceive that strike action is likely to become repetitious, and to contain a challenge to the system. Within these two schematic alternatives would seem to lie the course of African collective labour action for the immediate future.

Race and Class in Southern Africa

PHYLLIS MACRAE*

INTRODUCTION

Much of what has been written about the white supremacist regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia¹ has discussed race as an independent variable, largely ignoring the economic base of racism. The liberal argument holds that apartheid itself is the source of the 'problem' and that the free market mechanism of capitalism will eventually solve it. I would like to argue from the contrasting viewpoint of Oliver C. Cox that racial attitudes develop secondarily out of situations of economic class exploitation for which racist ideologies provide a rationalization. Cox discusses the original use of white slaves in the West Indies before it became relatively easier to acquire Africans than it was the poor of Europe.² White indentured workers imported to South Africa on a contract basis were originally subject to the same control by mine owners as black labour is now under the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1841. Cox states that:

... racial exploitation is merely one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labour, regardless of the colour of the labourer. Hence racial antagonism is essentially political class conflict. The capitalist exploiter, being opportunistic and practical, will utilize any convenience to keep his labour and other resources freely exploitable. He will devise and employ race prejudice when it becomes convenient.³

It very quickly became convenient in Southern Africa to base economic discrimination on skin colour. Africans were much less equipped to fight their categorization as a cheaply exploitable resource than was the small group of white workers. And once non-white labour had been defined as a degraded and sub-civilized group (thus deserving of sub-civilized treatment), white workers had to be reclassified not as proletarians, but as associate members of the capitalist class. Race is now a self-perpetuating social variable often superseding the rational economic interests of the different classes. But class cannot be fully subordinated to race as the two main racial groups occupy the traditional class roles. The whites of all classes, through their ownership of the means of political and economic control, maintain a united front against the non-whites of all classes whose only resource is their labour power.

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1 Throughout this paper I have referred to South Africa and Rhodesia, rather than Azania and Zimbabwe, because the former are the political entities existing in the present while the latter are of the future.

2 Oliver C. Cox, "Race and Exploitation: A Marxist View," in Baxter and Sanson, eds., *Race and Social Difference* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 207.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 208.