

MIGRATORY LABOUR...

Perpetuating Poverty

It is three months now since Father David Russeli of King William's Town began his campaign to convince the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development of the suffering of those condemned to live on a pension of R5 a month. During June he cut his allowance even further, living on Dimbaza rations of R2,58 a month. There is no record that he has received any acknowledgement from the Minister to the open letters telling of his experience. This is the third of his letters to Mr. M. C. Botha.

July 15, 1972.

The Hon. Mr. M. C. Botha,
Minister of Bantu Administration and
Development,
Union Building, Pretoria.

Dear Sir,

I write this third monthly letter with an added sense of urgency. Your intervention is immediately required, so I hope this letter will be forwarded to you. I will also send copies to your Honourable Deputy Ministers who may be able to act while you are overseas.

This morning an old pensioner, appealing to me for help and advice, nervously thrust into my hand an official "Notice of Intention to Institute Criminal Proceedings in Respect of Non-Payment of Rental".

I had previously written a polite letter on his behalf to the Superintendent asking for clarification, trusting that there must be some awful mistake. But it was no mistake. Like others at Dimbaza he is being harrassed and threatened for not paying R2,80 a month rent for his house. How can a pensioner possibly pay rent, when the average social pension for Africans is about R5 a month.

Again today a young widow with five children came to see me in despair. She had received a pittance of a maintenance grant, not having been told that the rations would be taken away. She went out to buy paraffin for the month and for the first time in years bought a few items of clothing for her children. Then her rations were suddenly withdrawn — there was no food — there was no money for food.

Her only "sin" had been to purchase fuel and a little clothing. Now a senior township

official has told her to get work instead of asking for non-existent rations. She would dearly love to work. She asked how her young children were to be cared for. Apparently the official replied that they were not his concern. How can a woman be expected to cope in these circumstances?

The above are just two of the 30 or so people I saw today. The overwhelming evidence is that they are being relentlessly squeezed. A cruel spirit seems to be contaminating the whole day-to-day administration.

I wish to emphasise that these conditions of tearing hardship do not only involve the so-called "unproductive units". The situation is just as frustrating and harsh for the few able-bodied men "lucky" enough to be working as casual labourers for R20 a month. For this they must work a 46 hour week, starting at 7.30 a.m. and finishing at 5.12 p.m., Monday to Friday, with only half an hour for lunch, and no tea break at all. There is the added hazard of possibly being laid off at any time without warning and with no compensation.

For a casual labourer with a wife and only four children there is a mere R3,34 a month per person for living. These wages and working conditions are shocking.

For such a family the income per person is even less than the absurdly inadequate pension of R5 given to the aged and infirm. What a callous mockery for an able-bodied man to be obliged to struggle to make ends meet on the basis of R3,34 a month per person. He cannot find more than that in R20 a month.

The Poverty Datum Line figures tabulated below show by comparison how utterly hopeless the Resettlement Township Casual Labourer wages are.

MINIMUM TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENDITURE ON ITEMS IN TERMS OF THE POVERTY DATUM LINE.

**TOTALS FOR "AVERAGE" FAMILY
(two parents and four children)**

Food	R44,93c
Clothing	11,52
Education	44
Rent	2,50
(Average between two and four roomed)	
Transport	—
(Assuming that they do not need it!)	
Washing/cleaning	2,65
Fuel/lighting	22,00
Health	—
(Assuming the clinic supplies all needs)	
	R64,04c

This Poverty Datum Line is more remarkable for what it excludes than for what it includes.

It excludes furniture, crockery, linen, pots and pans, dentist bills, stationery, reading matter, postage, transport, savings, and money

for dependent relatives, let alone entertainment.

I hope you will understand from the above why a note of desperation has entered into my pleadings. The people must be protected from the impossible demands being made upon them. Something must be done to improve working conditions and wages.

The R5 a month I have been living on for the last three months leaves me significantly "better off" than most Dimbaza inhabitants. Nevertheless I am feeling the strain. It is like serving a prison sentence — I hold on grimly counting the day. My life revolves around my stomach! Human joy is shrivelling up: my capacity for giving out is shrinking. My friends notice the difference in me.

The R5 is utterly inadequate for my needs. I have no money for shoelaces let alone shoes. How can you expect people to pull themselves up with the bootstraps when they do not even have them, and when you squeeze and extinguish their opportunities for acquiring them.

May God in His love give you no peace of mind until you have freed the poor from being bullied for rent, until you have ensured a just and living wage for the labourers.

I wait with hope for your response.

Yours sincerely in Christ's service.

D. P. H. Russell.





Bongani — there was no room for him in the hospital at King William's Town. I had to take him to the mission hospital 30 miles away.



The markings on his arms are signs of pellagra.

