

MIGRATORY LABOUR...

Depressed Wages

In the report from this office in May this year we mentioned the fact that the migrant labour and influx control systems depress the whole level of wages paid to the black community in South Africa and enable employers to exploit employees in a way which can only happen in a society where economic and legislative power lies exclusively in the hands of the employer group.

There have been some encouraging signs recently that the larger corporations and industrial concerns are beginning to press for a better wage structure throughout the Republic and for employers to facilitate the growth of works committees and trade unions for black employees. This will undoubtedly lead to an improvement in working conditions for some people and rewards for such companies in reduced labour turnovers and greater productivity. Unfortunately, however, the hundreds of thousands of White people who have small businesses, or who use mostly unskilled labour, or who are employers only of domestic servants or farm labourers, will be unlikely to take the same attitude. There is no law compelling them to do so and, as long as there is an enormous pool of unemployed Black people in the bantustans they will have no incentive to provide workers with sufficient money, good working conditions and job satisfaction.

As long as a man who complains can be immediately and cheaply replaced, as long as workers are denied the necessary freedom of movement to sell their labour advantageously, so long will employers continue to pay wages well below the breadline and to regard the people who work for them as labour units to be discarded as soon as they fail to fulfil the sometimes unreasonable demands made of them.

Contract workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. They may not leave their bantustans to seek for work but must wait until a recruiting agent comes to their particular labour bureau. If they have been out of work for some months they will accept any job offered because any wage is better than none at all. They must then work out the

year's contract before trying again at the bantustan labour bureau for a better job. One man, a factory worker, who came to us this month is registered as a work-seeker at a town in the eastern Transvaal. He supports his wife and children there and has to pay R8 per month rent for his house. At the expiry of his last contract he went home and registered as a work-seeker at the beginning of April. He waited for four months without being offered any work at all. He told us that recruiting agents hardly ever went to the area. We confirmed this and discovered in addition that no applications would be accepted for any individual by name, even were we able to put him in touch with a prospective employer. This means that, unless he is actually physically present at the labour bureau when a recruiting agent happens to arrive, he will miss all chance of employment. It must be borne in mind that the labour bureau may be many miles away from where a man lives. When, eventually, an agent does turn up there he will be forced to take any job offered, whatever the pay. If he refuses there are plenty of other men on the spot longing for work and he will not be offered anything else. He cannot risk bargaining or holding out for better contract terms. He has to work to pay his rent and feed his family.

Some places in the bantustans are closed to all industrial centres except specified border areas. Men registered at a tribal labour bureau are told they can only work in a certain border industrial area. As existing wage agreements are waived in the border areas, wages paid are well below the already low level in cities like Johannesburg. The case of a man who has been told that he may only work in Brits came to our attention. He is earning R16 per month in a factory there but has no choice. He cannot find better paid work anywhere because he is not allowed to look for it or to accept it. His sister's Johannesburg employer was prepared to find him a job but any application for him to work in Johannesburg would be refused. His employer in Brits is protected from any pressures to pay more because he is assured of a plentiful supply of labour at whatever wage he chooses to pay.

The following cases illustrate some examples of the very low wages paid in Johannesburg.

Mr. F. P. D.

worked for one firm from 1942 until he was discharged in May, 1971, because he was "too old". He was being paid R8 per week when he was discharged so did not even qualify for unemployment insurance. This only becomes operative for workers who earn at least R10,50 a week. He had nothing to show for all those years of faithful work, not even a pension.

Mrs. N. R. M.

is an elderly woman who has worked for the same employer for the last 10 years. She is paid R16 per month and is scared to give notice in case she cannot find another job at her age.

Mr. J. T.

is a foreigner from Botswana. He has just been discharged because his employers said

he was becoming "cheeky". He has worked for them for 21 years and was paid R10,30 a week at the time he was discharged. He has a wife and children in Botswana for whom he is the sole breadwinner. He will probably find it difficult to get registered in a new job because he is a foreigner.

Mr. S. K.

comes from the Ciskei. He has been working for an industrial company in the Transvaal since 1966. In 1970 they transferred him from their factory in Johannesburg to Germiston and he had to be re-registered to them under the 1968 labour regulations on yearly contract. They then reduced his pay from 36 cents to 33 cents an hour and told him that this is what the law compels them to pay. They have not given him any increase since 1970, telling him that they are "not allowed to".

He has to live in a hostel and to support his wife and children in the Ciskei.

Johannesburg Advice Office

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