

REVIEW

"Industrial relations in South African perspective" by K. Reese (McGraw Hill, Johannesburg, 1983. Price R12 approx.)

A comprehensive survey of this subject has long been awaited by students of South African industrial relations. Unfortunately Prof. Reese's book falls short of this task.

The problem is not confined to the occasional error of fact - although members of the South African Association of Municipal Employees may be perturbed to find themselves affiliated to the Council of Unions of South Africa (p.12). More serious is the apparent absence of any knowledge of the long history of conflict between capital and labour in this country. The result is to falsify the record of half a century of struggle by black workers in the face of state repression:

As far as South Africa is concerned, the remarkable aspect is that such organised protest (i.e. trade unions) against arbitrary management and unfair employment practices did not express itself forcefully much earlier. The explanation may be that different groups of workers have unequal propensities to unionize, and that the normally not-wishing-to-commit-themselves majority of South African blacks only became convinced over the past ten years that there is no other way to force unenlightened managers to change their ways. (p.7)

Prof. Reese skates over a host of topics without establishing a coherent theme. Part I: "Identifying the essentials" - begins with an esoteric discussion on Christian ethics and the institution of private property. More useful perhaps is the summary provided of various codes of conduct drawn up for

companies operating in South Africa.

Part II: "Conflict management" - draws on comparative material to stress the role of the industrial relations expert and the need for good communications within the firm. However if co-option fails and conflict cannot be mediated more traditional options are still available. This section of the book ends with a "strike contingency plan" of almost military proportions. The seventeen point plan includes provisions "to evacuate female staff the moment that the trouble starts".(p.71)

More ominously employers are advised to:

arrange for the police to stand by in the event of trouble. As long as the strikers behave in an orderly and peaceful manner, ensure that the police remain out of sight. If the strikers are militant and stick-wielding, however, immediately ask the police to move in. The liaison with the police should be handled by the security officer, and not the industrial-relations manager.(p.71)

The second half of the book provides a world Cooke's tour of schemes for "co-determination" and "worker ownership". The overall orientation is still one of trying to manage conflict in order to safeguard wider management perogatives and preserve basic capitalist relations of production. Notwithstanding Prof. Reese provides a service in warning South African managers that in future they may have to negotiate over a much wider range of issues than simply wages.

(Jon Lewis, South African Labour Bulletin)