

WHAT

THE BLACK WORKERS THINK

by Mike Murphy

Many Whites, as the self-appointed guardians over the present and the future of Blacks presume they know what Blacks think and how Blacks feel about the treatment they receive. The following quotes reveal how Blacks themselves feel about issues closely related to their lives – their work, their working conditions, their wages, racism, the Church, the police.

The quotes are taken from a booklet published this year following a novel experiment carried out in December 1971 and January 1972, and sponsored by a number of Christian organizations. Six Black theological students, all in their early twenties, were sent into various factories on the Witwatersrand to take on jobs as ordinary labourers, to experience what the workers experience, to learn how they feel, what they think. These students were taken off the job for a day after 4 weeks, after 6 weeks, and finally at the end of the 8th week to answer questionnaires and for purposes of reorientation and encouragement. The students went to different sorts of factories and their varying answers reflect the variety of working conditions they experienced. The students all had a minimum of a Std. 8 education and one year's theological training. Some students were more fluent in Afrikaans than in English, but answered the questionnaires in English. A selection of the questions and answers appears below, with the answers reproduced exactly as the students wrote them.

In answer to the question "To what extent were you informed with regard to

- (a) **Process of production or work**
- (b) **Your responsibilities**
- (c) **Human relationships**

To whom were you introduced? :

Student A

- (a) I was informed that the process of production and work is very low and poor because of incompetent workers. They said that production would be good if they had good workers; but, I discovered that there are capable workers but they are not taught well or why they do their work.
- (b) Machine operator or helping where the need was felt. I wasn't always clearly and adequately informed about them. I had to use my discretion. I was always told I should reach a certain quota. I was informed about efficiency, speed and industry. I was informed how to operate and maintain the plant, e.g. oiling and checking.
- (c) At first very poor. Individualism and estrangement prevailing. Life situation anonymous, soulless, bewildering, frustrating, embittering. Superiority complex – white staff
Inferiority complex – black staff

Student B

- (a) Shown only the piece of work required from you at that time.
- (b) Limited to the piece of work you're doing.
- (c) Fair. You introduce yourself.

In answer to the question "Describe the work place with regard to environment, organisation, space, appearance, flow of work, light air, noise, safety. What did your fellow-workers think about these conditions? "

Student A.

Discription of work with regard to Environment: Boredom transferred from home to industry.

Organisation: very poor; supervisor lacked mastery of his work thus inducing confusion and disorganisation among the workers and to the work as a whole.

Space: Not enough space to move and work freely.

Appearance: The place looks untidy and without order.

Flow of work: flow of work isn't satisfactory because workers are not crystal clear about purposes and goals of industry. Boredom always crops up because workers are not even allowed to talk. If found talking they're told they are hindering the progress of work.

Light: Light especially sun's rays prevented by tall buildings around the firm.

Noise: A constant, piercing, disagreeable noise causing stomach troubles.

Safety: No safety from machinery. The sickening noise causes emotionally induced illnesses. Frustration and boredom causing unpleasant emotions thus resulting in poor human relationships. Some workers complained of "pains in the neck" and "gas". One worker injured and another stayed away from work.

In answer to the question "How would you describe the attitude of your fellow workers and supervisors with regard to: Their work, Factory, Industrial work in general? "

Student A

Workers feel punk physically. They are fundamentally unhappy, because the pace and pressure are so great. Industrial work in general causes terrific emotional illnesses. It frightens off maturity to co-operate and share willingly with their fellowmen. Workers lack responsibility with regard to work. Non-creative. Supervisors play superior thus exploiting the workers. It is a "monster" with a soulless atmosphere.

The supervisor couldn't fix the machine well – failing which he started to blame me for miscarrying of machine and even promised to give me the sack if that mistake occurred again. But when someone else (engineer) came to have a look at it he discovered that the plant was badly adjusted. On one occasion the plant was so loosely adjusted that it could have cut my fingers off, but by luck I discovered it. The boss once called me "boy" when he wanted me to help him carry a box to his car.

Temporary and permanent workers were sometimes robbed of their wages because they were ignorant and illiterate and unable to calculate the hours and minutes they'd worked. Workers are cynical about all these things for they prefer being undermined, bullied/dehumanised rather than that their families should starve.

Fear dominates them, even when scolded for something they are innocent of they do not defend themselves.

In answer to the question "What was the weekly wage of workers?":

Student B

R12,00

Student C

R7,98

In answer to the question "Did the workers have any influence on conditions or decisions about working? If so, what results were achieved? "

Student A

They realised they are treated as things, not human beings; only to be dominated and pushed around like objects. Men as old as my father who have great personal responsibility in the community are treated like "boys" at work. But they decided to conform to such conditions so that their families could survive. They even remarked that since the whites had defeated the blacks they will always be "baas" to them. "A black is and will ever be inferior to the white" some said. The workers seem to be permanently crippled and impaired by the indoctrination of white superiority and despise themselves.

In answer to question "Describe the attitude of workers towards material and machines and the consent of the worker":

Student A

That they are cogs of the machine responding to its constant grinding. Their emotions are dictated by the plant, Little knowledge about machine operation and materials. They don't dream they could themselves invent or construct low-cost technical instruments or machinery. They are convinced that the Government is against any invention. They feel machinery is the enemy of the worker and is filled with various unsolved problems. It is a threat to them. Most accidents or fatal injuries are caused by machines. This makes them anxious, absent-minded, worried and imposes fear which induces hatred. They find machines monotonous and boring.

In answer to the question "What were their main subjects for discussion":

Student C:

They said academic education was valueless for their young people because of job reservation.

The young educated people who should be holding higher posts in society work alongside them in unskilled jobs, so it was useless educating children.

They prefer factory work because it pays equally well or even better than nursing, clerical work, teaching or even somebody with a B.A. degree.

They said they felt that there were Africans who are capable of leading the nation, in various fields of life, such as industry, technology and inventions, but these people are stifled by Government policy and not given the chance to use their talents.

In answer to the question "Do they take part in political action"? :

Student A

They are cynical about politics but they did decide never to say "Baas" to any white man. They started to unfold but fear dominates their thinking. They are indoctrinated "Thou shalt be only seen but not heard".

In answer to the question "Describe the racial attitude in the work place":

Student E

The racial attitude in the work place is very acute and every day it grows from bad to worse. Many white workers have created an attitude of mind of trying to put Africans in a little box or compartment and trying to see in him what he is not. Every African is called a kaffir – this is the common word used in the factory. If one African has made a mistake automatically all Africans are liable to doing the very same mistake; yet, this is the opposite with regard to whites – they judge their brother's case according to it's merits and demerits or judge him as an individual but not as : "all whites do this". Everyday the African appears to be strangers to whites because they don't even greet him nor give him a word of deserved appreciation after he has accomplished a good job or task. They don't feel pity for him just because he is a "kaffir" – he is a machine, they send him to dangerous spots or positions because to them his life is unnecessary and his death is a death of a dog where it isn't even worthwhile to mourn.

In answer to the question "In what were people interested or what were they most worried about? "

Student A

Low wages, family problems; thugs, workers service as means of profit, long hours but less pay.

Student F

They were interested in wages and worried about little money.

In answer to the question "What was their attitude towards politics"? :

Student F

Some whom we had some talks with were interested, but usually warned us not to talk too much because else we shall be arrested.

Others are ignorant – they are afraid – they say that everywhere the police is as the government's watchdog.

In answer to the question "How did the attitudes of workers find expression with regard to: diligence, loyalty, willingness to work overtime, pride in work, vagueness, listlessness, irresponsibility? "

Student E

Many workers are diligent and loyal to their jobs but what really discouraged them was that no matter how diligent and loyal they may have been for years, there has been no indication of appreciation or promotion, from the employers. They seem to remain as things and not people and they constitute nothing to the success of the factory as a whole. They are willing to work overtime not because they feel like it but because their salary is very low, so the way to increase it is by working overtime. The result of the whole situation is that they have no sense of pride in their work, just because they are slaves working for nothing except that they are looking forward to the day when things will be different.

In answer to the question "What was the attitude of fellow workers towards :

- (a) You as a theological student/ University student?
- (b) The Church?
- (c) The Christian Faith?

Student C

(a) Some seemed to be jealous of me and took me as their enemy of tomorrow when I shall perhaps be working

in the office set-up.

- (b) They said what was the use of attending church when you are suffering like this — they said some people do not attend church and yet they seem to have everything.
- (c) People call themselves “Christians” but there is no difference between them and us. They drink, smoke and commit adultery, and even you minister, so we don’t see any use for the Christian faith.

Student D

- (a) They said that I wanted to be a minister so that I would eat other people’s money.
- (b) It is useless to go to church and listen to another person telling you lies.
- (c) They don’t believe there is such a thing in S.A. as the Christian faith.

In answer to the question “What percentage of workers lived away from their families?”:

Student E

Approximately 80% of the workers lived away from their families.

In answer to the question “What was their attitudes

towards Trade Unions?”:

Student A

They regard it as a means to lull things — to make you think that grievances are considered though their problems increase instead of decrease. They regard Trade Unions as useless — a thing which is non-active.

Student E

The more enlightened ones see the need for Trade Unions. They have good expectations that if Africans were included in Trade Unions they would help to eliminate some of the problems facing the workers in industry.

In answer to the question “What were their questions and what discussions arose?”:

Student D

Their main question was: when will we get some independence? And their main discussion: we work hard but we get little money.

Student F

One of their discussions was: this is not the place for a clever man only you must work here until you can get a better job. □

