

A3454/53

THE LABOUR SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

HAROLD NXASANA

FOSZIA FISHER

Most black South Africans are workers. We believe, therefore, that to understand the problems facing black South Africans we must begin with the labour situation. It is the situation in which blacks experience oppression in its acutest form. And it is the situation in which there is the greatest potential for forging new organisations through which blacks can reclaim their human dignity.

In this paper we shall begin by showing how conquest was institutionalised in a system of exploitation of cheap labour. The black workers and the other black classes play different parts in this system, and we have to understand these differences if we are going to work out a programme for a renaissance which will satisfy the needs of all.

Having discussed these differences, we shall then go on to show why trade unions are at present the best organisations through which black workers can assert their human dignity.

The present situation was created by conquest. The conquest divided South Africans into two species: the conquerors, who controlled the country and have full social and political rights; and the colonised, who lost control over their country through the conquest, and so are in practically every way second class citizens. Seen in this way, all black South Africans are similarly deprived, and have one common aim: to be restored to full citizenship in their own country.

But it is not as simple as that. The conquest was used to impose a particular kind of social system on South Africa. The blacks were deprived of most of their land. This meant that they had to go out to work for those who now had their land. By keeping up a continuous pressure on the land, by taxation, and by measures which made it difficult for black farmers to compete with the subsidised white farmers, the state was able to make sure that there would always be more workers than there were jobs. So wages were low and remained low.

The conquest was used to impose a system of economic exploitation through which the blacks were forced to work and to create wealth which enriched the whites. This economic system produced, and continues to produce, more white wealth and more black poverty. The reserves get poorer, the cities get richer.

The original conquest was carried out by soldiers. But to impose an economic system, and to make sure that it continues to reproduce itself, more is needed than just soldiers. The new system needed chiefs who could be used to keep the peace in the rural areas. It needed a religion that would teach the people the virtues of obedience and poverty, and it needed priests to teach that religion. It needed schools that would teach people what they needed to know in order to obey orders and to do their work, and it needed teachers who would teach them these things. It needed a new legal system which would ensure the dominance of the new order, and to make this system work it needed clerks and interpreters and lawyers. It needed minimum health care to make sure that the workers reached their jobs and stayed alive, and it needed doctors and nurses to provide this care. In the factories it needed clerks, and now it needs personnel managers to help in operating the system.

So to operate the new economic system of exploitation of cheap labour, it was necessary for the colonists to train some of the colonised to do all these jobs. These people, quite unconsciously, then became important cogs in the machinery of exploitation. As such, they also received greater rewards. They earned higher wages than black workers, and they also had a bit more prestige.

In this way the colonised were divided into two groups: the workers (and their families in the reserves) who were the source of the country's wealth, and the others, the functionaries, who played some part, however small and however unintentional, in making the system operate smoothly. Both groups, the black workers and the black functionaries, are oppressed: they are second class citizens. Both groups are discriminated against because of their colour, the symbol of their subhuman conquered status. But each group experiences oppression and discrimination in a special way. The groups have some interests in common, but they also have some conflicting interests. To understand how they can work together, we must understand both the similarities and the differences of interest.

In order to play their part in keeping the system of exploitation going, the functionaries had to be trained in the rules of the system. That is, they had to learn many of the same things as the colonists themselves learned: they had to be "educated". Because they were educated in the same way as the colonists, and came to share their culture, they experienced the situation of oppression essentially as DISCRIMINATION. They were deprived of equal chances within the system because they were black. In Africa, many of the independence movements were started by, or most strongly supported by, black civil servants who found that they were confined to the bottom rungs of the civil service. Their struggle for independence was a struggle for the right to move to the top of the civil service. After independence they africanised the civil service, but the civil service continued to perform its function of ensuring that the system of exploitation functioned properly.

The workers, on the other hand, experience their situation of oppression as one of EXPLOITATION. Discrimination exists but it is not the central issue. Whether the foreman or the personnel manager is black or white makes no difference to the essential situation of the workers when they have no power over what happens in the factory. This is what exploitation means. To be exploited means to have no control over how you work or over how the product of your labour is to be used. It means that your body can be used to produce wealth for other people.

An end to discrimination would not necessarily mean an end to exploitation. It would not change the fact that there are a small group of exploiters and a large group of exploited. It might only mean that there would be equal competition between black and white for positions among the exploiters.

The point that we want to make is that the functionaries have an interest in the abolition of discrimination, while the workers have an interest in the abolition of exploitation. The functionaries want an end to discrimination in salaries; they want equal pay for equal work. The workers do not do "equal work", and would not be helped by such a principle. They want a change to the whole way in which wages are set. They want trade union rights which would enable them to use the power of their numbers to get a more equal division of the wealth that they produce.

Now if the colonists in South Africa were clever, they would do what has been done elsewhere in Africa. They would accept the functionaries as equals, and cooperate with them in a new way to keep the system of exploitation going. Some people want to do that here. This is what a lot of fuss about "petty apartheid" is about. The right to dine in 5 star hotels will be nice for the functionaries who can afford it, but it will mean nothing to the workers. However, it is likely that the colonists in South Africa are too blinded by their own propaganda to use this division of interest between the black functionaries and the black workers in order to divide the people successfully.

What this means is that the functionaries cannot hope to act independently to end discrimination. They can only hope to end it through a policy which will also end exploitation. Of course, the other alternative will be to accept discrimination as the price to be paid for the relative privilege of being a functionary, and many functionaries will doubtless choose this course. But many will not. We believe that the growth of "Black Consciousness" among the black middle classes indicates a growing awareness

of the extent to which they have up till now been used as functionaries to keep the system running. They are beginning to realise that the "western culture" to which they have been given access is nothing but a set of tools for domination. But "black consciousness" does not as yet seem to have got beyond a simple rejection. And it does not seem to have made a clear analysis of the relation between conquest, discrimination and exploitation. This is why we welcome this opportunity to focus upon the problems of the workers. We believe that it is only by a careful consideration of the relation between the interests of the exploited workers and the interests of the discriminated against functionaries, that the nature of a black renaissance can emerge.

The main problem facing the workers, then, is the problem of exploitation. This exploitation is based on two principles:

1. The continued underdevelopment of the "reserves" (whether inside South Africa or outside), which ensures a continuous supply of workers to the industrial areas;
2. The fact that african workers do not have institutions through which they can combine and use the power of their numbers to negotiate for a fair share of the product.

This means that the workers have an interest in policies and strategies which:

1. Ensure rapid development of the rural areas throughout Southern Africa, with an increase in the employment capacity of the rural areas;
2. Help in the growth of worker organisations through which workers can begin to assert some control over their labour.

In this paper we shall deal only with this second aspect. The rapid development of the South African economy brings about changes in the role of the african work force. African workers have always been predominant in the farming sector. But, for a number of different reasons, it is usually very difficult for farm workers to organise. African workers have also always been predominant on the mines but, the compound system and the migrant labour system as practised on the mines make possible a very tight control over workers. It has been equally difficult for black mine workers to organise.

However, what is happening now is that the industrial sector of the economy is the fastest growing, and over the past 15 years african workers have also achieved predominance here. Firstly, the percentage of white workers in industry has continuously declined. Less than 25% are now white. Secondly, black workers are moving into semi-skilled operative jobs. In these jobs their skill is more important to production. The result is that they have more power. Employers can dismiss unskilled labourers and replace them without any loss of production. But it is not so easy to replace a workforce of experienced machine operatives.

The Durban strikes, and increasing worker militancy throughout South Africa, are made possible by this change. Unless there is a very serious recession in the rest of the world, the South African economy will continue to grow, and with it will grow the potential power of the black workers. But this power will remain a potential power unless it can find organisational form. This is where trade unions come in.

Trade unions will not grow of their own accord. There are three main obstacles in the way of trade unions.

The first is the state. It is legal for african workers to form trade unions, but nevertheless the government does not like them. There is no legislation which protects workers' organisations adequately against employers. Most african trade unions suffer a lot from security branch harassment, and a number of trade unionists have been banned. However, the state is subject to a lot of external pressure to recognise, or at least not to ban, african trade unions. Also, at least some people seem to be beginning to realise that trade unions must come.

The second obstacle is the employers. The employers have long benefitted from high profit rates and from total control over their black workers. Very few employers are willing to recognise unions unless they are forced to do so by the organised power of the workers. Meanwhile they use every trick they can. They victimise active workers, even when such workers are on legally recognised works committees. They cooperate with the department of labour and with the police in trying to harass unionists. And they spread lies to the workers about trade unions.

The third obstacle is bad leadership and bad strategy. The most obvious danger here is corruption, and many unions in South Africa and elsewhere have suffered from corruption. But there are more insidious dangers. It is very easy for a trade union to become a complaints office, to which workers come with individual complaints. Then the office solves these complaints for the workers. In this way the union becomes something separate from the workers themselves. Even if the workers pay subscriptions, they remain essentially unorganised. As such, they can never exercise any collective power.

A real trade union is something different. It must be based on the organisation of the workers within each factory. The workers, through their organisation, must be able to deal with most of their own problems. The union organisers should act only as expert advisors in very difficult situations.

The factory organisation is the most important unit of the trade union. It is only on the basis of a strong factory organisation that it is possible to build up a union which can negotiate for all workers in an industry.

The shop steward organisation within each factory has three functions:

1. to deal in concrete terms with the problems of that factory;
2. to keep the rank and file members in close contact with the union, to keep them informed, to collect subscriptions, and to mobilise them when necessary;
3. to act as a training centre and as a recruiting ground for potential union leadership. Through strong factory organisation the union can produce its own leaders, instead of being dependent on outsiders.

The main organisational principle is that the workers' organisation should be able to combine short term benefits with an awareness of long term goals. One of the difficulties with many organisations in South Africa is that they often talk about excellent long term goals like freedom and justice, but are not able to work out tactics which will help to solve people's immediate problems.

For the trade union, the long term goal is not just higher wages. In fact higher wages is always a secondary goal. The main goal is human dignity. We said earlier that exploitation is a situation in which the workers have no control over the way in which their own bodies are used. Exploitation is above all a denial of human dignity, a way of turning a person into a means to somebody else's satisfaction. The aim of trade unionism is to change the workers from being part of the machinery into being full participants in industry. The aim is to help workers to participate in deciding how work should be done and to participate in deciding how the product should be distributed. Higher wages are merely a by-product of human dignity.

The trade union is itself a beginning of the affirmation of human dignity. Through the trade union the workers can immediately begin to assert some control over their own lives. They can do this through their power within their own workers' organisation, and through the power which they can exert through the organisation within the factory. A democratic trade union organisation is in itself an assertion of human dignity, and a means to greater human dignity. And at the same time it can offer immediate short term benefits of a material kind.

It is for this reason that we believe that the development of trade union organisation is central to any "black renaissance" in South Africa. Most black South Africans are workers. They experience the problems of oppression most acutely at their work place, and it is there that they must begin to fight back. This means that the struggle of the workers through their trade unions must be the pivot of any attempt to reassert the right of black people to full humanity.