

## THE BLACK SASH

## JOHANNESBURG ADVICE OFFICE.

STRIKE - AUGUST 1980.

"Traffic police had brought food in wheelbarrows at 3.30 a.m, said the worker. The food was then tossed into Room 152 so that a confused free - for- all ensued. 'If you catch it its yours' the worker commented-----.

On Friday morning at 8.30 a.m the doors were opened and workers began to board the buses bound for the homelands. The worker said the police 'were in a great hurry' and were driving the men with batons and the butts and barrels of rifles". - STAR 4/8/1980.

Thus ended the strike by Johannesburg City Council workers. The Chairman of the Management Committee, Councillor Oberholzer said that the Council had learned some important lessons from the strike and would have to tighten security at all points, to improve communication with its workers through the appointment of more officials who speak black languages, to make do with less black labour in the future, and to make adequate preparations to deal with the possibility of another wild cat strike.

The rest of us have learned an even more important lesson and that is that the migrant labour system and the pass laws make it almost impossible for workers to organise successfully and to press their demands. Once striking workers have been dismissed, endorsed out, and returned under police escort to the bantustans whence they came Union organisation is broken into hundreds of pieces and calls for re-instatement become meaningless. Even supposing the Council were to change its mind and to agree to re-instate sacked workers it would be impossible to find and identify the scattered victims in their home areas. According to press reports over 1200 Council workers were physically removed from Johannesburg on buses.

The migrant labour system is largely responsible for the unacceptable conditions of employment and low rates of pay exposed by the strike. The only way in which men who live in the overcrowded poverty stricken bantustans can obtain legal employment is to wait at the Labour Bureau in their home district (or at the new "detached labour Bureau" being established in the wake of Riekert) until a requisition comes through from a Labour Bureau in the so-called "white" area. There are always more jobseekers than there are jobs offered. If a man is lucky enough to be offered work he attests a contract (usually for one year) with his unseen, unknown employer and only then may he proceed to town to take up the job. He is in no position to bargain for better pay before he signs the contract. If he tries to do so the job is immediately offered to someone else.

When he arrives in town he is registered for one year only. At the end of the year his employer is compelled to discharge him and return him to his home area. If he is to come back to the same job a new contract is attested in the bantustan and he returns for another year. If his employer does not want him back he must join the long queue of unemployed again to wait hopelessly for a new requisition.

Migrant workers must live in hostels and compounds with no privacy. They may not bring their families with them to town. For many men the hostels are 'home' for their entire working lives and family is something they meet with once a year when they have to go back to attest a new contract. 12,500 of the Johannesburg Council's 15000 black workers are migrants.

The current minimum wage paid by the Council is R33. per week and, because of the Council's grading system, many workers are kept perpetually at the minimum even after twenty years or more in the Council's employ. Nor do those at this level qualify for inclusion in the Council's pension scheme. The Council's wage structure for those who are not migrants as well as for those who are, is dictated by the plentiful supply of cheap black labour and not by any other considerations.

MR. M, MR. B and MR. L.M are not migrants. They all have their own houses in Soweto. Mr. M. worked for the Council from 1947 to 1950 and again from 1952 to 1980. His pay was R33. per week. MR. B. has worked for the Council from 1943 to 1980. His pay at the time of the strike was R43. 40 per week. MR. L.M has worked for the Council from 1957 to 1980. His pay after deductions is R32.02 per week. He has six children. All of these men participated enthusiastically in the strike and have been discharged.

"The Selby workers were asked/---

"The Selby workers were asked whether they wished to return to their jobs or not and those who indicated in the affirmative were immediately transported to their work place". Councillor Oberholzer.

MR. D. AND MR. N both lived in the Selby compound. They have both worked for the Council for 21 years. MR. D. was paid R39.16 per week and MR. N. R33. per week. Both deny that they were asked whether they wished to return to work and say that they were not asked this or any other question. Their Reference-Books were taken from them and signed off. Both state that they had in fact reported back to their section head that morning for work and had been told by him that they were sacked and must return to Selby to be signed off.

Both these men wished to be re-instated in their jobs and the Advice Office made numerous phone calls to the Chairman of the Staff Board over a period of four days. He was always unavailable and we did not receive the courtesy of a return call from his office. MR. D. qualifies to remain in Johannesburg in terms of Section 10(1)(b) and is therefore free to seek other work, <sup>He</sup> has decided he is better off without his Council job and will take his experience and training elsewhere. He will undoubtedly be able to earn a much better wage. MR. N., who is entitled to a 10(1)(b) qualification because he has been lawfully resident in Johannesburg for more than 15 years has been endorsed out.

"The 200 workers at the Traffic Department indicated that they had no complaints but were simply afraid to work because of the intimidators". - Councillor Oberholzer.

Unlike most of the Council workers who have come to this office these two middle aged men were not members of the Black Municipality Workers Union and stated that they did not strike but that they had been unable to get to work because the police were guarding the gates of the compound to prevent people leaving. We asked whether they had requested the police to allow them to leave to go to work. They both said that they had been too frightened to do so because the police had guns.

"It was concluded that the group thus formed consisted of workers who wished to continue the strike action and it was decided that they be discharged from the Council's service because of their obvious failure to heed appeals to return to work and their presence at Selby which constituted a potential danger to the public and to Council workers who by then had returned to work.

The following steps were then taken :

Officials of the West Rand Administration Board endorsed these workers out of the Johannesburg area by placing the necessary stamp in their Reference Books "... - Councillor Oberholzer.

MR. S. E. N. is a member of the B.M.W.U. He was on strike. His weekly pay packet was R31.58 per week after deductions. He has a wife and four children at Louis Trichardt, but has no fields and no cattle. He lived in the Nancefiad Hostel and went to Selby Compound to see whether the strike was to continue and whether any progress had been made towards achieving negotiations. He says he was shoved into a line, was not asked any questions except which compound did he live in. His Reference Book was taken and he was endorsed out.

MR. K. W. N. has been eleven years with the Council. He has a wife and three children under ten years at Giyani. He was discharged and endorsed out without being asked any questions and without a word being said.

West Rand Board officials were very free with the endorsement out stamp. They seem to have been acting as agents for the Council in the Council's desire to get rid of workers as fast as possible rather than making any proper investigation of men's legal position in terms of the pass laws.

MR. R. W. M. was endorsed out in spite of the fact that he has been continuously registered in the employ of the Council from 1967 to 1980. He is therefore entitled to his 10(1)(b) qualification. The victimisation he has experienced has extended to the Commissioner's office in the Department of Co-Operation where an official told him to get a reference from his employer when he went to lodge his appeal. Apart from the fact that the Council's attitude as an employer would make it highly unlikely that such a reference would be given it is entirely unnecessary. MR. M's long and lawful employment with the Council is a matter of official record and Section 10 rights are not dependent upon one's employer's opinion of one's efficiency

"Personnel Officers (white) attached/---

"Personnel Officers (white) attached to the various Council Departments, form the liason between the Council and its daily paid Black staff, including migrant workers. Personnel officers visit work sites and ascertain from supervisors and workers whether any problems exist in regard to the workers!" - Councillor Oberholzer.

It is a pity that Council personnel workers have not spent time over the years helping workers to establish their rights in terms of Section 10 so that they can escape from migrancy and the compounds and establish themselves in some sort of family stability. MR. R. W. M. above is a case in point as are MR. M. M and MR. M. D.

MR. M. M has been endorsed out. He has worked for the Council from 1960 to 1980 and is legally entitled to a 10(1)(b) qualification because he had been lawfully resident in the Council compounds for more than fifteen years. He was being paid R28. per week after deductions.

MR. M. D. has also been endorsed out. He was getting R30 per week after deductions after working for the Council for nineteen years. He is also entitled to 10(1)(b) after more than fifteen years lawful residence in the Nancefield hostel.

Not only have these men been denied a better chance of stability and permanence but they have been denied the benefits of contributing to the Unemployment Insurance Fund through lack of concern shown by their employers. Because the Council did not help them to establish their Section 10(1)(b) rights after they had completed their fifteen years lawful residence they have continued to be registered on annual contracts. They are both Transkei citizens and as migrants, were excluded from the Unemployment Insurance Fund when Transkei became independent (if they had been permanently registered, they would have been eligible to continue as contributors to the Fund even after independence.)

"They were given the option to make use of the free bus to their particular home district and by far the majority of them willingly boarded the buses".... - Councillor Oberholzer.

MR. M. M and MR. M. D. were both bussed to Transkei. MR. K. W. N was bussed to the Northern Transvaal. They all boarded the buses so willingly that they returned to Johannesburg from their home districts immediately after being offloaded.

SHEENA DUNCAN  
ADVICE OFFICE DIRECTOR.

14th August, 1980.