

Communism in South Africa

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Presented to the Executive of the Third International on behalf of the International Socialist League, South Africa.

The Third International has, of necessity, not given much attention to Africa so far, further than a passing recognition, in the heat of the European struggle that the teeming millions of the Dark Continent are also to come under its wing. Africa may not cover such a vital part of the anatomy of Imperialism as India does. But a country's immediate contribution to the collapse of world capitalism is not its sole claim on our attention; we have to consider what positive dangers it may harbour for the movement as a whole. European capital, however, draws no mean contribution from South African cheap labour. "Kaffirs" (as gold shares are appropriately nicknamed) are the mainstay of a large section of the bourgeoisie of Paris and London. Besides which the depressing state of the vast mass of Kaffir labour from the point of view of proletarian development—illiteracy, generally low social and civil status and backward standards of life—is not a matter to which the Communist International can remain indifferent.

Africa's hundred and fifty million natives are most easily accessible through the eight millions or so which comprise the native populations of South Africa and Rhodesia. Johannesburg is the industrial university of the African native, although recruiting for the mines has been confined in latter years to parallel 22 in Portuguese territory.

South Africa, moreover, is an epitome of the class struggle throughout the world. Here Imperial Capital exploits a white skilled proletariat side by side with a large native proletariat. Nowhere else in the proportions obtaining on the world scale do white skilled and dark unskilled meet together in one social milieu as they do in South Africa. And nowhere are the problems so acute of two streams of the working class with vastly unequal standards of life jostling side by side, and the resultant race prejudices and animosities interfering and mixing with the class struggle.

SOUTH AFRICAN POPULATIONS.

The Union of South Africa, occupying the country South of the Limpopo River, comprises the old Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the old British Colonies of Natal and Cape of Good Hope. These now form one Government with their own local Provincial Councils. The more sparsely settled areas of Rhodesia and German West Africa are not yet in the Union. The white population of the Union is divided almost equally into Dutch and English extraction, with a large Jewish population in Johannesburg. The whites number about a million and a half. The feuds existing between the two main sections of the white population are matters of history, and animosities resulting therefrom are serious political factors at the present day.

The native population of the Union numbers about six millions. The native race is mainly composed of one type, called the Bantu, meaning "folk," divided into several tribes which have their remnants of

tribal territory in Zululand, Basutoland, Swaziland, etc., nominally under the protection of the Imperial Government; in practice, however, the native peoples are governed by the Union's Native Affairs Department.

Between the black and white peoples there are shades. There is what is known as the coloured people. In South Africa "coloured" means "half-caste." The coloured population, inevitable accompaniment of a black and white society, numbers hundreds of thousands, mainly in the Cape Province, with large numbers in Kimberley, Johannesburg and Durban, and other industrial centres. They are a social link with the natives, though not socially intermingled. They are a section apart, aspiring to the social standards of the whites and invading the skilled trades. In the Cape Province coloured people enjoy the civil and political rights of the whites with a far larger measure of social equality than in the Transvaal.

In Natal, is centred a considerable Indian population, originally indentured to the Sugar Estates. A large proportion of these people are South African born. They socially intermix with the coloured people. Further immigration of Indians is prohibited in the Union.

INDUSTRIES.

In a country of a million square miles, agriculture is of necessity a staple industry, though the old Boer farmers' methods are obsolete, and there are vast tracts of land held up idle by the landed syndicates in combination with the mining houses.

The Gold Industry of the Transvaal, with its Witwatersrand gold reef sixty miles long, is a world-renowned phenomenon. The Reef, with the town of Johannesburg as its centre, provides the economic stimulus for the whole country. The diamond mining industry of Kimberley and Pretoria, the coalfields of the Transvaal and Natal, the Sugar Estates of Natal, sum up such industries as affect the world market. The Railways are owned by the State.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CURRENTS.

In such a milieu one may guess that the social relations are rather complex. After the overthrow of the old Boer Republics, the Boer political leaders, Botha and Smuts, proceeded to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, and fitted themselves to govern by acquiring interests in land and gold mining. By 1907 they were deemed sufficiently safe to be entrusted with self-government. There was a distinct subsidence of the animosities aroused by the war. After the Union of the Provinces in 1910 the Dutch Party was again entrusted with the Government. Hertzog, the present leader of the Republican Party, was at that time the left wing representative of the Dutch in the Cabinet as Minister of Justice, and, it may be observed in passing, the first to conceive the brilliant idea of arming the mounted police with pick handles to beat down the tramway strikers of Johannesburg. After his expulsion from the Cabinet in 1912, the Dutch Party split up into the present South African Party led by Smuts and the Nationalist Party led by Hertzog, who, since the great war, gives half-hearted homage to the republican idea, and Tielman Roos, the more thorough-going republican leader. Since 1912 those "heralds of illwill," Dutch

Nationalism and British Chauvinism, further fostered and embittered by the world war, have sounded the slogans of Capitalist Imperialism versus petty bourgeois federalism. During the war the Dutch Nationalists broke out into open rebellion. It was, however, speedily suppressed. Latterly the Party has gained popularity at the polls with its republican and populist programme, appealing as it does to the increasing mass of disinherited Dutch Afrikaners. This has caused the consolidation of the British Unionist Party with the Dutch South African Party. The February elections showed that the Nationalist farmer recoiled before the consequences of the Republican propaganda, and the Government Party obtained a safe parliamentary majority for the Imperial connection.

DUTCH NATIONALISM AND THE NATIVE.

The great festival of the Dutch Afrikaner people and of the Nationalists in particular is Dingaans' Day. This day is made the occasion of political appeals on present issues, as well as a commemoration of December 16th, 1838, when the Dutch Voortrekkers crushed the power of the Zulus in a bloody battle fought on the Blood River, Weenen. On this festival the dual oppression bearing on the small Dutch farmer are inveighed against: justifiable hate of British imperialism and of the British Chauvinist on the one hand, and hatred of the progeny of Dingaans on the other, his own hewers of wood and drawers of water. "Presbyter is only Priest writ large." More glaringly than in most Nationalist movements, the freedom demanded from British rule is almost avowedly freedom to more fully exploit the native. As a concession to Nationalist sentiment, Dingaans' Day has now been officially declared a legal holiday throughout the Union. On these days, as on others, the rifle and the sjambok are invoked as the appropriate remedy for native grievances. In his personal relations the Dutch farmer adopts a quite friendly and patriarchal attitude towards his native labourers, provided of course they keep their proper stations. To the old Boer, the native is a simple beast of burden. His religion is that of the Old Testament. It involves no contradictions, for his economic environment is primitive, though rapidly changing now with the advance in agricultural methods. General De Wet's excuse for going into rebellion in 1914, was that he had been fined five shillings for flogging a native servant—an unpardonable restriction on personal liberty! The Nationalist movement has a literary reflex. What there is of Afrikaner literature is, of course, inspired by Nationalism. But the mania for isolation reaches absurd lengths. For example, Holland Dutch is one of the official languages of the Union. But the spoken language is a crude patois called Afrikaans. Previously the Dutch Afrikaners were content to let Afrikaans remain the spoken language, and used Holland Dutch as a vehicle of religion and literature. But now, the Nationalist movement resents Holland's intellectual patronage as much as Britain's Imperial dominance. Though there are no fixed standards of grammar or style or spelling in Afrikaans, it is now being tortured into requisition as a literary medium, and the upholders of "Hollandse" are stigmatised as the creatures of Smuts. The treasures, historical and literary, of the mother Dutch are thus thrown overboard; but the young Afrikaner intellectuals cannot possibly endure such a self-imposed sentence of solitary confinement for very long.

Our remarks on this movement, as the movement of a class, must not be construed to apply to our Dutch friends as a race. They partake of the virtues of all good people. In the feud with the British it is they who have always held out the hand of conciliation, often spurned with insult by the British Jingo.

BRITISH CHAUVINISM.

Among the British section of the population there is a corresponding animosity towards the Dutch Afrikanders. The recent elections show that the Republican scare took away many votes which had previously been given to the Labour Party, although that Party blows the Imperial trumpet loudly enough. But this brand is too notorious to need any description here.

FRANCHISE ANOMALIES.

Only whites are qualified to vote in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In Natal the coloured people are qualified to vote, and even natives, but on terms so strict that only three or four individuals are able to avail themselves of it. In the Cape Province, besides manhood suffrage for whites and coloured, natives are also qualified to vote on certain slight education tests, and the coloured and native vote is a serious electoral factor to be reckoned with. These disparities of franchise rights obtaining for the various provinces are inherited from the pre-existing provincial governments, and are the cause of the most amusing antics of electioneering parties operating simultaneously in the different provinces. The liberalism of the Cape is the legacy of the old Free Trade Governors of the Victorian period. In those days, Manchester looked upon native populations more as buyers than as cheap labourers—people whose standards of culture and, above all, wants should be improved.

In the Transvaal, thanks to the slave-holding traditions of the old Boer voortrekkers, Imperialist Capital with capital to invest rather than goods to sell, found cheap labour in a civil milieu to its liking for the exploitation of the gold reefs.

These political cross currents produced some curious effects during the war. The British workers cried down our anti-militarist declarations, while the Dutch approved. But coming to our native workers policy, it was then the turn of the Dutch to decry, while the British with their trade union traditions were prepared at least to listen. We were being repeatedly consigned to prison by the Johannesburg magistracy; and the judges, drawn largely from the older population, as repeatedly quashed the sentences.

The Indian traders, who are fast gaining control of trade in Natal and other parts of the Union, are the cause of much heart-burning among the white traders, and anti-Asiatic movements, into which the workers are often dragged, are frequent.

Among the Trades Unions of the Transvaal, the wage-cutting effect of the coloured labour that swarms to the industrial centres is a burning question, aggravated as it is by the short-sighted policy of the Unions in excluding the coloured worker from membership. This time it is the turn of the employing class to sneer at Labour's inconsistency.

WHITE LABOUR MOVEMENT.

The white Trade Union movement in South Africa dates from the end of the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902, although such trades as the Typos., Engineers, and Building Workers were organised in South Africa previous to that. W. H. Andrews, prominent among those who did the spade work of the Transvaal Labour Movement, is still to-day active, blazing the trail of the Communist Movement. The growth of the movement was marked by the usual steps of the formation of unions in the different trades, the Trades Council of Johannesburg, from which sprang later the Federation of Trades and the Labour Party. After the Boer War, the gold magnates profited by their victory to introduce Chinese labour into the gold mines of the Rand. This created a White Labour Policy League, of which Creswell, then a victimised mine manager, was the head. This movement also mixed itself with the labour movement and brought Creswell into the Labour Party, of which the capitalist press soon appointed him popular leader in opposition to the class leadership of Andrews. In 1910, when the four provinces formed a Union Government, the South African Labour Party was inaugurated out of the various Provincial parties. This party had a Socialist objective in its platform, as also a demand for the abolition of the indentured system of native labour and the prohibition of the importation of native labour from territories outside the Union. The Party started in 1910 with four members in Parliament; it gained another four in by-elections up to 1915. The Party very soon became the accepted political expression of the white workers, its class-conscious elements, rather than the White Labour Leaguers of Creswell, being dominant. At that time "class-conscious" meant white class-conscious, and the native as a fellow-worker and a comrade in industry never entered into any Labour calculations; neither did the idea of Labour enter the native mind, so well defined were, and still are, the respective industrial functions of black and white. Indeed, the wholly utopian proposal of segregation of black from white in strictly delimited areas, in accordance with the scheme of the White Labour League, and the withdrawal of the native from white industry, was the only Labour proposal for the natives up to the time of the war.

In 1913 a general strike of white workers broke out on the Rand, causing a complete stoppage of the gold mines for the first time in their history. This strike was a bloody affair. Troops were called out, and shootings by the regular troops resulted in 22 persons being killed and several hundred wounded. At that time the Chamber of Mines, which employs about 20,000 whites, had not learned the value of class collaboration—a wrinkle which Syndicalist Crawford* taught them later. In 1914 another general strike broke out, this time forced upon the white workers by the Government, which spread to all parts of the Union. The massacres of 1913 had brought the workers an unexpected victory; but in 1914 the Government had prepared in a military manner. Martial Law was proclaimed, and 60,000 burghers from the veld were armed and put in possession of Johannesburg, having first been told that the English were making war again. The workers were driven back to work and leaders imprisoned by the dozen. Nine trade union leaders, and others who were by no means leaders, were deported by force to England.

The indignation against deportation found a vent in the ensuing Provincial Council elections, when the Labour Party obtained a majority

of seats in the Transvaal. This resulted in a large influx of middle-class elements into the Party. The outbreak of war found the Party divided on the question of militarism, but the Executive was anti-war, though few in a truly revolutionary sense. At a special conference of the Party held in 1915 the Executive were defeated by an overwhelming majority on the war issue, and were thereby forced to resign. The Creswell faction carried things with a high hand, and forced every candidate to give a written undertaking to "see the war through." The anti-war section broke away, and with the co-operation of what were called the S.L.P. men (comrades like John Campbell and Rabb, who propagated the principles of Marxism as formulated by De Leon) formed the International Socialist League, which is to-day the South African section of the Communist International. The League started its career backed by the majority of the Labour Party Executive, including the Chairman (Andrews) and the Secretary (Ivon Jones), who took similar positions in the new organisations. It, however, soon shed its Reform Pacifists on the adoption of a revolutionary programme and the extension of the class struggle to include the native workers.

THE ERA OF COLLABORATION.

The Labour Party, thus rid of its anti-war executive, fought the elections of 1915 on the cry of "See it through," and for its pains got its Parliamentary representation reduced from eight to four. Up to the time of the split the Labour Party was composed of open political branches, and the Trades Unions affiliated or deaffiliated to the General Council, according to the fluctuating votes of their respective memberships. Up to the war the Party was largely composed of elements from the trades unions, the Engineers, Carpenters, Miners, Boilermakers, and Printers being affiliated. On the war issue the trades unions followed Creswell's lead, but they seem to have very soon got ashamed of their handiwork, for to-day there are no trades unions affiliated to the Party, which has deteriorated as a machine into a collection of electioneering committees trading on the name of Labour. This is partly due to the increasing number of Communist supporters among the active elements of Trades Unionism; and partly to the influx of Dutch workers into the towns for which the unions must "cater." To these workers the Labour Party is anathema, for it has by its beating of the Jingo drum violated their legitimate national sentiments.

Nevertheless, in the general elections of the early part of 1920, the Labour Party, by a judicious handling of the two issues of the Cost of Living and the Imperial connection, pulled off twenty-one seats. But at the general elections of the early part of 1921, when Smuts forced the issue of the Imperial connection against the Republican propaganda, the Labour Party, led by Creswell, though it jettisoned the "Red Flag," all its economic demands, as well as the Jonah of Socialism, and frantically protested on every platform that it was faithful to the Empire, only obtained nine seats, Creswell himself being beaten. This looks like its final decline. The factors are too complex in South Africa for a powerful Social Democratic Party.

During the war the White Trades Unions gained enormously in membership, and lost equally in fighting spirit. Crawford, at one time anarcho-syndicalist, is now the apostle of class collaboration, and as Secretary of the S.A. Industrial Federation, is the willing agent of the Chamber of Mines.

LABOUR ARISTOCRACY.

The failure of the anti-war Executive of the Labour Party to keep the workers to the class struggle was due to the fact that, in the white worker, consciousness of class is, so far, fitful and easily lost. He is used to lord it over the unskilled native as his social inferior. The white miner's duty is almost wholly that of supervision. With the fitters and carpenters the native labourer does no more than the fitter's or carpenter's labourer in European countries. But he is black, a being of another order, and moreover only has half a shirt on his back, more for ornament than for use, and sleeps in a tin shack. As workers whose functions are wholly different in the industrial world, there is hardly any competition involved; indeed, the white miner is as much interested as the Chamber of Mines in a plentiful supply of native labour, without which he cannot start work. They are therefore annoyed at any strikes of natives, and are prone to assist the masters in their repressive methods, although in the case of white strikes they are not behindhand in appealing to the natives not to go down the shafts; and the natives, as a rule, are unwilling to go without the white miners. For between white and native worker there is, as a rule, the best of good humour at the place of work. The native addresses the white worker as "boss," it is true, but this term has now become almost a convention like "sir," and there is no doubt that the native is animated by a large measure of respect for the white worker as his industrial educator, a respect which will find more generous play on both sides in a better economic order. One of the nightmares of the white miner is that he may lose his monopoly to the legal right of holding a blasting certificate. Under such conditions what wonder if consciousness of class among the mass of white workers is somewhat narrow and professional.

During the war, the capitalists, urged by the necessity of keeping up gold production, discovered that it paid them to regard the white workers as an unofficial garrison over the far larger mass of black labour, and that it was not bad business to keep the two sections politically apart by paying liberally the white out of the miserably underpaid labour of the black. The white workers were far more intractable to Communist ideas at the end of the war than in the second or third year when the colonial campaigns were in progress. The premium on the mint price of gold enabled the Chamber of Mines to keep up this policy of economic bribery till the end of last year. Now it seems as if it had come to an end. The bribe fund has petered out. The premium on the mint price of gold is being reduced, and under the threat of closing down the non-paying mines the white miners are compelled to accept lower pay. During the last few months there have been unofficial strikes against the will of the Union Executives and of Crawford, the Federation Secretary. The mines have retaliated by withdrawing the "stop-order" system. This system, introduced in 1916, was an ingenious bait to trade union officialdom. Every miner had his trade union contribution deducted at the mine office from his wages, and the mine offices handed it over to the union in a monthly cheque, thus making the Union an adjunct of the Chamber of Mines. Now this "privilege" has been withdrawn as a measure to weaken the none-too-pliant membership. The garrison is too costly. The mining industry can only save its profits by following the historic process, namely, to raise the black standard and depress the white, making towards a homogeneous working class.

(To be continued.)

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