

# Political Developments in South Africa.

By James Shields (Johannesburg).

It is only comparatively recently that the class aspect of things has begun to develop to any appreciable extent in the political life of South Africa. Quite a number of political parties and associations have been in vogue ever since the formation of the Union in 1910, but the dominant issue for most of the time has always been the racial question.

The cosmopolitan character of the population, the teeming mass of blacks, and the absence of full political rights for the vast majority still combine in making an exceedingly complicated and difficult situation from a working class standpoint, and one which is perhaps unequalled in any other country. The racial prejudices existing between black and white and coloured manifest themselves day after day, running like a thread through every vital question and presenting an insolvable problem for the bourgeois politicians.

It is in this atmosphere of racial conflict, accompanied by an accelerating growth of class consciousness, that what is known as the Pact Government manipulates the reins of power on behalf of the master class. This Government, is a combination of the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party, and replaced the regime of the Conservative Government of General Smuts about eighteen months ago. Its advent to power was a direct result of the widespread reaction which developed against Smuts in relation to his 1922-Revolt brutalities, rather than of any constructive policy or programme put forward on its own behalf. To the slogan of "Smuts must Go" sixty three Nationalists and eighteen Labourites were returned to the House of Assembly at the last election in 1924, as compared with fifty three members of the South African Party.

From this period commences the peculiar Parliamentary combination called "The Pact" which still remains in power.

So far as Parliamentary representation in South Africa is concerned, three political parties have the field all to themselves. These are — the Nationalist Party, Labour Party, and the South African Party. Non-Europeans such as Indians, blacks, etc., are without the franchise, with the exception of the Cape coloured people and some 15,000 native workers in the Cape Province.

Between these three chief parties there is practically no difference so far as their outlook on the colour question is concerned. One and all they are out "to keep the blacks in their place" as they put it.

The growing menace of working class unity has led the Pact Government to attempt the adoption of certain proposals for still carrying on the old imperialist policy of "divide and rule", and it is in this connection that such measures as the Colour Bar Bill which debar native workers from skilled occupations, and the Segregation proposals have been brought forward by the Pact. Hertzog the Premier proposes to take away the franchise of the Cape natives and to drive a wedge between the black and coloured peoples by granting the Cape coloured equal rights with the Europeans. The red herring of allowing all the natives in the Union a voice in Parliament through seven European representatives, and the setting aside of territory solely for native development, is being drawn across the track of the blacks. It is a subtle tactic to secure the passage of the Segregation Bill and wholly impossible of being put into practice. As a matter of fact the character of these measures and the change in outlook which has recently come about in the Nationalist Party leads one to the conclusion that that Party is very quickly absorbing the ideas and thoughts of Imperialism.

At the present time even its most radical leader, Tielman Roos, who used to go the whole hog for separation from Britain, now comes forward with the phrase that "Secession is no longer practical politics", while most of the other former Republican elements in the Nationalist camp have likewise shed their republican ideas, as their enthusiastic demonstrations during the Prince of Wales visit go to prove.

This volte face must be a source of satisfaction to those upholders of race purity — the S. A. Labour Party — for, like their British namesakes, members of this party continually prattle about the Empire being a "glorious commonwealth of nations". They make fitting companions for their Nationalist partners on the Government Benches and are staunch supporters of bourgeois democratic tradition. As a National Labour Party they have been in existence since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, when the different Labour groups of the various provinces, Orange Free State, Natal, Cape Province, etc., amalgamated. The party, however, remains merely a Labour Party in name, for its membership is confined to whites only, the blacks and coloured being looked upon with hostile eyes. The following of the S. A. L. P. is mostly made up of petty bourgeois elements of British origin and, unlike the Labour Party in Britain, the Party is not based on the Trade Unions. Indeed, in this respect the recent tendency has been for the Trade Unions to move further away from the Labour Party standpoint, thus giving rise to great alarm among Labour Party officials — already greatly perturbed at the extreme weakness of their Party's position.

This was manifested at the recent annual conference of the S. A. L. P. held at Port Elizabeth, where a so-called left wing indulged in a certain amount of radical phraseology and expressed their intention of pressing forward to the Socialist objective, even if it meant putting an end to the Pact Government. This left wing, however, is a very nebulous one indeed, and like its right counterpart believes in a "Socialism for whites only". Nevertheless its appearance is an indication of the rise of great discontent within the Labour Party itself, a discontent which follows from experience of the inactivity of Labour in Parliament in connection with working class problems. Regarding the personnel of the Labour Party left wing it is perhaps interesting to note that quite a number are ex-Communists who dropped out of the C. P. because they disagreed on the native question.

That Labour's Parliamentary reign is likely to be a short one seems probable when we take into account the dissension in its ranks, quite apart from the possibility of the Nationalist Party breaking away and forming a new alliance with the S. A. P.

In this connection it is only three months since the Nationalist leaders made great talk of bringing about "hereeniging" (union) with the S. A. P. If this were carried into effect it would mean the unity of Agrarian Capital (Nationalists) with Financial & Industrial Capital (S. A. P.), and would also signify the linking up of reactionary capitalist forces for the combined domination of the blacks. From the look of things at the moment such an outcome is quite within the bounds of probability, for this idea of domination of black by white is giving rise to what one might term "Africander Imperialism".

Evidence of it can be seen in the efforts to bring about the annexation of Basutoland, Swaziland and Bechuanaland, and also in the attack on Indians and natives.

Against these attacks the native workers are putting up a stiff fight, and pleading to relate, they oppose from a **working class standpoint**. Some of the native political organisations are, of course, out and out radical in character, the chief of these being the **African National Congress**, and the **Negro Mutual Improvement Society**. These two organisations follow the ideas of **Marcus Garvey** and his **American Universal Negro Improvement Association**, but they are very loose associations with little organisational structure.

Another native group, in the form of the **Bantu Union**, loyally co-operates with the Government in the Cape Province.

Neither of the two racial organisations mentioned above are feared in the slightest by the powers that be, but things are vastly different in the case of the **I. G. U. (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union)**, the semi-political organisation of native workers. Gradually this Union is rousing the native masses to a real knowledge of the exact nature of their problems and how they must be faced. Within recent times it has torn the racial trappings from the various oppressive measures levelled against the workers as a whole, and presented the class aspect of the situation. Its leaders also have not hesitated to declare the Labour Party a fraud and sham because of its attitude on the Colour question. It is chiefly as a result of the growing activity and organised strength of the **I. C. U.** that the recent **Sedition Bill** was introduced into the House of Assentby, although this measure is aimed even more at the **Communist Party**, which played a big part in assisting the **I. C. U.** to develop.

If this Bill becomes law the authorities will have power to deport practically any European on the flimsiest pretext, and also curtail the movements of the native trade unionist organisers. Its introduction has roused a storm of protest from all sections of workers, both black and white, and in view of this atmosphere it now seems doubtful whether it is likely to be put through in its present form. The subtlety as well as the aim of the Government is shown by its attempted sowing of hostility between the black, and white and coloured workers by means of its policy of displacing native workers for white and coloured. It uses this tactic as a double edged weapon, for not only does it tend to create hostility between the different colours, but it gives the opportunity of sacking natives and employing white workers in their places at wage rates much below the average European level!

It is being ably assisted in this process by the "**Afrikaanse Nasionale Bond**", a Cape Coloured organisation. This body is one of the two coloured organisations in the Cape Province and a staunch supporter of the Nationalist Party. The other coloured organisation named the **A. P. O. (African Political Organisation)** is simply the tool of the South African Party. They both function fairly effectively at election periods in mobilizing the coloured voters at the polls in support of their respective masters.

The most backward section of all the exploited and oppressed in the country is undoubtedly the **Indians**, who number roughly 170,000, of which at least four sixths reside in Natal. The great majority of this section are **colonial born workers** who, in addition to being mercilessly exploited, are now faced with wholesale repatriation to India, where they would be mostly complete strangers, and confinement to certain small areas so long as they lived within the Union. This menace confronts them in the shape of the **Asiatic Bill**, against which one or two Indian political groups such as the **B. I. A. (British Indian Association)** carry on a fight, but with the exception of the **Colonial Born Indian Association** these groups are only concerned with the interests of the Indian Traders. The **C. B. I. A.** however, further aims at organising the Indian Workers in S. Africa for **industrial demands** in the nature of increased wages, shorter hours, etc.

All the various channels through which the working class political movement is developing greatly suffer in the meantime from the lack of a real active co-ordinating centre to closely connect them up. We have a small **Communist Party** in existence, it is true, but it is still a long way off from being that real vigorous factor in the political field which serves as a common rallying point for all working-class forces, and the spearhead of attack against capitalism. Of this fact the Party itself is well aware, and it is now striving its utmost to build itself up on

a stronger and sounder basis. To the extent with which it can successfully solve the problem of getting into close contact with the working masses and allying itself to all phases of the class struggle, to that extent will it be able increasingly to bring the **united class challenge** to the forefront, and completely undermine the efforts of the bourgeoisie and their satellites to bring about the imposition of a white autocracy over the native proletariat.

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