

From Kraal to Goldmine

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MUCH remains to be written concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat in relation to the component parts of the present British Empire. The present article is only a contribution of interest that may draw forth a more exhaustive study of the matters than I can only lightly touch upon here.

In what way do the Abantu—the heterogeneous collection of tribes referred generically to as Kaffirs—impinge on industrial organisation? Why has it been so difficult to organise black labour, especially north of the Cape Province? A slight knowledge of actual living conditions may help materially towards a study of the problem.

Let me then start with a quotation from *Secret Service in South Africa*, by D. Blackburn and Captain Caddell.

“Among the many points on which the general public hold erroneous and misinformed notions in regard to South African matters is that of the relationship of white and black. They cannot grasp the vital fact that, despite the existence of a teeming native population, only a very small percentage of the males will, or need, work. The public do not know that owing to the communal system under which the Kaffir lives—his access to free land and the surprising fewness of his material wants—the necessity for earning money only exists when forced upon him by artificial needs.”

It will be noticed that the authors make a confusion of the term “work.” It is hardly to be supposed that even free land does away with the necessity for labour of some sort. What the authors then mean by “work” is the civilised state of wage-slavery. By implication then, the access to free land is a hindrance to the development of “work.” But to resume the quotation.

“The Kaffir is born to the means of livelihood. He is born to a father who, by the law of natural increase, possesses growing wealth in the form of cattle. He has no rent to pay, the labour essential for the cultivation of the mealie patch and the herding of cattle is supplied by wife, or wives and children, and as each daughter becomes marriageable—as she does at fifteen or sixteen years of age, or even earlier—she brings as the price paid by her husband six, eight or ten oxen to swell the ever-increasing herd.”

These conditions, of course, apply in the kraals or collections of native huts, mostly in the native reservations like Zululand, Basutoland, etc., where purely native conditions obtain and where the main authority is nominally held by native chiefs with their indunas (or headmen), ruling under native laws and usage. Here the Kaffir lives in real simplicity as his forefathers did.

It must not be supposed, however, that these kraals are a sort of earthly paradise, oases in the arid waste of industrialism and land exploitation, free from the clutch of the white man's laws. The chief in reality is the tax-gatherer of the Government, for there are such incidentals as hut-tax, poll-tax, etc. And it is by means of these taxes that the wedge of industrialism enters.

The authors of the book I have already referred to assert that since the first battery started crushing on the Rand, shortage of native labour has even been chronic. Never has the supply caught up with the demand. The reason for this is that the native only goes to the mines to "work" when, through bad harvests or with rinderpest and nagana affecting his cattle, he is unable to find the wherewithal to pay the Governmental taxes.

Under these conditions, then, he enters the industrial arena as mine labourer, house or garden boy, and as general worker in the shops of the towns and dorps. A percentage also goes on the farms of the backveld.

The difficulties of organising this floating mass of native labour, ever in a state of flux, lie in the fact that as soon as he can the native returns to the kraal. He is seldom in the industrial market as a proletarian, but is there mainly to raise a minimum amount of money for immediate needs. If he stays at all for a considerable time it is only with the view of being able to buy the necessary cattle for acquiring a wife.

Apart from these difficulties of native law and usage, there are the Governmental regulations controlling native labour and the old Boer laws, still extant, touching on the relations of whites and blacks. How these complicate matters will be seen.

In the first place, when a native sets out to find "work" he finds he has to wade through a mass of forms and other documents. A pass from the kraal to the dorp or town is first necessary. Then a permit to roam round, looking for a situation. These permits contain the name of the native, his "work name" (a concession to the inability or disinclination of white employers to pronounce native names, the work names varying from the simplicity of "Jim" to the dignity of "Sixpence"), the name of his chief or father, the location of his kraal and the place where the tax is paid. The name of his tribe or race (Zulu, Basuto, Pondo, Swazi, Shingaan, Fingo, etc.) is also entered. This permit is only valid for seven days, however, and would-be employers are warned against engaging natives with permits more than seven days old.

Let us suppose, however, that our Sixpence has been fortunate enough to convince a baas of his abilities. The baas takes his papers from him, writes out a pass for the native to go to his "location" (or barracks), and Sixpence has to walk there, the trams being (in the Transvaal at least) barred to him. He has to rise betimes and walk to the house of his new baas, arriving there at seven in the morning.

What are his conditions of labour? I must here confine my remarks to actual knowledge acquired in Johannesburg. His wages are paid monthly, and a cook would command £5, a houseboy, £4 10s. and a garden boy up to £4. (The term "boy" refers to an adult native, youths being "umfaans" and native boys being "piccanins.") As to these native domestic servants, to whose conditions my knowledge is unfortunately confined, they are lodged in outhouses on the estate or, in smaller houses, in the yard or back part of the premises. They are hardly ever, if at all, lodged in the house itself.

A food allowance is made, this consisting of mealie (native maize, their staple food), sugar, meat, tea and native bread. The working hours are, for houseboys and cooks, from an hour before the morning tea to the washing up of dishes after the white man's dinner or evening meal. For garden boys, from the same hour in the morning till dusk. The meals are for them usually three per diem. On Sundays they are usually allowed the day out from the forenoon, and have to be provided with a special pass to their destination by the baas, the hours of absence being entered.

The baas, on taking each boy into employment, has to go to the Native Pass Office and pay two shillings for a kind of licence, this being renewable monthly. The name of employer, rate of wage and date of entry into employment are then inscribed on the work permit of the native. The employer can also write out special passes for the native should he desire to go out on any week-day evening, the hours of absence always being entered, so that the native police, who roam in couples armed with assegai, knobkerry or simple staff, may ascertain that the native is not staying out of hours.

The native is thus not only harassed with papers and documents, to which are attached penalties, but he is subject to the caprice of his employer, being liable to imprisonment should he leave his employment suddenly, his papers always being retained by the baas until the employment is mutually terminated. A native without papers is in the position of a man at home "without visible means of sustenance."

The segregation of whites and blacks, especially in the Transvaal, is not confined to the matter of domicile and being barred from the use of the tramways (unless accompanied by employer). In the towns "locations," usually a collection of perpetrations in corrugated iron, are set apart for town boys engaged in shops or industrial undertakings. In some cases they are "housed" in the back part of engineering and other works. Mine boys are invariably lodged in "locations," but in Johannesburg what are called "barracks" are available.

The natives, however, being as it were exiles from home who expect to return to the kraal within a certain period, do not seem to find any serious drawbacks in these havens of rest. And for the same reason it is difficult to organise them to improve their conditions of employment. There is some sort of native organisation with educated natives at the head, but these gentlemen will eventually be found accepting with alacrity Governmental positions at such time as these may be thrown open to them.

It must not be supposed, however, that there is no strong movement among the class-conscious elements of the South African workers, white or native (or among the so-called "coloured," who are chiefly in the Cape Province). The purpose of my article is not to go into this however, but if I have given my readers a rough idea of conditions as between whites and blacks, this will be enough. I leave it to a better-informed South African to fill in the hiatus.