Facts about Namibia

The Ovambo Strike
In December, 1972, some 15,000 Ovambo contract workers went on strike all over Namibia (South West Africa). That strike is still on. Under the illegal South African occupation of Namibia, Africans are not allowed out of the native reserves without a permit, and since they must work to live, they had to leave the reserves through the contract labor system.

The largest base metal mine in the territory, where contract workers struck, is U.S. owned, Tsumeb.

Workers on contract must leave their families behind for periods of a year or 18 months. They have no choice of jobs, no say in working conditions, and may not either leave work or change jobs.

The wage for a fit class laborer was $11.55 a month. (It is estimated that an average black family needs a minimum of $110 a month to live frugally.)

Housing is provided — in barrack-like compounds — and food is served in the compounds.

Minor changes were made as the result of the strike, but the workers were not consulted at all. Future arrangements will be made between the men and employers, again without consulting the workers.

(over)

Voices from Namibia

(Quotations from letters and petitions received since February, 1972, or produced at the Windhoek trial of strikers.)

Because if you could have seen the life in Ovambo you should have cried

the government of South Africa is lying to the world that there is peace and goodwill in Namibia. Yes, there is peace, but to the point of a gun.

We eager to see Mr. Diggs [U.S. Congressman, denied permission to enter Namibia when in South Africa] and his South African companion, Mr. Muller [South African Minister for Foreign Affairs] in a car speeding for Ovambo. We hope it will not be night by the time they arrive at Oshivel, otherwise Mr. Diggs will have to wait till next day so that his belongings can be searched. Mr. Muller, being a white man, will be let through ... (into a so-called African homeland).

The Coloured people also have their aspirations and would like to have a place in the sun, however small.

Let them remember our people in Roben (sic) Island [a prison off the coast where South Africa holds at least fifty Namibians as political prisoners] those who have been jailed because they fought for freedom.

Why is it that if a Boer bought me and he doesn't want me any more he can send me back to Ovambo but if I don't want, I have no right to leave the work and go some other place?
Facts...

Thousands of strikers were sent back to Ovamboland, the reserve South Africa is turning into a “Bantustan.” Protests continued, and South African troops rushed to the area.

Behind the Strike

South Africa has been administering Namibia since it received a League of Nations mandate after World War I.

The United Nations took away its authority in 1966 for violation of mandate terms and refusal to submit reports. (All other former mandates have received independence.)

In 1967 the U.N. set up a Council for Namibia to take over administration and prepare Namibia for independence, but it has no enforcement powers.

In June 1971 the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that South African control of Namibia was illegal and should not be recognized by U.N. members.

How it happened

(Excerpts from a diary taken from a striker when he was searched after his arrest)

On December 12 a letter was received from Walvis Bay written in clear language how the slavery of the contract should be ended. The letter was read by all the residents of the Windhoek compound. The writers of the letter had talked about a thing that was close to the hearts of the Windhoek residents.

They started writing letters appealing that people should go into this matter. When they wrote nobody asked each other what should be written but everyone wrote as dictated by their own spirits. Though the superintendent of the compound and the black messenger had tried to destroy the letters, instead of these letters decreasing they increased in number.

The papers were read from December 5 to December 11, when they decided to meet in order to discuss the abolition of the contract. The men decided not to go to work on December 11. They met. The people cannot meet easily because they are afraid as on December 12 when the Boers heard of the decisions taken they started firing their guns.

The powder from the gunshot spattered towards the residents of Windhoek. Therefore the people were scared. Although it was like that, the leaders had started to call the people.

They came together, discussed and decided that nobody should go to work and agreed that nobody should leave the compound.

The Commissioner of Windhoek, Mr. White, came and begged that the Ovambo people should start working. Although he tried very hard the people refused. They had decided that if the contract was withdrawn it is only then that they will go to work.

A Strike for Freedom

The Namibian people have never abandoned their struggle for independence. Following the World Court decision religious and other leaders called again for independence and human rights. All tribes agreed and met together in a national nonwhite convention to show their unity.

The strike against the contract-labor system must be seen as part of this general movement against South African control and oppression.

The Namibian people are again appealing to the world, which has recognized their rights, for action. But they are not waiting.

Education, vocational training, and access to employment are limited and controlled.

Poverty is universal, malnutrition and starvation familiar.
Defense lawyer's questioning of Mr. Kotze. His firm, Lafrenz, employed one of the defendants.

— Mr. Kotze, did you ever consider it of importance to try to find out what food your employees actually received? [in the compound where contract laborers must live]
— No, I didn't attach any importance to that. I understood previously that the food is apparently not what one would wish, but that is not in my line. I simply pay them and that's that.

— Didn't you attach any importance to a person's experience?
— No, we don't regard this as important. If he comes in, he's treated as a new person. If we send back a person with experience then we usually give a letter to SWANLA [recruiting agency] requesting that he is sent back. But if we order people we don't care how much experience they have. We start them where we start all our men, right from the beginning, and if he works well then in time his salary is increased.

— If such an employee comes to your firm or he puts it to you that he is not satisfied to work at your salary, you would let him go?
— Yes, we discharge him immediately.

— Yes, but if a person says to you "My wages are too low," is that your answer, that you wouldn't attach any importance to determine whether the person has a good case through, for example, examining what his needs are or what his previous experience was — you just let him go?
— We let him go, definitely.

— You don't consider whether his salary should be raised on merit?
— If he has the experience, if he hasn't worked for us some time, then his salary is not increased.

— But Mr. Kotze, if this is the situation, you don't attach any importance to his qualifications, you don't attach any importance to whether he has a wife or children, you don't attach any importance to whether he says "I'm receiving too little money." If this is the situation, then you will certainly agree that it causes tremendous frustration to a worker.
— It's possible.

— So all the particulars which are normally of importance to an employer with regard to his employee and in his attitude to building up proper employer-employee attitudes don't apply to your situation?
— No, we just make an application. Under the old system we made application for say 100 Ovambos or 6 or whatever the case may be to SWANLA and we paid for this and they send us 6 Ovambos, and so we go to fetch them and we put them in the various departments where we need them.
"Defense and aid" is our part in southern Africa. The people of southern Africa are struggling for freedom against tremendous odds. In Namibia they have struck against a contract-labor system that holds them as virtual slaves. The result has been arrests, terror, and hunger. In Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) they are defying a state of emergency, bannings, arrests, shooting, to reject a Rhodesian-British settlement that would postpone majority rule to the next century. In South Africa a constant succession of political trials that reveal torture as well as repression remind us that the opposition has not been crushed, even by an efficient police state. In the Portuguese colonies, wars of liberation have reclaimed substantial areas for the African people in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.

The United States helps the status-quo powers—with planes, loans, military training, nuclear knowhow, and outright subsidy.

The Africa Defense and Aid Fund provides a way in which you can help the people—with money, with supplies, with legal defense.

Send your contribution today.

Children and their miserable homes at Walvis Bay. An installation at Tsumeb mine, U.S.-owned.