

**SOUTH AFRICAN COAL IMPORTS:
SUPPORT FOR A RACIST REGIME.**

The New England Power Company (NEPCO) has signed a contract to import 220 000 tons of South African coal. The United States is a leading exporter of coal, and our production far exceeds our consumption. Why, then, should NEPCO (and other US power companies, including the Southern Company) import coal from South Africa?

The reason is that South African coal is cheaper than US coal, because of the slave labor conditions in South Africa. It also has a lower sulfur content than US coal, and thus it enables NEPCO to comply more easily with the EPA regulations against the burning of high sulfur coal. But given that there are other ways of complying with the EPA regulations, and that the working conditions in the South African coal mines are probably the worst in the world, importation of South African coal is indefensible.

Politically, the NEPCO contract is in line with the unspoken American policy of supporting South Africa, especially through economic ties. This is despite the official denunciation of South Africa's racist apartheid policies.

Apartheid: Institutionalized Racism

South African coal is cheap because of low wages. These wages are kept down through the "Bantustans" (African reserves) system, which is the keystone of apartheid. This system confines the Africans, who form over 70 per cent of the population, to 13 per cent of the land - the least fertile, least industrialized, and least productive land in the country.

The result is that many Africans have to find work in the "white areas". They are only allowed to stay in these areas (which include all the industrial areas in South Africa) if they have a white employer and leave their families behind. No African can be a citizen of the white areas.

Thus, almost all African workers in South Africa are either migrants living away from their families, or peasants starving on insufficient land.

- Over half of African babies in South Africa die before they are six, according to the United Nations.
- In some places in the Bantustans, women and children can afford to eat only three times a week, according to a survey by the Dutch Reformed Church.
- Eighty per cent of all Africans in the towns earn less than the minimum necessary to survive, as calculated by the University of Natal's Institute of Social Research.

- Four out of five unskilled African workers in the towns show signs of malnutrition.

South Africa also gets cheap labour from outside her borders. Eighty per cent of African workers on the mines are from Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Angola and Malawi. The economies of these countries are dominated by South Africa.

Conditions on the South African Coal Mines

Ninety-nine per cent of African workers on the mines are migrants. Underground workers earn about \$62 a month; surface workers earn around \$47 a month. The minimum income necessary for survival in South Africa, however, is calculated at \$142 for a family of five. In other words, these wages are not nearly enough to survive on. By contrast, white workers earn twenty times as much.

Mine owners justify these starvation wages by saying that, in addition to wages, African miners get free room, board, and medical care. But the housing consists of prison-like barracks with concrete bunks, and only one per cent of African miners are allowed to have their families with them. The food is almost exclusively maize porridge. It provides about 4 000 calories a day, at a cost of 26¢ per miner a day. Africans work sixty hours a week, with only two holidays in the year - Christmas and Good Friday.

Mine owners keep African wages low because African strikes are illegal, and the Government bans, jails, and kills African organisers. On the other hand, whites (who comprise only five per cent of coal miners) have a union which is recognized by both employers and Government.

In addition, the skilled, better-paid jobs are reserved for whites only. By law, no African may supervise a white worker.

U.S. Support for Apartheid

The importance of American economic, political and military support for South Africa is unquestioned.

The US is South Africa's third largest trading partner. Between 1968 and 1973, US investment in South Africa almost doubled, to over a billion dollars. The rate of profit for American investments in South Africa is 19 per cent, as compared with a rate of 11 per cent in the US.

These investments provide vital support for the South African economy. Some US companies, under pressure from American workers, have made small efforts to improve conditions in their factories. Major change, however, is not possible for individual firms. In fact, many improvements are illegal; by investing, US firms in effect accept the racist laws.

This was highlighted by the Prime Minister, J.B. Vorster. He warned against "salaries being increased in a haphazard manner

simply because a man is black, and because pressure is being brought to bear on South Africa from America, Britain and elsewhere." He added that South Africa cannot afford "to say or do anything which will eventually amount to a redistribution of possessions."

In addition, the US has important military ties with South Africa. South Africa provides overflight and landing facilities for US military aircraft. The South African intelligence agency and the CIA have a secret pact. Both the Department of Defense and NASA maintain tracking stations there.

In 1969, the National Security Council made a study of the southern African situation. This contained several options for US policy. The one that was finally adopted (called "Tar Baby") was based on the assumption that: "The whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come is through them.... Our tangible interests form a basis for our contacts in the region, and these can be maintained at an acceptable political cost." In other words, for the sake of its economic interests, the US should cooperate with the white racist regime.

The implications of this conciliatory policy were shown by the recent visit of Admiral Hugo Biermann, commander-in-chief of the South African Defence Force, to the US. While in this country, he visited the acting Secretary of the Navy, and at one dinner party met seventeen US admirals. Connie Mulder, the South African Information Minister, also visited this country last year. He met with a number of important Government figures, including then-Vice President Gerald Ford.

It is significant that these visits came right after the coup in Portugal, which increased the immediacy of African revolution inside South Africa. South Africa is obviously looking for more open support - especially military support - from the US. Are we prepared to face another Vietnam?

The NEPCO Connection

NEPCO has imported almost 200 000 tons of coal from South Africa so far. It is expecting a further shipment within the next two months.

Power companies say they have to import South African coal because it is low in sulfur. However, there are billions of tons of low sulfur coal in undeveloped veins in Appalachia. In fact, the companies use South African coal because then they don't have to pay the price of clean coal mined safely by well-paid miners. This also undercuts American workers trying to raise their wages, and increases unemployment in the US. For example, 375 coal miners will lose their jobs because of coal imports from South Africa by the Southern Company.

In this, importing South African coal has the same effect as runaway shops, which have cost American workers thousands of jobs. As workers organize in one part of the country, businessmen move

their factories to poorly organized areas. International corporations can transfer their operations to other countries, whose governments do not allow strong unions. American workers lose jobs and their unions are weakened. The foreign workers are paid subsistence-level wages. Only the corporations benefit.

The United Mine Workers of America have recognised this. They have brought suit against the Southern Company under a federal law which prohibits the importation of materials produced by "indentured labor under penal sanctions". Dockworkers and miners protested the Southern Company's contracts for South African coal at a stockholders' meeting. They also campaigned to stop the unloading of South African coal at Mobile, Alabama. In doing this, they supported the struggle of the South African people for a better life.

American companies are already heavily involved in the mining of metals in South Africa. They now want to develop their own coal mines there, and also to negotiate more long term contracts. These moves will strengthen South Africa's racist regime, increase the suffering of Africans there, and cost American workers more jobs.

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