A CALL TO THE CHURCHES OF AMERICA - The General Strike in Namibia

Namibia (South West Africa) is in the grip of a general strike by African workers which began December 13, 1971, and has spread to mines, factories, the fishing industry, railways and docks, municipal services and to farms throughout the vast territory. 12,500 Ovambo contract laborers have quit work and at their insistence are being sent back to their homes in Ovamboland, the northern tier area of Namibia. The latest contingent of 350 strikers is from the Consolidated Diamond Mines at Oranjemund, the territory's most lucrative industry and long considered to offer the best wages and working conditions for blacks.

(The Ovambo people constitute about 45% of the total population of 750,000; there are only about 95,000 whites in Namibia.)

The strike started as a protest against the contract labor system, under which Africans cannot offer their labor freely on the market, but must sign up with the South West Africa Native Labor Association which parcels them out for work for white employers for terms of one year to 18 months at wages averaging $28 per month, plus food and housing, but with declared minimums of $12.25 monthly for a Grade A laborer down to $5.25 monthly for a child.

On June 30, Bishop Leonard Ayala of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo Mission Church and Moderator Pastor Philius Swart of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa released a statement to the press by over 3,000 adherents issuing an Open Letter to the South African Prime Minister, Balthazar Vorster.

During the terms of their contracts, black workers are separated from their families and must live in company barracks or municipal locations. Breaking the contracts is illegal.
The general strike is the latest and most forceful non-violent protest by the Namibian people against the conditions of their lives under the illegal occupation of their country by the adjacent power, the Republic of South Africa. South Africa - openly defying the United Nations, the lawful authority in Namibia - has tightened its control over and extended its apartheid policies to the territory.

For two and a half decades the world community has been wrestling with the matter of Namibia and its control by South Africa. There have been repeated resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council; worldwide protests; opinions by the International Court of Justice; the growth of a dedicated, armed liberation movement, the South West Africa People's Organization. In 1966, the General Assembly terminated South Africa's mandate over Namibia which dated back to the League of Nations. The U.N. assumed jurisdiction itself and created the Council for Namibia to administer the territory, but has been prevented by South Africa from exercising its authority there.

On June 21, 1971, the World Court handed down an advisory opinion affirming South Africa's presence to be illegal and calling on U.N. members to do nothing to recognize South Africa's presence and administration. Namibians reacted spontaneously inside the country: students demonstrated, tribesmen faced up to government-appointed chiefs, chiefs not beholden to the South West Africa administration spoke out.

On June 30, Bishop Leonard Auala of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-kavango Church and Moderator Pastor Paulus Gowaseb of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa on behalf of their almost 300,000 adherents issued an Open Letter to the South African Prime Minister, Balthazar Vorster.
The two black leaders listed the grievances of the African people: intimidation by racist policies; denial of free speech, movement and voting rights; forced separation of tribal groups; the contract labor system. They called on South Africa to work with the United Nations to bring independence to Namibia. At a subsequent face-to-face meeting with Verster, the churchmen did not budge an inch. Their stand was totally supported by Anglican Bishop Colin O'Brien Winter and, except for the independence statement, by the Roman Catholic bishops.

The United States government has upheld the rights of the United Nations in Namibia by votes in the General Assembly and Security Council; it supports the World Court decision. It has cautioned American businesses in Namibia but has not pressed efforts to have them recognize the lawful authority and stands aloof from the Council for Namibia. Last month, the U.S. administration made a $436 million grant to Portugal, South Africa's closest ally, currently pursuing three colonial wars in Africa, one in Angola, which lies just north of Namibia.

Namibia's mineral wealth has attracted American capital. The Tsumeb Corporation is a major feature in the territory's chief economic asset - the $126,000,000 per year mining industry (copper, lead, zinc, tin, vanadium, diamonds, etc. - with uranium to come). Tsumeb's three mines are controlled by American Metal Climax, Inc. and Newmont Mining Corporation, both with headquarters in New York City and both listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Amax and Newmont each own 29% of Tsumeb, and Newmont operates the mines. Tsumeb uses contract labor, pays taxes to the illegal administration, and its American holders reaped over $15 million profits in 1970. Tsumeb's miners went out early in the strike, solely, the American companies claim, against the contract system - therefore the administration - but reports indicate the strikers are in rebellion over low wages and poor living conditions as well.
South West African industry faces economic ruin, writes Benjamin Pogrund of the Johannesburg RAND DAILY MAIL. As the strike grows, as administration and industry attempt to find replacements elsewhere in Namibia (even Angola, Botswana, Malawi and South Africa itself have been mentioned as possible recruiting grounds) and face training new men, the mines deteriorate from seepage and other effects and smelters are cold. If outside black labor is willing or is coerced to come in, fights between strikers and scabs could occur. More likely, there would be a sympathetic joining in by other Africans and the strike could spread into the far larger and more sophisticated South African industrial complex.

Ovamboland is an area of total pastoral economy. The main reason Ovambo men become contract laborers is to raise money to pay taxes imposed on them, a device calculated to make them work in the white-owned mines, factories and farms. Doubtless the authorities feel they can in time force the strikers back to work.

Black leaders not in the pay of the administration are taking their stand with the strikers. Herero Chief Clemens Kapuuo - who has engaged British lawyers to challenge foreign exploitation of Namibia's natural resources - has stated that all Namibian people will unite to abolish the contract system since they all suffer from it. The events inside Namibia since June comprise the clearest mandate for freedom and self-determination a voteless, impoverished, occupied nation can give. It goes without saying that blacks living under the South African, Rhodesian and Portuguese regimes are marking closely what is happening in Namibia.

Cape Town journalist Stanley Uys writes in the London OBSERVER that the Vorster government is seeking scapegoats and 'agitators'. Whites persist in allegations about church leaders being involved in some sort
of conspiracy to promote the strike: they cannot conceive of black laborers initiating anything so immense. Official pressures on foreign clergy and lay workers (including white South Africans and particularly Lutherans and Anglicans) mount. A German Lutheran pastor was expelled from Namibia last week. Permits for churchmen to enter Ovamboland are denied almost daily. Bishop Auala, Moderator Gowaseb, Bishop Winter and others are marked men. The recent conviction of Johannesburg Dean ffrench-Beytagh as a 'terrorist' for giving financial aid to families of political prisoners hovers over the scene. Blacks in Namibia have virtually no sympathetic high level comfort and understanding but from church leaders. This infuriates the South African rulers. Retaliation is certain.

The churches in the United States of America have a duty to act:

- Send funds for relief of strikers and their families;
- Dispatch a delegation to Namibia at once to show solidarity with churchmen there and to assure the Namibian people the outside world supports them;
- Encourage American churchmen to go to Namibia to work;
- Urge the United States government to -
  - serve notice on South Africa to refrain from repressive acts;
  - fully support the Council for Namibia;
  - enforce positive action on U.S. firms in Namibia, that they abandon anything resembling the contract labor system and deal directly with African workers alone, and that they obey the lawful authority, the United Nations, and pay taxes to it;
  - establish a diplomatic presence in Namibia, accredited to the United Nations alone and pledged to the ultimate sovereignty of the Namibian people;
- Urge Senators and Congressmen to bring the matter of Namibia to the Congress and to support Congressman Charles Diggs' call for fair employment practices by American firms;
- Urge American Labor to declare and take active support of the strikers and all African working people;
- Call to account American firms operating in Namibia and challenge their policies at shareholders meetings.

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