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on

The Role of Transnational
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Labor Conditions in the TNCs

Paper presented by the Research, Information and Publications Department of the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

As colonialism took root in Namibia, the indigenous people were systematically stripped of their land, their means of livelihood, their freedom of movement and their right to determine their own future. Living in a vast and potentially prosperous country, they remain today, under South Africa's illegal occupation, ill-provided for in terms of health, welfare and education services, their talents and creativity stunted and warped by racialism, and in the majority of cases, desperately poor.

This is the human setting of the operations of the transnational corporations in Namibia today. It is amidst these conditions that they have opened up their mines and factories to exploit the territory's natural resources. The prospect of an abundant, easily manipulated and above all inexpensive labour force has been, after all, one of Namibia's main attractions for the foreign investor in the first place.

Today, the South African government is engaged in a concerted propaganda offensive to persuade the international community that things are changing in Namibia, that apartheid and racial discrimination have been abolished under the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance and that the people have been granted internal 'self-government'. The apartheid regime has been willingly echoed by many of Namibia's foreign investors who, faced by demands for the implementation of UN Decree No.1 and the imposition of sanctions against South Africa, find themselves under pressure to justify their continuing presence in Namibia. It can be all too easy, in countering their arguments, to be diverted from the wider historical perspective of Namibia's colonisation and the exploitation of its people, land and resources.

The participants in a Seminar such as this will undoubtedly be well aware of these points. The challenge facing those who are committed to the freedom struggle in Southern Africa, and are engaged in solidarity and information work of one kind or another, is to convey the issues involved to a wider public in a clear and straightforward, and at the same time imaginative and arresting way. The press and media focus on the international negotiations and diplomacy surrounding the search for a Namibian independence agreement can make the struggle for the territory seem complex and confusing. The answer is to return to the basics - the people, their needs, hopes and plans, and their vision of the future in a free Namibia.
LABOUR CONDITIONS - THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE

The recent literature focusing on the working conditions and experiences of Namibia's labour force is comparatively slight. A useful double issue of the South African Labour Bulletin, Focus on Namibia, was published in 1978 (SALB Vol 4 Nos. 1 & 2, Jan - Feb 1978). The International Defence and Aid Fund itself published its own survey of the subject a year later (The Workers of Namibia, by Gillian and Suzanne Cronje, IDAF February 1979). A number of subsequent publications have included sections or chapters on labour conditions and the exploitation of black workers (e.g. To Be Born A Nation, SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, June 1981).

But generally speaking, the available, up-to-date information is sparse and patchy. As far as workers employed by transnational corporations are concerned (i.e. approximately 50 per cent of the total labour force), much of the attention has focussed on those who work for the 'giants' of the Namibian economy, notably at the Rossing Mine (Rio Tinto Zinc Corporation). But about the workers employed by the smaller and lesser-known TNCs, or those whose operations in Namibia are themselves comparatively small-scale and obscure, we know very little.

SOUTH AFRICAN AND IDA PROPAGANDA

It is hardly surprising that the two TNCs which are most heavily involved in the Namibian economy, through the mining sector - RTZ and CDM - have also been devoting the greatest effort to improving and maintaining their image as benevolent, far-sighted, modern employers. These are companies which stand to lose a great deal in the event of major changes in the political and economic status quo in Namibia, and they obviously have a deep interest in maximising their credibility and laying the foundations for good working relations with Namibia's future rulers (even if their representatives often appear not to be aware of it in dealing with the press and general public!). Both CDM and RTZ have in recent years involved themselves in various educational and welfare projects, both for their own employees and in the wider community, have arranged briefings and visits for overseas journalists, and so on. Other TNCs, too, have from time to time been featured in the Namibian press in these kinds of connection.

Most people would probably agree that, exposed to the spotlight of international attention as they are, companies such as CDM and Rossing offer comparatively attractive wages, fringe benefits, working and living conditions for their black employees (not to mention whites). While this is not to suggest that racial discrimination has been abolished, or that the much wider issues raised by their involvement in Namibia in the first place and their relationship with the South African regime have been resolved, conditions are probably better for black workers than in many if not most other workplaces in the territory.
Apart from the motives and strategies of the TNCs concerned themselves, this situation has had important implications for the South African regime and the kind of image that has been built up internationally of Namibia by its information services, assisted in many instances by the press and media. Both the South African government and its proteges inside Namibia have seized on aspects of the situation pertaining at relatively 'enlightened' employers to reinforce the impression being assiduously cultivated abroad that a rising standard of living, opportunities for training and advancement, and modern employment practices are now the general lot of Namibia's black workers. Meanwhile, the reality of life for black contract workers in municipal hostels and compounds throughout the country, for families living in the war zones, for those employed on white-owned farms and in obscure factories and small enterprises throughout the land, and above all for the growing army of Namibia's unemployed, remains concealed and unknown to the world outside.

Away from the spotlight of public image building by the major TNCs operating in Namibia, it seems evident that the majority of Namibian workers continue to live and work under dreadful conditions. Smaller TNCs do not publicise their 'good works' on behalf of their workforce and the Namibian people in general (if indeed they are engaged in any); in fact, there is little information about working conditions and social provisions for workers employed by them. From what evidence is available, it can be surmised that in many cases, workers lack the most basic provisions of housing, health care and other social amenities, while being threatened with redundancies and destitution as companies close down or cut back their workforce.

LIVING CONDITIONS

The appalling conditions at workers' compounds in the main industrial and mining areas have come to light in a number of reports.

A visitor accompanying a Namibian pastor, Gerson Max, to Camites copper and silver mine, a Canadian-owned enterprise, described conditions there. The black workers live four to a room in hostel-like quarters away from their families. As contract workers they are not permitted to have their families with them. As a result, loneliness and alcoholism are frequent problems. The workforce of 450 is mostly black. The few 'Coloured' (mixed race) workers live on a separate site in houses provided for them and their families. At the clinic provided on site, apartheid rules apply. There are two entrances, one for whites and 'Coloureds', and another one for blacks. According to Gerson Max, Camites is one of the nicest of the 29 mine facilities he visits on his pastoral duties.
The racism of the management is evident in the explanations given by mine personnel, who ask the visitor not to write bad things. 'We bring these people out of the bush. They don't know anything when they get here. We give them a chance', he is told. A recreation room and bar are provided by the company to 'keep the men out of mischief', according to the white social director. The company would like to plant flowers near housing blocks for black workers, he explained, but 'these people wouldn't know how to take care of them'. (LWI 4.2.82)

Conditions at another mining company, Deblin Mining Pty Ltd, leased by the operator from Goldfields SA, were described as shocking by a visitor. The mine is located between Swakopmund and Usakos in south western Namibia. According to the reporter, average wages per month are around R50. No provision is made for housing and labourers have to build their own 'homes' from oil drums from the mine and any other material they can find. There are no lavatories and people are forced to use an area behind a shack. There is no transport for workers to Swakopmund, and anyone falling ill has to walk or try to get a lift. Workers who spoke to the reporter were frightened of reprisals if their names were mentioned (Information, Newsletter of the Council of Churches in Namibia, April 1982).

Shanty towns of unspeakable squalor have arisen on the outskirts of Okahandja, housing 2,000 people working mainly for two foreign companies, Southern Pipes, a French-owned company manufacturing piping for a pipeline, and Karoo Meat Packers, a South African company. A reporter from the Windhoek Observer, visiting the area described the conditions. 'Fowls compete with dirty nude toddlers in scrounging for food in rubbish dumps and rubble heaps. A few of the more fortunate squatters have a few goats.' There are no toilet facilities and no running water. The camps are situated on private land; in one, people are charged R20 per tin shanty by the owner. The companies provide no housing for their employees, who are thus forced to live in appalling conditions. One of the camps is only a few hundred yards from the factory. Southern Pipes completed its contract at the end of November 1982; for the people in the squatter camps employed by the company the outlook seems certainly bleak (WO 6.11.82).

UNEMPLOYMENT

The publicity generated by the few major TNCs' 'philanthropic' attitude to their workforce tends to gloss over the plight of the majority of Namibian workers, who face massive unemployment, an increasing threat of redundancies, as well as deplorable living conditions. While CDK employ around 5,800 people, Tsumeb around 7,000 and Rosing around 2,000, these and other companies are cutting back their workforce. A survey by the Windhoek Advertiser in October 1982 found that Namibia's biggest mining, industrial and trading companies have embarked on selective retrenchment, leaving vacancies unfilled, or cutting back overtime.
According to the survey, Sonnex (previously Barlows) had in the previous two months retrenched four per cent of its workforce, affecting 23 people. Complete service teams of the industrial marketing group were laid off, affecting skilled, semi- and unskilled staff.

South African Transport Services in Namibia had laid off 170 workers since July 1982. At CDM the average tour of duty of migrant workers from Ovambo has been reduced from eight to 7.6 months in the year, skilled staff numbers are remaining static and no new appointments are being made in areas where production has been cut.

Rossing has been slowing down its rate of replacement of staff vacancies. Rossing's General Manager admitted in July 1982 that the company has stopped recruiting new employees except for a few skilled men. Each month some 40 or 50 employees leave, and they will not be replaced. By July next year, he expected the labour force to be reduced by 600 (WO 3.7.82). According to the Windhoek Advertiser, there are 'several other big employers in the industrial services sector which have cut staff numbers and introduced other austerity measures such as minimising overtime' (WA 19.10.82).

Those made redundant join the estimated 75,000 unemployed and 50,000 underemployed workers in Namibia, with little hope of a new job. According to Professor Thomas, an economist, the Namibian labour force increases by 8,500 each year.

A symposium on unemployment held in Windhoek in May 1980 put forward recommendations fully in line with the regime's apartheid policies. They included exporting labour to work in the mines in the north western Cape, a system of farm jails (no further explanation on this was given), family planning to limit population growth, and influx control to prevent workers from the 'bantustans' from migrating to the urban centres in search of work. Influx control was officially abolished in 1977, though in practice it continues. Workers now have to produce identity cards to show they are in an area legally. Other measures recommended included labour intensive relief works, fiscal measures, recruitment of farm labour, training schemes, etc. (WA 3.10.80)

When asked 18 months later what had been done to implement these recommendations, the Chairman of the Committee on Unemployment (set up at the symposium) claimed that 20 proposals had been implemented but refused to give any details. He confirmed that the proposal to export unemployed persons to the Cape mines was awaiting final approval from the South African cabinet (WA 30.10.81).

REPRESSION

The South African and local police and army have increasingly taken on the task of controlling and suppressing any protest organised by workers against these conditions. This has taken the form of raids on workers' residences, allegedly to root out 'illegal residents'.

violent attacks on and killings of workers, and mass arrests of workers. At Katutura, the black town outside Windhoek, a permanent police force has been stationed, creating strong resentment among the workers at the brutal behaviour of these armed forces. There have been numerous incidents of police special constables assaulting workers. In July 1982 the Windhoek City Council announced its decision to clear two large hostel complexes in Katutura of around 9,000 residents and transfer the buildings to the army for occupation. This will clearly further aggravate an already explosive situation, making 9,000 people homeless and effectively placing the whole of Katutura under direct military control. It would add to the number of 'illegal residents' as defined by the authorities and allow them to 'repatriate' these workers to their 'homelands' - one way of reducing visible unemployment. This is already being done regularly. During police raids on Katutura between June and August 1982, 447 'illegal residents' were arrested (WA 27.8.82). Many of these are people who have fled from the war in the north to seek safety and work further south. From all available evidence, they are unlikely to find either.

CONCLUSION - THE ROLE OF IDAF

The purpose of this Seminar is to bring those actively involved in the Namibian issue together to exchange information and develop co-ordinated programmes of action. Some - perhaps a majority of participants - may be familiar with the publications of the IDAF and with its Research and Information Department (known 'in the trade' as 'DEFA Research'). DEFA's resources of press cutting, documents, research papers, books and periodicals relating to Southern Africa date back to the late 1960s and are available for use and consultation by members of the public by arrangement. The Department is in a position to assist those actively involved in research and information-gathering on Namibia, both by making the raw material of research available and, perhaps, putting individuals and organisations in contact with each other as appropriate. In the USA, the IDAF as a whole is represented both through its US national committee and through its office at the United Nations.

The IDAF also maintains an extensive photo, film and video library on Southern Africa, under the auspices of its Publications Department. These resources are, similarly, available for use and consultation by members of the public.

As far as specific information on the employment practices of TNCs in Namibia is concerned, much useful material often comes to light in the course of specific anti-apartheid and solidarity campaigns in particular countries, notably when individuals and groups undertake their own researches into particular companies in their localities which are known to have Namibian interests, or interact
with management through letters, deputations etc. If such information can be pooled, shared around and above all stored for ease of future access, it becomes infinitely more useful to the international solidarity movement as a whole. The IDAF Research Department can perhaps make a useful contribution in this respect, in addition to its work of monitoring and processing the press and media coverage of Namibia.

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IDAF Publications on Namibia

A Dwelling Place of Our Own, by Randolph Vigne
(rev. ed. 1975, 52pp illus)

The Workers of Namibia, by Gillian and Suzanne Cronje
(1975, 135pp illus)

Namibia - The Facts (1980, 100pp, illus)

Namibia in Struggle, portable exhibition of photographs
(18 display sheets plus text)

Remember Kassinga - and other papers on political prisoners and detainees in Namibia, Fact Paper No.9
(1981, 52pp)

Apartheid's Army in Namibia - South Africa's Illegal Military Occupation, Fact Paper No.10
(January 1982, 74pp)

Apartheid in Namibia Today - Recent data on poverty, living conditions and racial segregation
Briefing Paper No.4 (March 1982, 4pp)

Namibia: The Elusive Settlement - Update on negotiations since 1981, Briefing Paper No.6
(November 1982, 4pp)