Statement by George M. Houser, American Committee on Africa to the UN Council for Namibia

January 19, 1972
Mr. President and members of the Council for Namibia,

We have asked to appear before the Council this afternoon because of the extreme urgency of focusing international and American attention on the confrontation which has now developed in Namibia between thousands of striking African workers and the illegal South African government of occupation. Despite the support of the UN and most of the nations of the world for Namibian independence, there is very little evidence of concrete support for the workers who have dared to act against South African exploitation and oppression.

Far too little substantive information has reached the outside world about the demands of the strikers, or the extent, organization and progress of the strike. This is no accident, but part of the deliberate policy of the illegal South African government which has consistently prohibited free access to Namibia, particularly since the ending of its Mandate by General Assembly resolution 2145 in 1966. The South African government refusal to admit six Americans (including myself) who attempted to fly into Windhoek in 1967 without complying with their illegal requirement that we obtain South African visas, simply highlighted South African determination to maintain the wall of silence which it has constructed to isolate Namibia from the world. Those reporters who are allowed into the territory are kept on a tight leash, and Ovamboland, the base for most of the current developments, has been almost totally sealed off for some time, so that even churchmen wishing to minister to their members have been refused permission to enter.

At the same time the South Africans are working hard to create the illusion that all is well inside Namibia. Thus South African Minister Muller claimed in a speech delivered to the Security Council on the 27th September, 1971, "We have guided and administered the peoples of South West Africa for more than half a century in a manner which has earned their whole-hearted confidence. We have set them on the way of peace, prosperity and self-determination...."

The dishonesty and hypocrisy of this statement has been clearly exposed by the courageous united action of thousands of African workers on strike in Namibia since the middle of December. The bare facts of the strike as revealed in newspaper articles are by
now well known to the members of the Council, and I will not repeat them in detail. The strike, primarily involving contract laborers from Ovamboland, started among dock and fishing industry workers in Walvis Bay, spread to railroad, municipal and service workers in Windhoek, then to mine workers in the north at Tsumeb and surrounding areas, and then down to the diamond fields in the south. Scattered agricultural workers have also been involved; it now affects more than 20 centers and at least 15,000 people are involved, but no accurate figures are available on the number of strikers or the number of people arrested for striking. Strikers apparently demanded to be sent back to Ovamboland, a strategic demand which make particularly good sense when it is borne in mind that all contract labor lives in compounds which can be easily surrounded, cut off from the surrounding population and starved into submission. Thousands of workers were in fact returned to Ovamboland, often under armed guard and there have been reports that workers were subjected to police screening once back in the reserve.

Back in Ovamboland the strikers intensified their activities. They set up a Committee which has held meetings throughout the territory to explain the issues to the people and thus consolidate unity. Leaflets setting out major demands have been widely circulated and popular militancy is mounting. Central demands of the strikers involve:

1. Abolition of the contract labor system - the leaflet states, "We do not want the contract system improved or that it be given another name."

2. An end to carrying passes and abolition of the whole pass system.

3. The right to freedom of movement throughout Namibia for themselves and their families, and an end to the separation of families by the migratory labor system.

4. The right of free choice of jobs - the leaflet says, "Any method of selling people meets with our disagreement."

5. Increased rates of pay and an end to all job discrimination on the basis of race and color.


7. The right to be represented at all settlement talks including those scheduled for the 18th January between South African government representatives and the Ovamboland Council. The strikers have demanded that these talks be shifted to inside Ovamboland from Grootfontein, a small town 200 miles south of Ovamboland.
These demands reach far past simple economic issues and hit at the very roots of the whole apartheid system in South Africa and South African rule in Namibia. African poverty, landlessness, rightlessness are all designed to maintain white supremacy and wealth by ensuring a constant flow of cheap, powerless labor. Thus a fundamental attack on the pass and contract labor system poses a major challenge to the South African regime which it cannot allow to succeed.

The contract labor system is operated by a recruiting corporation called SWANLA (South West Africa Native Labour Association) which acts, according to the "Validation of Native Service Contracts Ordinance" Number 3 of 1958, on behalf of Consolidated Mines, Tsumeb and other mining concerns, who are all entitled to representatives on the administrative board. The movement of all Africans within Namibia is tightly controlled. The South African occupiers have designated two-thirds of the country as a "white area" (aptly called the "police zone"). There are reserves for Africans both inside and outside this area. Africans may neither enter nor leave the white area or reserves without a permit from the South African forces and they may not travel anywhere without a pass issued by an employer or a magistrate.

There are 350,000 Ovambo, 45 percent of the Namibian population and the Ovambo are traditionally a crucial source of labor to the white economy. Ovamboland is an undeveloped area with a subsistence agricultural economy and few jobs, and the Ovambo are forced to pay taxes in money. Thus many Ovambo are driven to find jobs outside, and work may be secured only through the South West African Native Labor Association. SWANLA medically checks, X-rays, and grades the worker (A-mines, B-farms, C-livestock breeding). Employers order workers from SWANLA in the same way - so many A, B, and/or C workers - and pay a $35 recruiting fee. A bracelet ("okangolo," mark of engagement) is attached to the worker's wrist and he is sent to Grootfontein by bus, then by train to his destination. At Grootfontein he receives a pair of shorts, a shirt, a blanket, and bread. The contract is usually for a year, with a possible six-month extension, and the worker's family may not accompany him. Workers on contract may not leave the employment areas, change jobs, or cancel the contract, and must return home when it ends, to leave again only on a similar contract. Namibian workers are chattel in the South African controlled contract labor
system. SWANLA sets a minimum wage. For a fit class A general laborer this is $11.55 a month. Housing is provided, usually barrack-like compounds, and "good wholesome food, containing either meat or fat and not less than 12 lb. of meal per week." Wages are sometimes withheld until the end of the contract, most often by farmers.

The terms of the contracts and other documents involved in the process of tying the worker to his job illustrate vividly the non-person slave status of Africans under South African rule. Thus the Contract of Service signed by SWANLA, the Employer and the Employee refers to the "Order No." under which the worker was obtained and reads: "The said master agrees to hire the service of the said servant(s) and the said servant(s) agree(s) to render to the said master his/their service at all fair and reasonable times in the capacity of ___________ for ___________ commencing on ___________. And it is further agreed that the said master shall pay to the said servant(s) wages at the rate shown against the name(s) to the said servant(s) and that such wages shall be paid monthly."

The titles and terms of the Proclamations which deal with conditions governing the behaviour of Africans under contract and their fate if they break such contracts are equally revealing. Proclamation 3 of 1917 titled "Control and Treatment of Natives on Mines" lays down in subsection 3 (e) Any laborer who "without lawful cause deserts or absents himself from his place of employment or fails to........carry out the terms of his contract of employment shall be guilty of an offence." The penalties laid down for this are a fine and/or imprisonment, with or without hard labor not exceeding two months.

The "Masters and Servants Proclamation" Number 34 of 1920 extends these types of sanctions to cover all contract workers, and lays down very similar penalties for crimes such as a worker "absenting himself without leave" or "refusing to obey any order of his master." This proclamation provides very heavy penalties for anyone attempting to "1(a) force or induce any servant to depart from his service before he has finished same," "1(c) force or induce any servant or other person to belong to any society or association or contribute to any common funds." Prohibitions on workers' organization or action extend in this comprehensive Proclamation to laying down penalties for anyone using or threatening
violence to the property of any other, or for "refusing to comply with any rules, orders, resolutions or regulations made" in an attempt to "advance the rates of wages or.....regulate or alter the mode of carrying on the manufacturing trade business."

It is against this background of rigid police-state control that the Namibian strike assumes its full significance. There has never been such a sustained, widespread strike before in either South Africa or Namibia; the implications are tremendous, and the South Africans are well aware of the dangers inherent to their white supremacist system in this growth of African consciousness and militancy.

The South African occupiers are faced with a dilemma. The strike aims at the very basis of their whole system - the cheap labor system. Thus they cannot allow it to succeed; on the other hand the international focus on Namibia makes it difficult for them to settle this strike in their traditional manner - shoot some workers, drive the rest back to work by guns or starvation. The high level of consciousness of the Namibian people is making it difficult for South Africa to devise a compromise which will leave the situation basically unchanged but apparently different. As the strike spread, Minister Botha was forced to announce a plan to abandon the current SWANLA-run contract labor system in Namibia and replace it by a system of recruitment and contract operated by the government-controlled tribal authorities of each "Bantustan." However, the Ovamboland Legislative Council has strongly backed the workers opposition to contract labor - an index of the tremendous pressure that they must feel from the whole African population.

But the Namibian contract labor system enforced by South Africa is only the most nakedly ruthless form of organizing cheap labor - the South African system, essentially the same, relies on the Pass Laws and Labour Bureau to do the same job, and the South African occupation authorities will no doubt attempt to introduce some variant of this system into Namibia under the cloud of reform.

The position of the Namibian workers is serious. They are facing the full force of South Africa's might, and the regime is very aware that this strike may spark others amongst mine workers over the border in South Africa.

In addition to South African operations in Namibia, there are a number of foreign
corporations deeply involved in Namibia as well, many of them heavily dependent on the contract labor system. There are no indications at all that these corporations have in any way opposed the South African occupiers in their past or present actions. United States involvement in Namibia is most clear in the case of the Tsumeb Corporation, which accounts for more than 80% of all the base mineral production of the territory and provides a significant percentage of Namibian exports. American Metal Climax and Newmont Mining Corporation each hold a 25% interest in Tsumeb, with Newmont as manager.

It is estimated that at the current speed-up rate of extraction, the Tsumeb mine will be exhausted within 25 years and will have taken a billion dollars worth of metal from Namibia. Tsumeb has two other mines in Namibia (Kombat and Matchless) and is involved in other activities with at least four other U.S. and South African corporations. American Metal Climax and Newmont made profits of more than $15 million from Tsumeb in 1970, and paid taxes of more than $13 million to the South African government; average pay for the Africans is said by management to be about $30 a month, while average pay for European miners is about $280. At least two strikes by African workers occurred at Tsumeb during the sixties. Tsumeb General Manager R.J. Ratledge has admitted that Ovambo do not work there by choice. "When Ovamboland has a good rainy season, Tsumeb has more difficulty recruiting employees. If it's a good year and they don't have to work, they stay at home."

The South Africans are now intensifying their efforts to break the strike which is still spreading. The latest news is that large number of police re-inforcements have been flown into Namibia to join the forces already available from the Caprivi strip where South Africa has a military base. Efforts to recruit labor from Namaland, Kavango, Damaraland and other areas are increasing, but are being met with non-cooperation from the people of those areas.

Militancy amongst all sections of the African people of Namibia is growing rapidly, as witness the strike, the increasingly active opposition of the Hereros to the attempt to impose a Bantustan on them, and the increasingly frequent reports of SWAPO activities evidenced by land-mine explosions in the Caprivi strip.
In light of this situation it is vital that the Council broaden its areas of immediate and long term action to support the people of Namibia. We suggest the following as lines of action:

1) We urge the Council to issue a statement of support for the strikers, condemning the contract labor system.

2) We urge the Council to make every effort to break the blanket of silence about the strike and actions taken against the strikers; it should itself collect and distribute information as widely as possible on a frequent, daily or weekly, basis.

3) We urge the Council to send its own observer to document actions of the illegal occupation and of the people's resistance, and to use its influence to have other international agencies do the same: an ILO team on the strike, and working conditions; WHO, FAO and UNICEF to check conditions in Ovamboland in view of reports that employers are waiting for hunger to drive the workers back, and to plan relief.

4) We urge the Council to invite representatives of the striking workers, of the churches, and other genuine representatives of the Namibian people, to appear before the Council in order to clarify events in Namibia, the demands of the people, and their relationship with the Council.

5) Funds should be made available for the legal defense of Namibians facing punishment by the South African authorities; we urge the Council to bring this to the attention of the United Nations Trust Fund.

6) In the light of the opinion of the International Court of Justice invalidating all agreements and contracts entered into on behalf of Namibia or Namibians by the illegal South African regime, the Council should call on all foreign corporations using contract labor to cease such practices, and should further call on such corporations to refuse to become parties to any agreement with South Africa in so-called settlement of the strike. No strike settlement can be made without participation of the striking workers or can be accepted until it has the approval of the people of Namibia and the Council for Namibia acting on their behalf. The Council should immediately summon the major corporations that have been subjected to strike action to appear before it to explain their treatment of the Namibian workers.

7) Under the World Court opinion, corporations should operate in Namibia only with the approval of the Council and the people of Namibia. Therefore, the Council should issue a statement on corporate policy, especially declaring that corporate taxes paid to the illegal South African regime are in violation of the Court's opinion and the authority of the Council as the interim legal body representing Namibian interests.

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