PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE:
Apartheid and the African Worker
As his metal armband indicates, the South African mineworker pictured here with all the trappings of his job is a "Boss Boy." Having risen to one of the highest positions available for a black mineworker, he is among the fortunate few. He has more responsibility and is much better paid than the black miners who work under him. Yet it is appropriate that this man should appear faceless, and in this sense, without personal identity and individuality; for in the context of the white South African economy in which he labors, he is essentially treated and viewed as a pair of working hands and arms.

In order to maintain a clear picture of the realities of apartheid through the smoke screen of "change-oriented" speeches that have recently come from the mouths of prominent South African officials, it is more necessary than ever to focus directly on the subject of what "change" can and cannot mean in the context of a society dedicated to the maintenance and reinforcement of white political and economic supremacy. In particular, we intend to ask what "change" has meant and can possibly mean for South Africa's black workers, and by extension, for the 82 percent of the population their earnings must nurture. For while it is the apartheid structure that assures white supremacy in South Africa, it is the absolute and complete control and regulation of the labor of the black majority that provides the scaffolding on which the South African economy is erected; and it is that economy that allows white South Africans to remain powerful and to enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Like the vote, this standard of living is "for whites only," who number less than 4 million and supply only 20 percent of South Africa's economically active population. Seven out of 10 workers in South Africa are Africans. They constitute 90 percent of the work force in agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining; 65 percent in electricity, gas and water; 67 percent in services, and 60 percent in construction.

While black Africans contribute over two-thirds of South Africa's labor force, white workers earn on the average eight times as much as their black fellow workers. Even if one views this as a skilled-unskilled wage gap, the acceptable differential in industrialized economies elsewhere in the world is 1.4:1.3 In 1970, the ratio of African to European per capita income was 1:17; in 1971, the gap reached 1:20 and was reported to be growing still wider.4 This is not an accident. It results from the elaboration and extension of a complex web of apartheid policies, regulations, laws and white "custom" over which African workers have no control and which they have been almost powerless to influence in any way.

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The expansion, diversification and industrialization of the South African economy during the 20th century and particularly since World War II, far from bringing any improvement in the position of African workers, has seen the steady erosion of the few tenuous rights they once exercised and hence of their ability to affect change peacefully. Even a partial listing of legislation dealing directly and specifically with the African as a worker makes awesome reading. For example, there is legislation that: 1) imposes a contract labor system for African workers (Native Labour Regulation Act, 1911; Bantu Labour Act, 1964, amended, 1974), 2) denies Africans right of ownership in land (Native Land Act, 1913; Bantu Trust and Land Act, No. 18, 1936), 3) reserves skilled employment on mines for whites and prohibits the issuance of certificates of competency to Africans and Asians (Mines and Works Act, 1911; Mines and Works Act, No. 27, 1956), 4) closes training opportunities for Africans and other non-Europeans (Apprenticeship Act, No. 37, 1944), 5) sets up "influx control" machinery and an "endorsement out" system for Africans (Bantu [Urban Areas] Consolidation Act of 1945) in conjunction with pass laws, i.e., reference books issued under the Bantu (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act, No. 67, 1952), 6) prohibits registered (hence, officially recognized) trade unions for African workers and denies them the right to strike possessed by white workers (Native Labour [Settlement of Disputes] Act No. 48 of 1953), 7) prohibits "mixed" trade unions, permitting them only in special cases and where the elected officers are white (Industrial Conciliation Act, 1956), 8) virtually eliminates the possibility of permanent residence for Africans in areas outside the Bantu lands (Bantu Laws Amendment Act, 1964), 9) allows the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development and the Minister of Labor to prohibit the employment of Blacks in any job in any area by any employer (Bantu Laws [Physical Planning] Amendment Act, 1970).
"I wish to emphasize that the government is always prepared to consider adjustments of labour policy within the basic framework of our society in order to promote efficiency and productivity. The rigidity of our labour laws is, in fact, often exaggerated."  (Dr. Diedericks, Minister of Finance, in budget speech quoted in Johannesburg Star, April 1, 1972)

Such legislation, and a myriad of other laws and regulations, suggest the kind of "change" experienced by the African worker in the 20th century and effectively negates standard assumptions regarding the positive relationship between an expanding economy and an improved standard of living for the majority of people whose labor has produced economic growth. Apartheid economics requires an entirely different set of assumptions, and these have not changed. Among the most basic is that which holds that the African is not a person with human rights when he or she works within the white economy; rather, he or she is a "unit of labor." Like a piece of machinery, this "unit of labor" is used or used up; it given perfunctory care to keep it functioning, is placed where it is needed; and discarded and moved out when it is no longer of use. A machine doesn't decide what work it would like to do or where it will work; it doesn't demand extra care or additional training; it has no rights. A Report rather, he or she is a "unit of labor." Like a piece of machinery, this "unit of labor" is used or used up; it given perfunctory care to keep it functioning, is placed where it is needed; and discarded and moved out when it is no longer of use. A machine doesn't decide what work it would like to do or where it will work; it doesn't demand extra care or additional training; it has no rights. A Report

The only sense in which job mobility applies to Africans in South Africa is a perverted one dictated by the apartheid system. Africans are indeed "mobile" in that they are forced to become migrant laborers in order to earn a living. First entrenched in the mining industry at the end of the 19th century, the migratory labor system is now deliberate public policy for African workers generally and reflects the need for cheap labor in the white-controlled economy and the parallel requirement that Africans be denied permanent residence in "white areas." The aim is that all Blacks in these areas will be migrants, i.e., living without their families and other dependents. By 1971, the proportion of economically active men living in single accommodation in the five main cities of South Africa was as follows: Cape Town, 85 per cent; Durban, 55 per cent; Johannesburg, 49 per cent; Pretoria, 47 per cent; Port Elizabeth, 20 per cent. As the Report of the Economic Commission (Spro-Cas), 1973, points out, "Migrant labour is perhaps the single most important distinguishing feature of the South African economy and is fundamentally evil in its operation." This system totally destroys African family life by forcing men and women to leave their homes and submit to the degrading and stark conditions of over-crowded single-sex hostels. Low wages insure perpetual poverty. One year contracts insure that the employers have little interest in investing in the training of the workers. In 1972, it was estimated that the migratory labor system affected the lives of at least 6,000,000 African men, women and children.

JOB MOBILITY

For African workers in apartheid society, the words can only suggest the cruellest of ironies. In the usual sense of horizontal and vertical mobility—the freedom of workers to seek employment where they choose and rise freely to higher level jobs as talent and initiative may dictate—they have no meaning. Pass laws and influx control regulations prohibit the free movement of African workers in order to monitor and restrict the percentage of Africans employed in any given urban industrialized area. A system of Tribal Labour Bureaux determines where an African can register as a "work seeker" and specifies where (what part of the country) he may in fact be employed. If there is no job available that calls for the particular skills, education or experience he or she has to offer, an African cannot decide to look elsewhere for an appropriate position. An African cannot quit a job to accept a better one. Work contracts are binding on the African worker for the period specified; deportation to a Bantustan faces an African who, for whatever reason, breaks a contract.

Similarly, vertical mobility is carefully restricted and controlled to protect white workers from competition and to insure that in every employment situation, Whites hold jobs that are ranked higher and paid better than those of the Africans.

The Black Sash, May, 1974)

According to the Secretary of Bantu Administration and Development, the migratory labor system is a perfectly appropriate way of dealing with "units of labor." "As at present, they [Africans working outside the Bantustans] need not always be the same Bantu. They will constitute a moving phalanx seeking their return to their respective Homelands, some more often than others." The essential institutions of South Africa's migratory
labor system are the mining compound, the Bantustan or reserve, and the segregated urban location. As such, they are the essential institutions of southern African labor exploitation.  

**JOB TRAINING**

The availability of job training for Africans, like every other aspect of their treatment in the labor force, has been, and is, determined solely by the requirements of the apartheid economy. These requirements are often in conflict. White employers in South Africa need more skilled and semi-skilled workers than the white population provides. But white workers want protection against competition from Africans and also want wages for work categorized as "white" to remain high. They have the power of the vote, and constitute a much greater proportion of the white electorate than the employers. The result is what has been described as a cautious "stop-go" approach on the part of both the South African government and industry. Modification of the industrial color bar and moves toward training of Africans must be carefully worked out to the benefit of whites. For example in the motor trade, training schemes in semi-skilled jobs for Africans were announced in 1974 "to relieve the crippling shortage of skilled mechanics." African repair-shop assistants were slated for more responsible work and higher pay. In effect, they were to be trained to do the least skilled parts of jobs held by Journeymen (white) in order to "free journeymen to handle skilled tasks only...." The pay of the African repair assistants was to be increased from $25.00 per week to about $29.00 per week, while that of the white mechanics would rise from $45.00 to $89.00 per week. Such job fragmentation and attendant pay increases for Whites characterize the South African approach to training for Africans.

In any case, adequate training does not insure Blacks employment for which they are qualified. For example, Johannesburg's Phoneefficiency African Business Training Centre graduates 30 to 40 African clerical workers each month who cannot find employment even though there are well over 6,000 clerical jobs available and no Whites to fill them. Phoneefficiency's principal feels that the public doesn't know that trained Africans are in fact available. But this is hardly the sole, and probably not the major problem. Employers don't want to provide separate toilet facilities required for black employees, and fear opposition from white staff. Moreover, a 1964 amendment to the Bantu (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945 prohibits employment agencies from handling African applicants; only the Labour Department and recognized agencies can place Blacks in employment.

A "**LIVING**" WAGE

To be a white wage-earner in South Africa is to be assured a "civilized" living standard for oneself and one's family. For the African worker, however, an entirely different standard has been devised. This is the Poverty Datum Line (PDL), a "scientific measurement of the rock-bottom income an ordinary African family needs to keep body and soul together." 12 Excluded from the PDL figures are expenditures on items such as furniture, household goods, medical and educational expenses, reading matter, postage, stationary, entertainment, telephone, savings and insurance, and money sent to dependent relatives. A marginally decent standard of living which includes these items is termed the Minimum Effective Level (MEL) and is calculated to be one and one-half times the PDL. Both these estimates must be constantly adjusted upward as the cost of living increases, and they differ in the various urban and rural areas of South Africa. The rising cost of food particularly affects Africans, as they must spend over 70 per cent of their incomes on this item alone.

A "**LIVING**" WAGE?

The average unskilled wage for an African man as of August, 1974, was $93.00 per month.

(Financial Mail, Aug. 9, 1974)

For the vast majority of South Africa's white employers, the PDL, if it is acknowledged at all, is not treated as a guide for the minimum wage to be paid African laborers, even though the figure, as calculated, represents a bare minimum living standard. Rather, it is viewed as a potential average wage figure. Most Africans receive wages substantially below the PDL, and African women are consistently paid even less than African men. The average pay for an African unskilled worker remains about $93.00 per month. 13 Despite some improvement in recent years stimulated by widespread strikes and labor unrest among African workers and to a lesser degree by foreign pressure such as that generated by Adam Raphael's devastating Guardian expose of the poverty wages paid by British companies in South Africa published in early 1973, moreover, white-black wage gap remains essentially the same, while in the case of white executives, a recently reported wage increase to keep pace with inflation amounts to more than three times the total average earnings of an unskilled African worker. 14

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"Lunch" being served to African workers
White employers who wish to justify paying less than PDL wages commonly argue 1) that the families of Africans working in urban areas provide for themselves in the Bantustans—an assumption that conveniently ignores the reality of poverty, overpopulation, malnutrition and unemployment in the Bantustan areas; 2) that African families tend to have more than one wage earner—which, as a result of dire necessity, is indeed often the case; 3) that rural living costs are lower—which is often not true due to higher transport costs and higher food prices; 4) that the PDL figure is based on a family of 5 or 6, when it might be smaller—or, one might add, larger; 5) that Africans have lower “nutritional needs” than whites—an assumption with racist content that hardly needs comment; and finally, 6) that many African workers are “single”—a reflection of the white acceptance of the migrant labor system which treats Africans as “single” even when they have families, and ignores the fact that some workers might be single precisely because they can’t afford to support a wife and family. The all-white Wage Board which recommends minimum wages for Africans under orders from the Minister of Labor invariably echoes such assumptions to justify setting minimums below the PDL.

While Africans working in the major industrial centers typically earn less than the established PDL figures for the area, those who must work in the so-called “border industries” and in towns designated as “growth points” under the Government’s decentralization program earn “wages far below the breadline...” Decentralization, apartheid’s answer to the “problem” of large concentrations of African workers in the established urban industrial areas, requires that expansion and the building of new plants and factories take place elsewhere. For the white industrialist who participates, the major incentive is even cheaper black labor costs than he is accustomed to, and the availability of a black work force unlikely to complain of poverty wages, forced over-time, and lack of workers’ rights for fear of dismissal.

**The average wage for an African man at Babalegi (a “growth point” just inside the Bophutha Twana Bantustan) was $44.00 per month as of December, 1974.** (Financial Mail, Dec. 13, 1974)

“...if Blacks had legal bargaining powers the PDL might be redundant. Their lack of it means that a vital component is missing from decision-making in South Africa.” (Financial Mail, April 5, 1974)
Throughout the world, workers have learned that effective organization is the key to their bargaining position as a vis-à-vis employers. Not surprisingly, the South African Government is determined to prevent African workers from utilizing this key. African trade unions are not recognized and are deprived of the right to negotiate and bargain on behalf of their members. Instead, African workers are permitted, through the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act, to participate in either Liaison Committees (with up to one half of the members, including the chairman, to be appointed by the employer) or Works Committees, which can be set up in any factory where a liaison committee does not exist, and where more than twenty black workers are employed. A Works Committee can only represent workers within a specific factory. Divide and rule is here, as in all other aspects of South African legislation concerning Blacks, the central purpose.

"Whites, whether employers or not, really have no idea what the Black man is thinking." (Financial Mail, Feb. 16, 1973)

To further emasculate African workers, the Government deprives them of the right to strike except under certain extremely limited conditions. But as has been demonstrated since early in 1973, prohibiting strikes has not prevented African workers from striking. In an 18 month period up to June, 1974, there were no less than 300 strikes, and in 281 cases, there was no works committee to act as a liaison between workers and employers. Since that time, strikes by African workers in the factories and mines, in the latter case leading to scores of tragic deaths, have continued. Both the Government and major industrialists are now aware that the absence of "proper channels of communication" can be as debilitating for employers and for the economy as it is for the African workers themselves. The problem for white South Africa is to find the means to institutionalize confrontation by providing "channels of communication" acceptable to African workers while continuing to deny them any legal rights and power within the South African economic system.

Change within the limits suggested can be expected, and the position of African workers in South Africa may therefore improve somewhat in the context of the present economic and political structure; but change in the real sense—change that provides the African with meaningful control over his own labor—will require no less than the dismantling of the entire apartheid system.

"...it is no use having a well-trained army on South Africa's borders if the Government allows the labour position to deteriorate." (Senator Eric Winter, quoted in Johannesburg Star, Oct. 12, 1974)

NOTES
1 A. Horner, "Black Pay and Productivity in South Africa," S.A. IRR, Sept., 1972, Table 2, p. 3.
6 Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, Hansard No. 1, Col. 298, 3 Feb., 1972, cited in Die Swart Serp, Maart, 1972.
9 Quoted in Financial Mail, Sept., 1972.
11 South African Digest, July 26, 1974.
12 Financial Mail, April 5, 1974.
13 Financial Mail, Oct. 11, 1974. In Durban, for example, this wage would be $46.00 less than the accepted PDL calculation of $59.00 per month.
15 Financial Mail, April 5, 1974, raises these points for critical analysis.
16 See, for example, the Financial Mail, May 18, 1973.
17 Johannesburg Star, June 8, 1974.
18 Financial Mail, Dec. 13, 1974. At Baballego, a growth point just outside the Bophuthatswana bantustan, the average wage was reported to be roughly $11.00 per week. Moreover, it was found that three-quarters of the workers surveyed directly were actually earning less than that "average."

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