

ACOA fact sheets

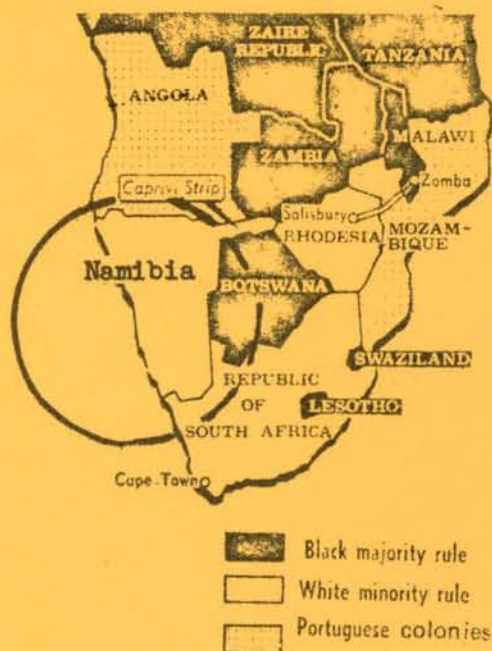
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STRIKE IN NAMIBIA

Since the middle of December, striking Namibian (South West African) contract workers, now numbering more than 12,000, have brought the crucial mining industry there to a near standstill. One of the focal points of the strike is the Tsumeb mining operations, jointly controlled by two U.S. companies, American Metal Climax and Newmont Mining. The strike has also spread to service trades, construction, and other occupations.

A Washington Post article (1/4/72) by Stanley Uys writing from Capetown reports that the continuing strike poses a major challenge to the South African regime in Namibia, which was declared illegal in an International Court opinion last June.

Namibia is a mineral-rich country (more than 50% of the economy is based on mining). But the mining companies there, including American Metal Climax and Newmont, are stripping the country of its natural wealth, using the captive African population to do it, under the brutal contract labor system enforced by the South Africans.

Namibians have no political rights in their own country; all movement and work is controlled by the South African occupiers. The Ovambo contract workers are confined by South Africa to a "native reserve" on the northern border, and allowed

out only as contract labor. They have no choice of jobs or say in determining wages, working and living conditions, and are confined in segregated barrack-like compounds when on contract. To strike or otherwise break contract is a crime.

There is a long history of Namibian resistance to South African domination, and SWAPO (the South West African Peoples Organization) has organized guerrilla operations against the South African forces in Namibia. Last September, Chief Clement Kapuuo of the Hereros in Namibia started legal action in London, based on the International Court's opinion, to prevent further exploitation of Namibia's mineral resources by international corporations without the consent of the people of Namibia.

Now the widespread defiance of the slave labor system by contract workers throughout the country in the face of overwhelming South African force is an extraordinary act which shows how completely the Namibians reject the life South Africa has forced upon them. The strike has been so effective (South Africa has been unable to find strike-breakers) that South African authorities fear the strike may spread to the oppressed workers in South Africa.

How The Strike Spread

The press in Windhoek, the capital, reported on December 10 that Walvis Bay workers planned to strike on December 14 and had written to ask others to join them. Windhoek proved to be the center of action when 5,200 workers struck on December 13. They included refuse collectors, porters, hotel and airport workers and miscellaneous workers. The Walvis Bay action started with 475 strikers, but additional workers were reported out after payday. As the strike spread to the mines, the U.S.-owned Tsumeb mine, largest copper producer in the territory, was struck by nearly 4,000 workers. A white skeleton staff has kept the copper smelter open on a nominal basis but the lead smelter closed. Tsumeb's Kombat mine, with 800 workers, also closed completely. At Berg Aukas, 900 workers closed the lead and vanadium mine; at Klein Aub copper mine, 458 of 640 struck; at Swakopmund, 72. Later in the month, workers closed the new Rosh Pinah tin mine.

The latest news is that the strike has now spread to one of the largest diamond mines in the world, the DeBeer's controlled Consolidated Diamond Mine at Oranjemund, a symbol of the mineral wealth that enriches white South Africa, where 250 workers have walked out.

Smaller strikes were reported in the press only if some special feature warranted, and the full count may never be known. For instance, a construction gang working on a post office refused to move to its next scheduled job at a tin mine. A cook on a farm near Grootfontein heard about the strike on the radio and told the eight other farm workers. All struck and the farmer took them before a magistrate. It is reported that two were returned to Ovamboland as "agitators," and the others were beaten, but six still refused to return to work.

Strikers everywhere protested against the contract-labor system. The protest in some places was directed also against living conditions and low wages. At Berg Aukas the demand for a \$2.80 a day wage was reported. At a meeting in Walvis Bay, strikers told the South African-appointed chief Native Affairs Commissioner

that they were protesting the statement of the Commissioner General of the Northern Native Territories that workers freely accepted the contract-labor system because they signed up freely.

Wide popular support is being given to the strikers. Live-in domestic servants in Windhoek were found to be hiding strike "agitators" and house owners were warned by the City Council that they were liable and should check their homes. SWAPO reported from London the dismissal of African police in Windhoek and Walvis Bay for collaboration with the strikers. They also reported that the Ukwavama tribe in Ovamboland was reported to be stopping Ovambo workers from Angola at the border. The normal influx of 500-600 workers twice a week from Ovamboland to the south was stopped altogether by an official ban as well as the strike. Efforts of both tribal and governmental authorities to get African strikebreakers met with almost complete failure. The one verified case was of 90 Kavango workers who replaced 72 school children who had been paid \$2.80 a day to scab as refuse collectors in Windhoek. The use of convict labor has been reported.

When the strike erupted in Windhoek, the authorities sent to South Africa for police reinforcements, sealed off the workers' compound and surrounded it with police. Thus the press report that the strikers returned to Ovamboland (in special trains, taking a thousand a day) voluntarily does not convey the police pressure applied. SWAPO reported that the workers were being taken north and placed in restricted areas for security screening. Of forty Ovambo strikers arrested in Windhoek early in the strike, most were sentenced to two months but actually sent back to Ovamboland; their offenses were failure to possess or to produce proper identification and/or permits, or failure to return to Ovamboland with the others. On December 29, 12 Ovambo and one Coloured were charged in Windhoek with violence, threats, and intimidation in encouraging others to strike and and they have been denied bail.

Although meetings were held between South African government officials, Ovambo headmen, and strikers in Walvis Bay and Windhoek, these were only to present strikers with the ultimatum of return to work or return north to Ovamboland. Strikers were told of a meeting to be held in February between Ovambo headmen and SWANLA (the South-West African Labor Association), the employers' group, with the Commissioner General of Northern Native Territories as chairman. Newmont Mining, which runs the Tlokweng mine, stated that it would enter negotiations with South Africa, SWANLA, and Ovambo chiefs. (Chiefs or headmen hold office at the pleasure of the South African occupiers and are paid by government.)

On December 29, M.C. Botha, South Africa's Minister of Bantu (African) Administration and Development, met with South West African Administrators, mining Executives, and industrialists. He then announced that the South African occupiers would work to revise the contract-labor system in Namibia. This may implement a change already under discussion to replace SWANLA by a group of chiefs. Since there would undoubtedly be a parallel group of employers to deal with such a new structure, the change would be more apparent than real. In no case is there even a suggestion to negotiate with workers themselves or representatives responsible to them.

The Contract-Labor System

The movement of Africans within Namibia is tightly controlled by the South African occupation forces. Two-thirds of the country, including cities, ports, mines, transportation and communication facilities, is now a "white" area" although there are African enclaves within it. If South African occupation continues, the Africans will be forced into twelve so-called "homelands" including about half the less desirable land. Ovamboland is the first of these to be established. Africans on these reserves may neither leave nor enter without a permit from South African forces and they may not travel outside without a pass issued by an employer or a magistrate.

There are 350,000 Ovambo, 45 per cent of the Namibian population (which is 85% African). Ovamboland is an undeveloped area with a subsistence agricultural economy and few jobs, and the Ovambo must pay taxes in money. Thus many Ovambo are forced to find jobs outside, and work may be secured only through the South West African Native Labour Association on which the major employers are represented. 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 area, 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.

Tsumeb Corporation

United States involvement in Namibia is most clear in the case of the Tsumeb Corporation, although other U.S. firms also operate under the contract-labor system. The Tsumeb mine was opened in 1908 by German capital. In 1946 a predecessor of American Metal Climax acquired it from the Custodian of Enemy Property. Now AMAX and Newmont Mining Corporation each hold 29 per cent interest 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; 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."

South Africa, Namibia, and the United Nations

The United Nations revoked South Africa's mandate (allocated by the League of Nations after World War I) over South West Africa in 1966 because of maladministration. On June 21, 1971, the International Court of Justice stated that the continued presence of South Africa in South West Africa is illegal. It held that member states of the United Nations are obliged to recognize the illegality of the South African presence; recognize the invalidity of its acts on behalf of or concerning Namibia; and refrain from acts and dealings implying recognition or lending support or assistance to South Africa's presence and administration in Namibia. The U.S. government has accepted the Court's opinion.

Consequently, grants and concessions in Namibia derived from the South African government, including the South African territorial administration there, are invalid; this covers most U.S. mining operations and all mineral exploration ventures. Products obtained in or removed from Namibia under invalid claims are held or transferred illegally. South African apartheid, racist, and anti-labor laws in Namibia are likewise invalid and, incidentally, a direct contradiction of the original mandate terms. Taxes ought not to be paid to the illegal South African government or the territorial administration it supports, yet in 1969, Tsumeb paid out \$9.58 million in taxes.

Support for the Namibian Strikers

As the strike and the Namibian struggle for freedom continue, support from the U.S. is needed, and we hope you can help. Earmarked contributions can be made to the Africa Defense & Aid Fund of ACOA. And aid can be sent directly to the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), P.O. Box 2603, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Further, we urge you to:

1) Communicate with American Metal Climax (1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020) and the Newmont Mining Corporation (300 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022) calling on them to:

- * Stop using the contract labor system;
- * Negotiate directly with the Namibian workers on terms of work; and
- * Stop paying taxes to the illegal South African authorities;

2) Call on the Administration to implement the International Court opinion, which it has verbally accepted. A central aspect of implementation would be government action to stop U.S. companies in Namibia from paying taxes to the illegal South African regime there;

3) Support stockholder actions to raise the issue of U.S. corporate policy in Namibia at annual stockholder meetings in the spring. Please let us know if you or organizations that you are affiliated with hold stock in AMAX or Newmont.

Contact ACOA, 164 Madison Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10016, telephone (212) 532-2700 for more information.

***** LATE NEWS: A BBC press survey (1/5/72) quotes a London Times report on the continuing strike in Namibia: "The employers have crudely said that they hope the men will be starved into returning, though, as people more or less starve in Ovamboland anyway, belts may be kept tight for longer than the authorities expect.... They are keeping their disputed country in the limelight, demonstrating how far they are serfs in their own homeland." (our emphasis)

Namibia

