

# COLOUR v. CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICA

By M. G. DESAI

**T**O-DAY, South Africa is perhaps the biggest menace to the growing unity of the world's workers. For representing, as it does, the meeting ground of races from all parts of the world, it is just here that racial divisions among the workers are most pronounced. With incredible short-sightedness the White workers of the Union are joining hands with the capitalists to beat back the Africans and Asiatics into a state of semi-slavery. In face of the monumental selfishness on the part of the White workers in South Africa itself, the long distance fraternal greetings of the European trade unionists are apt to sound as hypocritical to the dusky masses of the East as the sentimental cant of the missionaries with which they have been so long familiar.

It is significant that South Africa should be taking a lead in forcing the coloured races into economic serfdom and political helotry. Throughout the last century and more, she has been perfecting the science of turning men into robots. As late as 1834, the Boer farmers were battenning on the labour of the negroes and the Malayas bought from the English slave-dealers.

With the abolition of slavery, rapid progress in farming and industry met with a difficulty. The Bantu and Hottentot tribes, secure on their communal lands in the hinterland, could not be easily induced to work for others and the White workers would not remain long in service in view of the easy accessibility of land. It was, therefore, thought necessary to introduce labour that would have nothing to fall back upon. Special recruiting agencies were established to enlist negroes from Central Africa, and with the help of the obliging Indian Government, poor ignorant agricultural workers from India were trapped into indentured labour—periodic slavery. Besides this outside labour the South African natives were also gradually squeezed out of their ever narrowing reservations and forced to migrate to the mines and the towns to sell their labour to the Whites. The comparatively more skilled Indian

workers were employed in the development of the tea, tobacco, and sugar industry, and in railway construction ; while the Africans were harnessed to the more strenuous work in the coal, gold, and diamond mines.

The Indians were brought out on the clearest understanding that when they had served their five years' indenture, they would be treated as free men ; and if they preferred to relinquish their right to the free return passage, they would be given land of a corresponding value. But the colonists soon began to feel that a free Indian was not as desirable as an Indian coolie. So the Municipalities started placing restrictions on their trading activities ; and a heavy tax was imposed on all free Indians who would not re-indenture themselves. In the mining areas, the African workers were faring much worse. They were doing the deeper underground work for ridiculously low wages. And, even when off duty, they were not free, but were locked up like pigs into terribly insanitary compounds. The rate of mortality has been fearfully high, especially from phthisis and pneumonia. During the Boer war, these carefully built-up colonies of semi-slaves were scattered. Hence in 1904-5, some 50,000 indentured Chinese workers were introduced on the Rand. But after having exploited them for some six years, all of them were repatriated in 1910. The Indian experience had taught the colonists not to take any risks.

The policy of the employers has been to play one section of workers against another—the skilled half-castes against the whites ; the semi-skilled Indians and Africans against the half-castes and the " Poor Whites " ; and African workers from outside the Union against the natives. The White workers, if they had been wise, would have retaliated by taking a lead in organising all-inclusive Unions. But in the colonies, race hatred has been sublimated under high auspices into a Christian cult. And the White workers have followed an opportunist selfish policy with disastrous results even to themselves. It will be remembered how in 1922 the White workers on the Gold Reef struck as a protest against the admission of natives to semi-skilled work and the consequent reduction of the wages of the Whites. It soon developed into a general strike so far as the White workers were concerned. There were frequent collisions between the strikers and the police and

military leading to violence. But while these stirring things were happening, the vast masses of native workers were compelled to remain idle spectators. In the end martial law was declared, the strikers suppressed with bloodshed and the Whites had to resume work on the employers' terms, as far as work was available, and the recognition of their Federation was withdrawn.

South African industries are organised on a basis of an excessively large amount of cheap unskilled labour in relation to the skilled workers. There are in general eight natives to one European. In all the mines, for instance, there were 31,000 Europeans to 272,000 native workers in 1924. The White miner on the average gets £335 annually, while the native gets £27. So far as skilled work is concerned there is as yet no serious competition between the White and the coloured. The real competition is for semi-skilled work, and that, too, generally with the "Poor White" Boers, who have been flocking to the industrial areas from agricultural parts. With the introduction of railways, the Boer farmers, with their primitive methods of agriculture based on cheap land and cheap labour, had to face the fierce competition of the world market; and a process of elimination of inefficients set in. It is from the ranks of the latter that the Poor Whites of the city slums are recruited. In 1921, they numbered 120,000. It is largely for their benefit that the new legislation is being enacted.

By the Class Areas Bill and the Colour Bar Bill, and other kindred legislation, what is proposed in effect is a thorough-going segregation of all Asiatics<sup>1</sup> and Africans<sup>2</sup> in the Union—territorially, industrially, and politically. In rural areas, they will be crammed into certain narrow reservations. In the cities, the necessary number of workers will have to reside in well-defined slums. It will not be open to them to learn or engage in any skilled or semi-skilled work. No Indian or African can be so much as a lift-boy or chauffeur. If they would have to bore a well or run a tractor on their land, they will have to engage a White. They cannot aspire to any political rights. They are graciously allowed the privilege of electing a small number of Whites to represent them in the Union Parliament. The worst conditions in the worst parts of the Union at present in existence would thus be standardised throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> 165,731

<sup>2</sup> 4,697,913

Union. Especially in the Cape Province, for instance, the coloured races had so far practically been on a footing of equality with Whites; but all that is to go. In view of the existing pressure on land in Native reservations and consequent drift to towns and in view of the congested condition of the 30 miles coastal belt in Natal to which Indians are to be confined, these restrictive proposals are evidently in effect a device to swell the ranks of the landless proletariat, and to further beat down the already low wages of the unskilled coloured workers.

The half-castes are exempted but the Asiatics, mainly Indians, are deliberately classed with the natives. The reasons for this special animus against Indians, who number at present 160,000, are obvious. Firstly, they fraternize with the natives. Secondly, their ranks have also been strengthened by the prosperous Indian merchants who followed in the wake of the Indian workers. The Whites object to the competition of this Indian trading class, who are moreover sufficiently influential to secure wide-spread attention to their grievances in India and elsewhere. After Gandhi's passive resistance campaign a compromise was patched up in 1913, and repeatedly confirmed at Imperial Conferences, providing that the lot of the already domiciled Indians should at least be improved, in return for which South Africa should be allowed to close its doors against further entry of free Indians. But as soon as the war was over, things have again been made too hot for Indians, and already 35,000 Indians have been turned out of S. Africa and dumped into India. This is not re-patriation but depatriation, because 70 per cent. of the South African Indians were born and brought up in the colony.

Among the Natives, the old tribal traditions of implicit obedience to the headman—in pay of the Government—are fast breaking down; and there is a rapid approximation to modern standards. Primary education is becoming general. In 1907, they started a college for higher education. The workers in the industrial areas are becoming class-conscious. Witness, for instance, the splendid strike of 71,000 native workers employed on the Rand in 1920. They have organised themselves politically and industrially into the S.A. Native National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union. The trouble at

Bloemfontein last April leading to shooting and the boycott of the Prince's visit are evidences of their rising temper. At their last congress they have resolved to embark upon a passive resistance campaign if the proposed legislation be passed.

The following extract from the secretary's report to the Fifth Congress of the Native Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union is significant of the new spirit among the African workers.

We are aiming at the building up in Africa of a National Labour Organisation of the aboriginals, through which we shall break the wall of White autocracy and Capitalism. We shall not rest there. We shall open the gates of the Houses of Legislature now under the control of the White Oligarchy and from their steps we shall claim equality of purpose with the workers of the world to overthrow Capitalism and usher in a Co-operative Commonwealth—a system of government which is not foreign to the aboriginals of Africa.

What is the motive behind the White policy of enforcing racial subjection? That policy is, of course, intended to ensure the supremacy as an exploiting race of the tiny minority, one and a-half millions in all, of the White community. The ostensible justification for it, however, that is put forward is the necessity for preventing the racial purity of this minority from being submerged.

This racial bogey must be squarely faced by the workers if international unity is to be more than a dream. For the racial problem of South Africa is only an epitome of the whole racial problem throughout the world. Everywhere European Imperialism has not only transferred large sections of the European population to other continents, but also scattered vast masses of other races, helter-skelter, over the globe.

In the South African Union as elsewhere, permutations and combinations—between the Dutch, the British, the Jews, the "Poor Whites," the Hottentots, the Kaffirs, the Negroes, the Indians, the Malayans, the Arabs, the Chinese—have been in continuous development behind the transparent curtains of bourgeois respectability and racial purity. The number of half-castes is three to four times the entire Asiatic population.

Race fusion leads to decadence, say the purists and pseudo-scientists, and point to the position of half-castes the world over. Disowned by Westerners and despised by Orientals, it is true that the half-caste has on the whole been in unenviable plight. But

there is not a shred of evidence to prove that there is anything biologically wrong with him. It is the social forces that have been against him. In any case, any attempt at this hour to preserve the phantom of race purity by the erection of an intricate caste system will prove as futile and suicidal as the caste system in India. With the assertion of economic and political freedom by the coloured races, and the emancipation of women, there is likely to be a still greater admixture of races.

It is not whiteness, but civilisation that should be the goal of South Africa and similar countries. If the White colonists care only for their racial purity, let them remove themselves from countries where they are not the rightful inhabitants. But if, in order ostensibly to preserve their racial purity but really to maintain the race dominance of one-sixth of the population, they persist in the policy of attempting to separate and lock up the overwhelming majority of the people like cattle in the kraals, then let them beware for they are building their whited sepulchres on the slopes of a rumbling volcano.