

THE NORTHFIELD COLLIERY STRIKE DECISION.

The action of the African National Congress has been called forth by the very heavy sentences that were imposed on the men involved in the recent strike in the Northfield Colliery in Natal and the negative effect of the legal decision with regard to ameliorating the conditions which gave rise to the strike and acts of violence on the part of these men.

The African National Congress has not come forward because of any complaint about the competence of the presiding judicial officer in this case because Congress ^{has come to} believes in the efficiency and high mindedness of the judges in handling trial and actions where Africans are involved. Congress, however, does wish to draw the attention of the Minister to the adverse comment of the presiding judge on the bad conditions of the African labourers in the said coal mines and to the fact that if these men were legally represented there would have been something said for them in mitigation. To us the sentences imposed on the men seem very heavy in the light of the evidence disclosed at the trial.

The complaints of the men were about food, sleeping accommodation, low wages and exploitation by the concession store, bullying by the Induna, the difficulty of lodging their complaints, etc. We doubt whether the ordinary courts where mere points of law are considered and the charge abstracted from the surrounding material conditions are the proper instruments for ^{correcting} adjusting industrial disputes. Hence the decision of the Northfield Colliery disputes is negative as it does not give the men any relief in the things they were complaining about.

The position might have been different if the case had been referred to a properly constituted Industrial Court if such there be where points of law and economic relations could be decided upon and be immediately operative in the industrial field in the same way as a Wage Board determination. In the absence of such a court, Congress feels that it is for the Government to bring about better conditions in the coal mines and in other industrial establishments.

Congress like the Government regards strikes as detrimental to the country's war effort, but if a maximum war effort is to be brought about in order to win the war it is necessary for the Government to bring about legislation which will better the conditions ^{and wages} of the African labourers and in the course of strike.

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