

F. A. W. LUCAS

NATIVE ECONOMIC COMMISSION.  
NATURELLE EKONOMIESE KOMMISSIE.

Sitting at

Capetown  
April 24<sup>th</sup> 1931.

Berman

Feberer

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

(Pages 6936-7039.)

G. H. Ribbink (pp. 6936-6986.)

H. Walker (pp. 6995-7309.)

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NATIVE ECONOMIC COMMISSION

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CAPE TOWN 24th APRIL 1931 9.30 A.M.

NINETIETH PUBLIC SITTING

PRESENT:

Dr. J. E. Holloway, (Chairman),

Major W. H. Anderson,  
Dr. H. C. M. Fourie,  
Mr. F. A. W. Lucas, K.C.,

Mr. A. M. Mostert,  
Dr. A. W. Roberts,  
Senator P. W. le Roux van  
Niekerk,

Mr. C. Faye, (Secretary).

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MR. AARON ZALMAN BERMAN, Public Accountant,

called and examined:

CHAIRMAN: Will you please tell us what you have to say ?- After very considerable study of Native affairs in the Cape, I came to the conclusion that it was very difficult, if at all possible, to get some reliable information and full understanding of the subject if viewed as something entirely different from the economic position of the community among whom the Natives have now settled and live together. If viewed as part of the whole structure, one may get an intelligent conception of both the problem and any suggested solution, but if viewed entirely separately, divorced from the rest of the community, one will neither understand the problem nor find any solution. It is a popular misconception that trade unionism or labour organizations among Europeans are centuries old,

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and that among Natives they are just beginning to manifest themselves. It would appear that trade unionism in South Africa is probably 50 years old and in the first 20 years of its existence, it was found that there were but a ~~xxx~~ few isolated unions with a membership of a few hundred. The Native followed the European mode of organization some 15 years ago.

It is hardly conceivable that it could have been otherwise. Men working side by side will naturally look to one another for the best manner in which to protect their interests and to organize for that purpose, but to my mind the formation of the first Native trade union in Cape Town or in South Africa, for that matter, will give us an excellent illustration as to how closely the Native follows the European mode of organization and as to how closely he follows European modes of self protection.

I do not think it is known at all that the first trades union of Natives in the Cape came into being as a result of an appeal by the Cape Federation of Trades for some steps on the part of workers in the town to protect the country against export of its foodstuffs overseas. This was in 1919, and the cost of living at the time was rising daily and, <sup>spite</sup> instead of the claim that we did not have enough foodstuffs for the requirements of the country, export of our foodstuffs was going on apace.

The Cape Federation of Trades had no adherence either at the Docks or at the Railways and at that time the ~~xxxx~~ nucleus of a trade union among Dock labourers had already come into being. Appeal was made to all workers to use their influence and whatever power they had to put a stop to the continuous export of foodstuffs that was going on.

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The response to this came from the Dock, labourers of Cape Town and the numbers given variously as 5,000 or 8,000 struck work. These men refused to let ships at the Docks load foodstuffs. The Federation of Trades was staggered at the response to its appeal. I do not know whether they realised the extent to which things were taken literally by the Natives.

Well, the Federation found itself faced with the task of feeding thousands of Natives who were thrown out of work and were starving. The strike was settled and the I.C.U. came into being and the movement spread throughout the country.

It is quite easy to start a union which the Natives would join, but it is very difficult to keep it going. It is difficult to keep a trades union going which has to follow orthodox European lines and at the same time is unable, as a result of the wagg way in which it finds itself separated from the various groups belonging to the same union, to keep alive such an organization.

We find that all types of trade unionism are primarily based on craft lines. Originally, all trade unions were on craft lines. In the same industry, we find various men organized among their occupations. There were over 40 different unions in the engineering trade in Britain, fitters, turners, ironboulders and other sections. Eventually, the tendency came into being for the unions to amalgamate on the lines of industry instead of on the lines of craft and it is very interesting to bear this in mind. Instead of there being unions for masons, bricklayers, painters and electricians, the tendency today is to organize them on the basis of industry

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and those who are engaged in industry will be found in one union.

But this cannot be applied to Natives or general workers. You find this position in regard to Native labourers, -- the Native labour, the unskilled work which he is doing, is such that today he is working in a quarry and tomorrow in a shop, and the next day you find him engaged on building operations and the week after you find him working in the garden. It is difficult to keep in touch with them, or to keep any union to which he may belong intact when the nature of the work is such that one may eventually have to lose touch with him. And although, in every instance, when the I.C.U. was formed, it had a huge membership in a very short time, it was difficult to keep the unions alive, not because the Native is not ready for industrial organization, but because the form of his organization is such that we cannot keep them together.

If we compare the organization of the Natives here to the other trades union organizations in other parts of the world where the same type of labour is organized, you find the same phenomena. Trade unions are brought into being in a week or in a month and they lose their membership next month. As some other form of labour organization will have to be found, which will meet the requirements of the Natives and enable them, if they are working in different spheres, to retain their membership or allegiance to the union, careful consideration of the subject is essential.

That such an organization is necessary, I need hardly say. All our protective forms of labour legislation can generally be placed into two sections, the one which encourages

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organization and provides the machinery to work through that organization and with that organization, and another form which is meant for those who, by reason of their inability to organize, are unable to look after themselves and their interests. As to the first one, the Native is unable to take advantage of that. Unfortunately, the Native has not ~~yet~~ ~~of~~ any assistance there yet, - I am now referring to the Wage Act, - and he is not likely to get any assistance so long as the present condition remains.

We had in the Cape a number of unions organized. The Natives comprised 90 to 95% of the members of those unions, but it must be understood that these unions are not purely Native, inasmuch as the Coloured employees in the same particular industries, are organized with them. And I want to say at this stage that, as far as the Cape trade unions are concerned, and there are no exceptions, there is not the slightest prejudice or bias against the Natives trade unions.

SENATOR VAN NIEKERK: Not in one organization? - Not in one. There is not one organization in which Natives are not accepted if they are allowed to work in the industry.

In the same organization? - Yes, in the same organizations, and sitting at the same table, and there is no prejudice whatever against them. There was. Fifteen years ago, there was a struggle and the struggle was not directly as between the Natives and the Europeans, but between the Coloured and the Europeans. Let me say that the Native entered trade unionism without any struggle whatever and he was accepted in the same way as the Coloured man, but there

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was a struggle on the part of the Coloured man to enter trade unionism, although this has gradually disappeared.

DR. ROBERTS: Can you tell us why it has disappeared? I shall try to give you the history. In some industries, the Coloured men organized separately. Take the building trade, for instance. Only a few years ago we had two bricklayers' unions, the one was an European union and the other a Coloured union; the one was called "Bricklayers' Union No.1" and the other "Bricklayers' Union No.2," and whenever wages were fixed and an agreement made with the employers, the two unions were consulted, and whatever wage was fixed for Bricklayers' Union No.1, a lower wage was fixed for No.2.

It is interesting to note that No.2 always accepted 2d or 3d per hour less, until the stupidity of it became obvious, even to the most reactionary members of the union, because the members of No.2 Bricklayers' Union were always employed, while the others were out of work, so, in order to protect the European bricklayers, the Union found it necessary to abolish Bricklayers' Union No.2, and to take its members into the Union.

There was a great deal of political friction about that. Some of the Coloured bricklayers opposed the union on political grounds. Some Coloured labourers said, "If the White man takes 2/-, you must take 1/10d or 1/11d, or 1/8d and so on. If you do not do so, you will not get a job." Curiously enough, it was to the interest of the White workers that the fusion came about, and the Coloured men realised it, and it was a gesture of sacrifice on the part of the Coloured men when the amalgamation actually took place.



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Now, when the Natives came in, they were accepted without a struggle. On the Executive of the Cape Federation of Trades, there are Natives and Coloured men. We had a Coloured Vice-President for many years. Recently, we had an acquisition in the shape of four unions which were previously organized on their own and federated as such.

It would be difficult for people who are not acquainted with conditions in the Cape, to realise what a welcome these four semi-Native ---- they are not exclusively Native --- what a welcome they had from the Federation. Well, they were assured of every support and loyalty and they were referred to as brothers, which is a term usually employed in trade union circles. You hear of Brother Soand-so and So-and-so.

Two of their men were immediately placed on the Executive. Now, these four unions represent the quarry-workers of the Union, which is almost exclusively Native, the laundry-workers' union, which is predominantly Native, so far as the male workers are concerned, and Coloured so far as the female workers are concerned; and then there is the stevedores' union, which is Coloured and Native, I think they are representative of every race and every mixture one can imagine; and then finally the general workers' union which has not been functioning too well, owing to various reasons.

CHAIRMAN: What is the chief racial creed in the stevedores' union ?- It is always changing, but it is predominantly Native ---- no, it would be about half Native and half Coloured.

I am referring to the union now ?- Yes.

Is that union a true indication of the whole occupation

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--- that is to say, are the stevedores about half Natives and half Coloured ?- I do not quite follow.

MR. LUCAS: Would you say that it is 50/50 outside the union ?- I see; the membership would reflect the general proportion of the racial groups in the industry. The only thing that would permeate, that would unite the various Native workers in town, would be of such a general nature that it could be almost done by legislation. The only thing they have in common are wages and hours, and I want to stress this point. It may seem to an outsider that these two factors are the sole factors which interest the trade unions. You will find some trade unions working on an agreement, extending it for five years, where wages and hours are laid down as something stationary, and yet the unions are very active and busy. Hours and wages form only a small part of the activities of an union, but owing to the reasons which I have set out, which govern Native employment, these would be the only two things which the various Native workers have in common.

Now that brings us to the question of a basic minimum wage for Natives. We have not had anything like it in South Africa, but in view of the difficulty that surrounds organization of Natives in the urban areas, it might be necessary for a basic minimum wage to be fixed by law, either through the Wages Board or in some other way. You will not get Natives to improve their conditions as far as hours and wages are concerned, through organization under present conditions.

DR. ROBERTS: Why not; what makes you say that ?-

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Well, because they cannot organize. You may organize them for a day but, as I have explained, tomorrow they are gone. It comes to this, that the mobile nature of their work is such that you cannot hold them in a union. Men organized in shops you will find have strong unions and they have their own shop stewards. You do not communicate with the men over the telephone, because they have no telephone for one thing, and they do not live for a long time in the same place, they shift about. If you want to get into touch with them, you have to do so through their shop steward.

In the printing trade, you have Fathers of the Chapel. Seeing that you cannot have something like that with the Native workers, you have to find some other means of stabilising matters. I have been trying to explain that point. You have heard evidence, not only here but elsewhere, that their pay is bad. You need not come to me to hear that, it is common knowledge. It is another curious phenomenon that, while a Native employed in a skilled trade is not only allowed to get into union, but is compelled to join up; the Native labourer working in the same industry is not organized and is not accepted in the union.

To illustrate to you the gulf that separates the Cape mentality from the Transvaal mentality so far as Coloured is concerned, you will be surprised to hear that ~~xx~~ a Native who works on a building or in a furniture shop or in some other kind of factory would be prevented from working if he were not prepared to join the union. That is a very important point.

SENATOR VAN NIEKERK: You say that that is so here in the Cape? - Yes. I may tell you that we have Coloured

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members sitting on an executive union which is predominantly White. We have a Chairman, a Coloured Chairman of a Union in the Furniture Industry in Cape Town where the majority of the men, at one time at anyrate, were White.

CHAIRMAN: What is the position now? - He is still Chairman.

Yes; but what is the position in regard to the membership now? - The membership is becoming more Coloured.

Is it predominantly Coloured now? - Almost so; of course, the word "predominant" is rather vague. There are more Coloured than White. It is another thing that we must take notice of. For years and years there has been a feeling abroad that it was necessary to co-operate on national lines, that is to say, the North and South should come together, but only a few years ago this was found to be impossible on the ground of colour. When the first invitation from the North was received here many years ago, to send delegates to the Conference, the first thing the Cape Federation did was to select two Coloured men to go; not because they were the ablest men, but because they wanted to shew our stand, namely that the first thing that we have to get them to accept is that trade unionism knows no colour or distinctions. Had there been Natives at the time, they would have sent Natives but, owing to the fact that Natives did not join skilled industry, we could not send them. The Conference was abortive and it was evident that they would not sit with them, but, at the last council meeting in Durban, there was a Native in attendance, representing a section of the Cape workers through the Cape Federation of Trades.

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I might say that, in theory, the Northern Unions have already accepted the Cape policy of no colour bar. In theory, the National Unions which have a membership in the various parts of the country, are bound to accept Coloured men. Now, a Coloured man who is a member of a Cape trade union which is nationally organized, has the right to go to any other part of the country and get his Cape Town card exchanged for a Johannesburg card, or a Fort Elizabeth card, or a Durban card or anything. Of course, the social prejudice is strong enough to make an intelligent Coloured man think twice before going to Johannesburg, because he knows that he would probably not be tolerated. But the condition that cards are interchangeable was insisted upon by other unions from the Cape before they allowed the National Unions to co-ordinate their activities.

The greatest hostility towards Native labour in the country was always expressed by the Mine Workers' Union of the Witwatersrand and, as a union, it is practically non-existent. The sounder and the more class conscious and intelligent a worker is, the less is his colour prejudice. That has been our experience in the Cape over many years. The more militant a worker is, the less his colour prejudice.

CHAIRMAN: With regard to unions that have a national organization, is not the difficulty introduced there by having a national industrial council? - Yes; the law helps in the removal of the colour bar from trade unions. Much to their annoyance and disgust, the Mine Workers' Union recently had to eliminate the colour bar from their constitution as a condition to their becoming registered under the Act. In

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that respect, the law certainly does help.

Take the National Industrial Council of the Building Trade, do not they in effect exclude non-European skilled labour ?- No. The Cape committee consists of a good number of Coloured men on the Council.

Apply that to the Transvaal ?- No, in the Transvaal there are no skilled artisans, no Coloured skilled artisans in the building trade.

Supposing a man, who is a member of your committee in the Cape Peninsula, a Coloured man, goes to the Transvaal in a place where he has to work under a national building council rules, would he get in ?- No, he will have to be elected first as a member of the council.

That is not the point. Will he get in as a craftsman? There is no national industrial workers union in existence.

Not a union, I am speaking of a council ?- The council cannot secure him admission in the union. The employers are organized nationally, the employees are not. There is the Western Province Building Workers' Industrial Union, in which Coloured men predominate, then there is the Building Workers' Industrial Union in the Transvaal, with branches in other areas in the Cape and where there are no skilled Coloured building workers. Then there is the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, which has a different organization again. In order to arrive at a national agreement, the various employees organizations have to select their representatives on the council and the employers organization, which is on national lines, elects its representatives, but if a member of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers in Cape Town goes to the

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North, he would be entitled to membership as a matter of course.

As I say, the better class of Coloured man, and the artisan is the better class, would fight any of the North on account of the class prejudice. That, of course, is something which only time may be able to change, but unfortunately that position prevails at present.

Your point is that where your trade union is national through the exchange of cards, the Native from here can get into the Union in the Transvaal, or anywhere else in South Africa ?- Yes, that is the position.

And, as regards actual employment, the Industrial Council frequently sees to that ----?- No. The Industrial Council have nothing to do with the employment of an individual.

In skilled trades ?- No, the Industrial Council merely exists for the fixing of wages, hours and conditions of work, and for the bringing into being conditions to be observed and to see to it that wages and hours as laid down are carried out.

MR. LUCAS: The point is that the Industrial Council would not be allowed to lay down a colour bar ?- No.

It is frequently stated, on the part of the Transvaal workers, who still maintain the colour prejudice, that the objection to Coloured trade unionism is not on principle but on social grounds. It is frequently stated that they do not like to sit side by side with a Coloured man or a Native. In the Cape, we do not notice that prejudice. When you enter this hall, when there is a general meeting of a union, you do not find the White man witting on the one side and the Coloured man on the other side. The trade unionists, the White men in the Cape, are too well-behaved and too considerate to shew

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