

REPORT TO THE TRUSTEES OF THE
BANTU WELFARE TRUST.

To the Trustees,
Bantu Welfare Trust,
JOHANNESBURG.

Dear Sirs,

This Report embraces a brief account of the Industrial work and the organisation of Bantu Trade Unions with which I have been occupied in the past, as well as a short survey of future activities.

AFRICAN LAUNDRY WORKERS' UNION.

I have been Secretary of the African Laundry Workers' Union since May 1935, and although in the employ of a local firm, I was able to devote my spare time to the Secretarial work of the Union. During this period a Bantu Organiser was employed to do the organising work, however, and from February 1937 my time has been fully occupied with the work of organising African Trade Unions.

Wages paid to the Natives employed in the Laundering & Dry-Cleaning Industry are regulated by a Wage Determination gazetted during 1932. Employees were underpaid, and the Union was instrumental in obtaining, for about 90 members, £300 arrear wages during 1935, for 110 members, about £400 during 1936, and during this year only a few pounds because there has not been the same degree of underpayment.

Conditions of employment in the industry have been considerably improved. Employees no longer work under the same arduous conditions as previously prevailed in this Industry prior to 1935. Wages have been increased by private agreement by approximately 40% above the rates laid down in the Determination. A Wage Board Enquiry is pending, for which I am busily engaged in preparing a memorandum based on information accumulated by me.

The Union has a membership of 1,100 out of a potential membership of 1,400. Subscriptions are difficult to collect owing to the obstructions placed in the way of the organisers and shop-stewards by employers.

AFRICAN BAKERS' INDUSTRIAL UNION.

The Union was initiated in April this year, when I called a meeting of African employees employed in the Baking Industry to ascertain their conditions of employment for use in a Wage Board enquiry for the Baking Industry. I succeeded in obtaining sufficient evidence to enable Mr. Ballinger and myself to state an effective case on behalf of the Bantu Employees, and thus obtain for these employees considerable improvements in their conditions

of employment, and higher wages, which will be shortly gazetted.

The Bakers' Union also caters for the Native employees employed in the Biscuit Industry. I discovered that the majority of employees in the one and only Biscuit Factory in Johannesburg were underpaid. Their wages are laid down in a National Industrial Council Agreement for the Biscuit Industry. Repeated requests to the Council for the Industry to rectify the existing state of affairs were made in vain. I was then forced to take 70 sworn statements from the employees of Messrs. Premier Biscuit Co., and refer the complaints of these employees to the Department of Labour. The latter then requested the Council to attend to the complaints of these employees, but with no concrete results. I then demanded that the Labour Department send their Inspectors to investigate the alleged underpayment. Three Inspectors were then sent to inspect the books of the firm and take statements from the Native Employees. The Union estimates that over one thousand pounds arrear wages are owing to these employees. We have not yet been informed by the Department whether they intend prosecuting the employers or settling the claim out of hand. I started investigating this case in May 1937, and the Department has recently informed me that very shortly everything will be satisfactorily settled to the benefit of the employees.

The African Bakers' Industrial Union has an approximate membership of over 300, and a potential membership of 900. Members are eagerly looking forward to the gazetting of the proposed Determination.

AFRICAN PRINTING WORKERS' UNION.

This Union has been in existence for the last 3 months. The Union is progressing steadily, and has a membership of over 150. The average wage received by these employees is about £1.2.6. per week for unskilled work. The wages of these employees are covered by a clause in the Industrial Council Agreement for the Printing and Newspaper Trade which lays down that unskilled employees should receive the highest wage laid down in other Agreements for the same kind of work. This clause has not been carried into effect, as these employees should receive £1.10.0., per week. I have made representations to Mr. Downes, the General Secretary of the Typo Union, that this anomalous position be rectified and the Bantu employees receive the wages they are entitled to. I understand that employers in the Printing Trade are being circularised to this effect. The Bantu employees have stated that they are willing to forego any claim for arrear wages if the employers will pay them the wages they are entitled to without delay, or trouble. About 700 Africans are employed in this Industry on the Rand, and each has a legal claim against his employer for £40 arrear wages. The Union has requested that these workers be granted annual leave on full pay, as well as contributions by employers to a sick Benefit Fund.

This agreement is shortly coming up for review, and the Union is busy collating evidence to show that the present legal (but not actual) minimum wage of 30/- per week should be maintained.

AFRICAN COMMERCIAL & DISTRIBUTIVE WORKERS' UNION.

The A.C. & D.W.U. was founded in March 1937, and is rapidly increasing its membership. The Union has been instrumental in obtaining improved conditions for the Native employees of a number of the large commercial firms in Johannesburg, viz: O.K. Bazaars, Mosenthal & Co., Macdonald Adams, Vacuum Oil and numerous others. Motor drivers in the trade were, until recently, covered by the Motor Transport Determination. I have been successful in obtaining arrear wages for a number of these employees, (approximately £300 for 37 employees in 1937). I have been compelled to explain to complainants that they must take the risk of losing their employment, as employers were intimidating the Native employees by dismissing them immediately they lodged a complaint that they were being underpaid, and then engaging European drivers. In this way nearly 200 African Motor Drivers have been displaced by Europeans. This displacement has been accentuated by the tactics of the Motor Transport Workers' Union, which has been canvassing employers to replace their Native drivers by Europeans.

At the request of our Union, the Minister of Labour has issued a reference to the Wage Board to make an investigation into the Commercial Distributive Trade, and lay down wages for the work of all classes of employees and not only for the class of work usually done by European employees. The enquiry will start at the beginning of 1938. At the moment I am engaged in preparing an exhaustive memorandum setting forth the case for an increase in the wages and the betterment of conditions for Africans employed in the wholesale and retail trades.

ROUTINE ACTIVITIES.

I am Secretary of the 4 above mentioned Unions and, as Secretary, I direct the work of three full-time Native Organisers, and with their assistance attend to the complaints of members. Complaints such as wrongful dismissal, underpayment, and dismissals without notice, vary in number from 5 to 15 per day. Members ask not only for advice and help on matters relating to their employment, but also request assistance to straighten out the various personal troubles which confront them from time to time.

Over 300 complaints against employers of labour have been attended to during the period January, 1937 to September, 1937. Complaints cover claims for wrong dismissal, wages in lieu of notice, underpayment, and payment for overtime. Eighty-three claims were settled by direct negotiations with employers. Twenty-five claims were settled, with a small measure of success, by the Native Affairs Department. Certain cases had to be referred to Solicitors for settlement, with very satisfactory results, but settlements by these means were usually avoided, unless all other venues for settlement proved abortive. About £14.10.0. was spent on legal fees during this period. The rest of the complaints were, in the majority of cases, satisfactorily settled in collaboration with the Department of Labour and Social Welfare.

AFRICAN (Non-European) TRADE UNION COUNCIL.

It has been my policy wherever possible to link the Native Trade Unions with the European Trade Union Movement. The South African Trades and Labour Council has always shewn considerable sympathy to Native trade unions requiring assistance and advice. Trade Unions of Pass-bearing Natives are not registered by the Labour Department, in accordance with the provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act, hence these Unions can only gain the benefit of existing Wage Legislation by making representations to the registered Unions of Coloured and European workers.

For various reasons it has become imperative that the work of the 12 existing Native Unions be co-ordinated. Irresponsible individuals have attempted to organise natives on Industrial lines, and their abortive attempts have made the Africans very suspicious of all people who attempt to organise them. This will be definitely stopped in future.

The African (Non-European) Trade Union Council was recently established to co-ordinate the work of the existing African Unions. The Council is a very centralised body and has the power to interfere with the domestic affairs of any of its affiliated bodies, (vide Constitution attached) and thus prevent the likelihood of mismanagement which in the past has ruined many promising Unions. The Executive Committee is democratically elected, and at the moment Mr. Gana Makabeni is Chairman and I am Secretary. The Council intends confining its activities to the following:-

1. Consolidating existing African Trade Unions and working out a uniform system along which the affairs of each affiliated Union must be conducted.
2. Organising branches of existing Unions along the Reef and Pretoria, as well as starting Unions for unorganised Africans.
- 3.(a). Making representations to the Wage Board on behalf of organised and unorganised African and non-European workers in any Trade or Industry for which an enquiry may be conducted.
- (b). Making representations to the South African Trades and Labour Council to advise all its affiliated bodies of the existence of the Council, and that they should consult with the Council as to the wages to be laid down for Africans before concluding any Industrial Council Agreements.
- (c). Requesting official recognition from the Department of Labour & Social Welfare, as representing organised and unorganised African workers, with reference to being allowed to criticise and make proposals regarding any proposed Wage Legislation which will affect the interests of this class of employee.
- (4). At a later stage the Council intends instituting an unemployment insurance scheme, as well as a Sick Benefit Fund for all members of its affiliated bodies.

EDUCATIONAL.

I have found it essential to the effective building-up of African Trade Unions that trained and trustworthy Africans be available for official positions. With this end in view I have organised an evening school for the specific purpose of training Africans to be efficient Trade Union Organisers. Three 2 hour classes per week are at present being conducted in Book-keeping, Arithmetic and English, as well as lectures dealing with existing Wage Legislation, how to keep Minutes correctly, and how to attend to complaints of members.

*how many
involved*

MANAGEMENT OF THE FUNDS.

I keep a Cash Book & an Analysis Book for each Union. Receipts are issued for money received from shop-stewards and organisers; only persons to whom the official receipt stamps are issued are allowed to collect subscriptions. Members only pay subscriptions if they receive a stamp in return, and each collector is responsible for the number of stamps issued to him. Collectors are provided with a Duplicating Book in which they are required to record the names or card numbers of the members who pay them subscriptions. The African Laundry Workers' Union has a Banking Account, but not the other three Unions. Vouchers and receipts are kept, and no payments are made without the permission of the Committee concerned.

Attached is a copy of a Constitution of an African Trade Union, as well as that of the African (Non-European) Trade Union Council.

I will be pleased to supply any further information which the Trustees may require.

M. Gordon.

P. O. Box 5463,
JOHANNESBURG.

15th November, 1937.

Collection Number: AD1715

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

PUBLISHER:

Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document forms part of the archive of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.