



Labour Conditions in British Central Africa

The following survey is based partly on the Reports published by the Labour Departments of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland on conditions in those colonies during 1940¹, and partly on a memorandum which was submitted to the Colonial Office by the British Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society as a result of the disturbances on the Northern Rhodesian copper mines, and which advocates a new industrial policy on the copperbelt.² Other information available concerning labour conditions in 1940 and 1941 has also been used.

EMPLOYMENT

There are indications that the transformation of the indigenous populations of this part of central Africa from subsistence farmers to wage earners is further advanced than is commonly realised. The Northern Rhodesian report states that the majority of the Natives "rely on wage earning to obtain money which has now become a necessity of life, and this increasingly so as the standard of living among the indigenous population rises". Many of the wage earners appear still to be migrant workers returning home to their lands after varying periods of absence. An enquiry, conducted by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute into conditions on the Broken Hill mine suggests, however, that a considerable semi-urbanised wage earning population is emerging, consisting of workers who bring their wives and spend more than two-thirds of their working lives in the towns.³ It was found that at Broken Hill, out of a total African labour force of 6,460 men, while only 64 had been born and bred in towns, 4,513 could be described as temporarily urbanised, having spent over two-thirds of their time in town since first leaving their villages.

¹ NORTHERN RHODESIA LABOUR DEPARTMENT: *Annual Report for the Year 1940*.

NYASALAND PROTECTORATE: *Annual Report of the Labour Department of the Provincial Administration for the Year ending 31st December 1940*.

² Memorandum by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society on the Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the 1940 Disturbances in the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia.

³ Godfrey WILSON: *An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Northern Rhodesia* (Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1941).

The assumption [underlying industrial and labour policy] . . . is that the African men in towns are normally migrant labourers who go home frequently, who spend half or more of their working lives in the country and who are only followed to towns by wives and infants in arms. This no doubt was once true but is so no longer. To-day they are temporarily urbanised; they spend most of their working lives in towns and the general population follows them thither increasingly.

Statistics of employment and emigration are still largely approximate. The Nyasaland labour report, however, estimates that, at the end of 1940, 67,000 Natives were absent in Southern Rhodesia, 31,000 in the Union of South Africa, 3,000 in Northern Rhodesia, and 800 in Tanganyika. The total Native population of Nyasaland is about 1,600,000, and in 1939 the Labour Department put at 329,000 the number of adult males fit to leave their villages to work for wages. The number of those in employment abroad during 1940, 102,000, would be roughly equivalent to 30 per cent., a percentage which does not appear to take account of military recruiting. Nor does it include employment within Nyasaland involving absence from home. The total Native population of Northern Rhodesia is approximately 1,400,000. The labour report estimates that 40,000 Northern Rhodesians are employed in Southern Rhodesia, 10,000 in Tanganyika, and 7,000 in the Union of South Africa, and that in Northern Rhodesia itself 98,000 Natives are employed, of whom 36,966 work on the mines. This probably means that something like 40 per cent. of the adult male population are absent in employment, and the report considers that in many areas the percentage is 50.

The problem of the proportion of men who should be normally in their villages so as to permit the continuance of village economic and social life is difficult to solve arithmetically. It may be noted, however, that the one important attempt to fix a percentage was made by Belgian commissions and led to the conclusion in 1931 that nine-tenths of the men ought to remain in the villages.¹ Throughout most of Southern and much of Central Africa so favourable a village situation must be rare.²

¹ Cf. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE: *The Recruiting of Labour in Colonies and in Other Territories with Analogous Labour Conditions*. International Labour Conference. Nineteenth Session, Geneva, 1935, p. 24. The I.L.O. Governing Body Delegation which visited the Union of South Africa at the end of 1938 put the dilemma in the form of general questions:

The Delegation was deeply impressed by the efforts which are being made to improve standards of living in the Native areas visited. . . . If this programme is successful, the ultimate result may be a larger population, from which European production can draw its labour, and certainly a more healthy and efficient population. During, however, the period of transition, is there not a danger that the training of men in new agricultural methods will fail because the enterprising young men are becoming industrial workers who only spend their leisure in the agricultural community? Is there no limit in numbers or in time to the absence in employment of the men if chances of home development are not to be prejudiced? (*International Labour Review*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 6, June 1939, p. 786.)

² For a study of the effects of migration on tribal life, especially in Nyasaland, see Dr. Margaret READ: "Migrant Labour in Africa and its Effects on Tribal Life", in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XLV, No. 6, June 1942, pp. 605-631.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism in the narrower sense of absence from work during periods of employment has a bearing on the problem of the competing claims for labour of employers and home agriculture. Where this absenteeism is excessive, employers must draw from the villages a larger labour force than strictly necessary. Generally, moreover, throughout those parts of Africa where a rigid contract labour system is being replaced by freer labour agreements there is a danger that traditions of casual labour will develop, to the prejudice of industrial efficiency and of social stabilisation.

LABOUR ORGANISATION AND LEGISLATION

Attempts to remedy the situation may be made by the farm labour committees which have been formed in Northern Rhodesia. These committees consist of a few leading farmers in each area and are to study, in co-operation with Government officers, the means of improving the quality of farm labour and the conditions under which farm labourers work.

The general governmental machinery for the regulation of conditions of employment comprises in both Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland a Labour Department, with officers in Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa and a Labour Advisory Board. In Northern Rhodesia this Board was reconstituted in 1941 to consist of the Labour Commissioner, the Director of Medical Services, the member of the Legislative Council nominated to represent Native interests, one provincial Commissioner, and three members representing various employing interests.¹ In Nyasaland the composition of the Board is similar, except that in September 1940 a Native member was added.

No African trade union development has been reported from either territory.

Important labour legislation adopted during 1940 in Northern Rhodesia has already been recorded in these pages (abolition of certain penal sanctions, improved workmen's compensation, minimum age).² As regards the abolition of penal sanctions, these penalties for absence without leave, neglect of duty and refusal to obey were in force until June 1940, and by then there had been 243 prosecutions under these heads. The total number of prosecutions throughout the year under the Employment of Natives Ordinance was 1,275. But of these, 802 were for unauthorised entry into mining compounds and 71 were for offences by employers. It thus appears that penal sanctions for purely labour offences committed by workers have ceased to be of importance.

In Nyasaland there were 244 prosecutions and 228 convictions in respect of offences against laws governing the employment of labour, but no conclusion can be drawn from these figures, since the nature of the offences is not indicated.

¹ *Northern Rhodesia Government Gazette*, 16 May 1941.

² Cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XLIII, No. 3, Mar. 1941, pp. 306-307 and 326.

ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY MEMORANDUM

In September 1941 the British Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society addressed a memorandum to the Colonial Office on the report of the Commission which enquired into the 1940 Northern Rhodesian disturbances.¹ The memorandum makes the following points, which, though directly applicable only to conditions on the copperbelt, are not without relevance to other parts of tropical Africa where industrialisation is proceeding apace.

Industrial Machinery

The majority of African wage earners in Northern Rhodesia are not ready for trade unionism. It is urged, however, that the "elder" system (the selection of men of authority from each tribe to represent the workers) should be encouraged, and that, since elections on a tribal basis will not secure the best machinery for industrial questions, some other body should be set up to include not only the higher paid, educated Africans in clerical and administrative posts but also semi-skilled and unskilled workers. It is also asked that the number of properly qualified labour officers should be increased, and that they should be given training in industrial conciliation and collective bargaining.

Wages

Improved wages and workmen's compensation are advocated.

Cost of Social Services

It is claimed that more direct taxation is necessary to meet the cost of social improvements required by the introduction of industrialism, and that the Government should already be considering making provision for new industries and for agricultural development out of copper profits, to overcome the possible difficulties of leaner years or the exhaustion of copper deposits.

The Colour Bar

The following are in brief the recommendations submitted:

(a) The Government of Northern Rhodesia is responsible for control and progressive improvement of the colour bar situation on the mines.

(b) The Government must guard against fostering an industrial colour bar introduced indirectly in legislation relating to industrial conciliation and the regulation of health and safety on the mines.

(c) So long as there is a colour bar, the immigration for employment on the mines of Europeans for whose work Africans can be trained should be controlled, and permitted only in exceptional cases.

¹ *Idem*, Vol. XLIII, No. 5, May, 1941, pp. 542-551: "Social Problems on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt".

(d) No trade union should be allowed to get the right to sole representation on behalf of the workers in the industry if it in practice excludes workers on the basis of race or colour.

(e) The claims of European miners released for active service to return to mining employment in posts which they previously held must be respected, as well as the claims of European miners retained on the mines in view of the essential nature of their work. Europeans who have replaced other Europeans on active service have no claim to retain positions to the prejudice of Europeans returning from active service or to that of African miners.

(f) The principle of equal pay for equal work must be maintained, but must not be practised so as to establish an effective colour bar. A certain quota of positions tenable either by Europeans or Africans should be reserved and allocated by a Government board, in which employers and workers of both races should collaborate.

(g) The Government should develop technical education rapidly so that Africans may be able to qualify for skilled work in the mines.

(h) The cost of implementing these proposals should be borne by the industry.

Stabilisation

It is held that the fundamental cause of difficulties on the copperbelt is the neglect of the Northern Rhodesian Government to formulate its policy on the industrialisation of the Native (that is, the probability of the emergence of a permanent class of African industrial workers). It is recommended among other things that small holdings for mine workers should be encouraged, that houses should be built fit for family life, that there should be free, compulsory education for miners' children, that transport facilities should be improved between mining and rural areas, that in the rural areas information bureaux and free medical examination should be provided for prospective mine workers, that holidays should be provided, and that remittance schemes should be developed.
