



White overseer and black workers

The white working class

Some South African capitalists want a modification in the system, so long as the black workers will keep quiet and not demand too much. The white workers, however, are in their great majority supporters of apartheid. How did this come about?

The early white working class was often militant. In 1883 white diamond miners struck against strip searches for stolen diamonds. Yet they made no attempt at common cause with the black miners who were to strike on the same issue four years later. And when told that London dockers had agreed to such searches, they replied: "Neither can overseers rightly be compared with dock labourers. Actually dock labourers occupy the position of our

Kaffirs" (Africans).

From the start the white workers were usually overseers and supervisors, paid maybe ten times as much as the black workers. In the early days of gold mining, until after World War 1, the white miners were like sub-contractors. The black workers were paid flat rates; the whites were paid piece rates according to the work done by the blacks under their supervision.

Many of the white trade unionists saw the defence of the colour bar as a defence of organised labour against unorganised, low-paid labour — and, in particular, a defence of their own jobs. The best socialists among them got only as far as saying that race questions were a diversion and

an irrelevance, and the only real issue was capitalists versus workers, white or black.

During the Rand Revolt of 1922 these attitudes were expressed in the slogan, 'Workers of the World Fight and Unite for a White South Africa'. White socialists saw this as defending 'civilised standards'.

Fighting

Some of the strikers sang the Red Flag as they were sent to the gallows for their part in the fighting with government forces. Yet at the start of the dispute the strikers had been encouraged by the police to set up armed squads on the understanding that they would suppress any unrest among the black miners.

After 1917, under the impact of the Bolshevik revolution and Bolshevik theory, a small minority of white workers broke from racism and founded the Communist Party of South Africa. The Russian Revolution, and especially the USSR's treatment of its dark-skinned peoples, also inspired many black South Africans; the first sizeable black union in South Africa, the Industrial and Commercial Union, was formed in 1919.

The CP, at first exclusively white in membership, moved slowly towards a new outlook.

In 1922 it justified the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa'; in 1924 it supported the Nationalist-Labour alliance, saying that this was an

On her tour of Africa Glenys Kinnock met a black student from South Africa studying English, and was reported as saying that she hoped that English and not Afrikaans would be spoken in a democratic South Africa.

Apartheid is often blamed exclusively on the Afrikaners (60% of white South Africans) as if the English-speaking 40% were innocent.

In fact the first version of the apartheid system of labour control was introduced in the diamond mines under British rule. A similar system

was extended and regularised for the whole of South Africa in the years after Britain won the Boer War.

The mineowners who pioneered South African capitalism were overwhelmingly British-based, and they paid 75% of their dividends to British shareholders.

To identify hostility to apartheid with hostility to Afrikaans is doubly stupid because many South African coloureds, as well as whites, are Afrikaans-speaking.

'anti-imperialist united front'!

But by 1928 it finally worked its way through to the slogan of a black republic (later defended by Trotsky in a letter of 1932 to South African Trotskyists).

The CP was winning substantial support among black workers, and though small held leading positions in the white trade unions.

By now Stalinism ruled in Moscow. Along with the 'black republic'

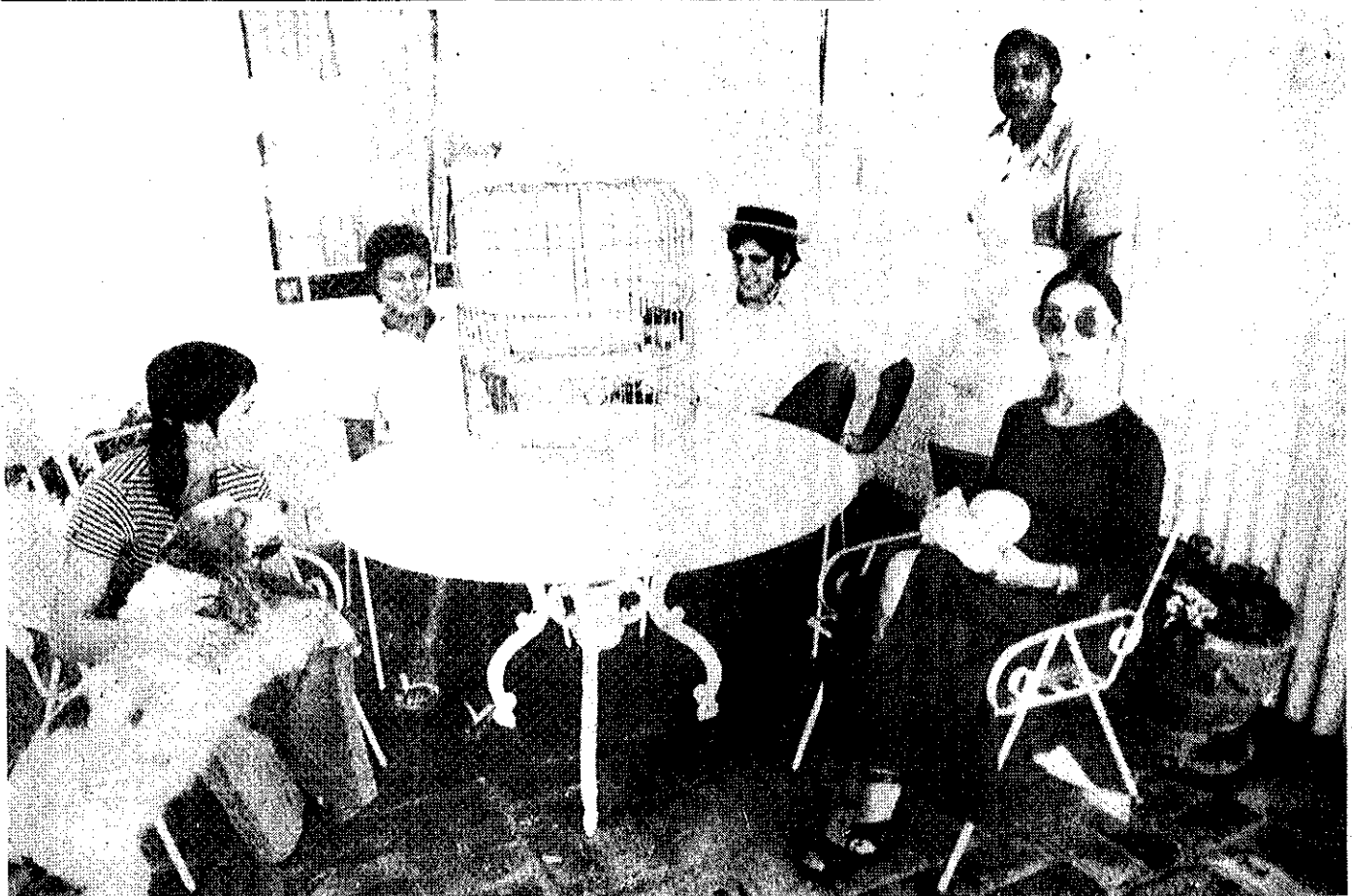
slogan, the CP was frogmarched into a 'two-stage' theory of revolution. And in 1931 its main leaders were purged, to be replaced by loyal Stalinists.

Cancer

Better things might have been possible without the cancer of Stalinism. In any case, the CP — along with Trotskyists and other leftists — registered some signifi-

cant achievements in non-racial trade unionism in the 1930s.

According to the historians Jack and Ray Simons, 'New industrial laws, the 'civilised' labour policy, and the Labour Party's presence in the coalition government (after 1924) marked (the skilled white worker's) absorption in the ruling elite. The position of the factory operative and unskilled white worker was still in



Luxury for the few, poverty for the majority

doubt. Left-wing trade unions and Afrikaner nationalism would compete for their allegiance in the following two decades'.

Afrikaner nationalism won. After 1948 the white labour movement rapidly abandoned any sort of independent role.

Now the white workers are firmly linked to the established order by racist pay differentials giving them wages four or times blacks'.

Unequivocally

Some whites do side unequivocally with the oppressed blacks. White students and ex-students have helped the new non-racial unions and sometimes serve them as officials.

Some white unions, also, have shifted a bit. The hard-line racist SACOL has lost affiliates, and some white-dominated unions have left TUCSA in favour of cooperating more closely with the non-

racial unions.

But their vast privileges keep most white workers firmly on the side of the regime. An increasing number have reacted to the rising black revolt by leaving South Africa.

Despite everything they have done, the whites should have equal rights; and indeed, documents like the Freedom Charter recognise that. The revolution will be easier and less bloody, the more whites it can win over or at least render neutral; and the education and skills of many whites will be valuable to a new South Africa or Azania.

Separate self-government or a federal system to accommodate the whites are scarcely possible: in every big city and every area except the bantustans, blacks and whites are closely mixed together. Trying to separate out African areas in Natal, the South African government

arrived at 44 separate bits for KwaZulu bantustan, with another 144 "black spots" from which Africans were due to be deported into the bantustan!

Paralleled

Although some of the South African whites' attitudes are paralleled by the Israeli Jews and the Northern Ireland Protestants, as a community they are not similar. The South African whites are not a more or less complete and autonomous community, embracing all classes, but a capitalist class, a middle class, and a thin labour aristocracy, all resting on top of a black working class.

There can be no justice in South Africa unless the whites accept equality. And the blacks can't, won't and should not be asked to wait until the whites accept equality voluntarily rather than having it forced on them.



Still no sweat from the white overseer. Photo: IDAF.