

COLOURED LABOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA
Part II.
By Balabushevitch.

The wages of the black workers are considerably lower than those of the whites. According to official data, the average wages of a white worker are approximately £246 per annum, whilst the black worker earns not more than £48. The day wages of a native workers are 3 shillings on the average, whilst the white worker earns 15 shillings. A coloured worker in Johannesburg receives from £3 to £3.10/- a month. As a rule the monthly budget of such a worker (with 5 people in the family) is divided as follows : food and clothing --- £1.13/4 ; house rent --- £1.5.0. ; education for the children 2/-; taxes 1/8; and travelling fares --- 8/-.

It should also be remembered that frequently the wages are paid either entirely or partly in kind ; in corn (for agricultural workers), wine (on the vineyards), and so on.

Under such circumstances it is not to be wondered that the exceptionally cheap and docile native labour has rapidly gained prevalence as an unskilled labour force in the factories, having ousted even the so-called "white paupers" (impoverished and proletarianised white farmers). After all is said and done, native labour now represents a serious menace not only to the "white pauper", but also to skilled white labour. The high profits and dividends of the South African industries (chiefly mining) are based to a considerable degree upon the cheapness of the "black" native labour. Naturally, the industrials and manufacturers have tried to make the utmost use of the cheap coloured labour in preference to the more expensive white labour. The menace of being gradually ousted and thrown out of work has been constantly before the eyes of the skilled white workers. However, the tip-top aristocracy of labour has succeeded in getting the policy of segregation of the natives and coloured workers to be carried on from the domain of agriculture into the domain of industry. A series of laws was issued for the protection of the predominant position of the whites in regard to skilled and semi-skilled labour.

You might mention, for instance, the famous "Color Bar Bill" which restricts the rights of the natives to occupy more or less skilled and responsible positions in industry. Nevertheless this policy, in the long run, has been detrimental not only to the interests of the natives, but also to those of the white workers. The white worker at the present time may not do any unskilled work, as he cannot exist upon the miserable pittance of the unskilled worker. On the other hand, the demand for skilled labour power is steadily diminishing in connection with industrial rationalisation and the introduction of up-to-date machinery. Thus, the majority of the white workers are doomed to chronic unemployment. Thus, the interests of the white workers themselves are beginning to urge the raising of the wages of unskilled labourers, so that white unskilled workers might be employed the same as the coloured workers.

An attitude of hostility and contempt towards the natives is to be observed not only among the bourgeois elements of the population in South Africa, but also among considerable groups of the white workers (both the unemployed "paupers" and the skilled workers), who feel a menace to their living standard from the cheap labour power of the natives. The bourgeoisie and its satellites, the reformists, are naturally doing everything to fan the racial hatred between the two sections of labour, driving advantages from the splitting of the forces of the working class.

The race prejudices, which still persist among the majority of the white workers, are finding their reflection in the South African labour movement.

In South Africa there is no united trade union movement. It is divided into two sharply distinguished branches: the trade unions of the white workers which bar admission to the natives and coloured workers, and the independent organisations of the native and coloured workers.

Altogether there are in South Africa 565,000 industrial workers (including 420,000 native and coloured workers and 145,000 whites), and 490,000 agricultural workers (including about 435,000 coloured and native workers and about 50,000 Europeans).

According to available data, out of the 145,000 white industrial workers about 83,000 are organised in the trade unions, or 37%, whilst of the 435,000 native and coloured workers about 100,000 are organised, or 23%.

The native and coloured workers, being stubbornly denied admission into the white unions, began to organise their independent unions only in 1918. A tremendous revolutionising effect upon the native workers in South Africa, as upon the workers in other colonial countries, was exercised by the world war and by the October Revolution.

In 1919 in Cape Town the first organisation of the native and coloured workers was formed — the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.) which began rapidly to grow. Being formed with only 24 members, it had 2,000 members in 1920, from 20, to 30,000 in 1926, about 80,000 towards the close of 1927, whilst at the present time it has about 100,000 members. The ICU is the only organisation of native and coloured workers of any considerable size upon the territory of South Africa. The organisational structure of the ICU is not distinguished by clarity. It includes in its ranks the most diverse categories of labour. There is no division into industrial sections; the internal cohesion is rather weak, and this leaves room for high-handed bureaucratic action. During the first years of its activity the ICU was a revolutionary organisation standing upon the platform of the class struggle and taking up a left wing position as compared to the South African Trade Union Council of the white workers. Until 1927 there were a few Communists upon the Council of the ICU, occupying leading positions. Nevertheless in point of numbers the reformist elements prevailed upon the National Council of the ICU, and the Communists had to carry on a stubborn struggle against them, which was brought to a head at the close of 1926. At that time the reformist leaders of the Union, with the National Secretary Clements Kadalie — who formerly considered himself as "left" — at their head, started a bitter campaign against the Communists who were urging a class struggle policy, eventually banishing the Commun-

ists from responsible positions.

After disposing of the revolutionary elements in the Union, Clements Kadalie and Co. exerted all efforts to transform the ICU from a class struggle proletarian organisation into a tool of class collaboration. Kadalie, and the rest of the reformist clique, refused to send representatives to the Brussels Conference of Oppressed Peoples on the pretext that it was a "bolshevist outfit". Kadalie protested his loyalty to the English King, opposing strikes as a method of fighting the employers, and urging peaceful ways for the settlement of conflicts. This did not end the treacherous activity of Kadalie. He got the ICU to join the Amsterdam International and invited reformist trade union officials from England to come as his advisers, whilst upon every possible occasion he declares that his Union and himself have nothing whatever to do with Communism.

It stands to reason that the severe economic and political conditions of the black workers represented by the ICU do not furnish favourable ground for the blossoms of reformism. The policy of class harmony cannot find any response amongst the masses which are eking out an existence of semi-starvation. Therefore, the reactionary policy of Kadalie & Co. does not indicate any process of decline in the sentiments of the native and coloured workers, having no solid basis of support.

Parallel to the ICU of the native and coloured workers, there are two trade union organisations of the white workers : the South African Trade Union Congress (15-20,000 members) and the Federation of Labour Unions of Cape Province (11,000 members).

The trade unions of the white workers, which had persistently refused to have any dealings with the organisations of the native workers, are now compelled to alter somewhat their policies. Now they cannot afford to ignore the existing organisation of the native workers which is many times stronger than their own. The South African Trade Union Congress, which had repeatedly declined all proposals and advances made by the ICU, at its session in April 1927 "condescended" for the first

time in the history of the South African trade union movement to discuss the question of collaboration with the ICU, and even to send back a telegram of greetings. It is true, the framing of practical measures for the establishment of collaboration with the ICU was postponed until the establishment of contact between the South African Trade Union Congress and the Federation of Labour Unions of Cap^e Province. Finally, such contact was established, in order to coordinate and harmonise the activities of both organisations of the white workers there was formed in 1927 the "United Trade Union Committee". Nevertheless there was little gained by this to the unity of the trade union movement. At one of its meetings, or rather, as the result of several meetings, the United Committee passed a resolution in which it recommended the South African Trade Union Congress NOT TO AMALGAMATE WITH THE INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL WORKERS' UNION, BUT TO CONVENE FROM TIME TO TIME JOINT MEETINGS OF THE TWO BODIES. The last session of the South African Trade Union Congress, which met in April, 1928, accepted the recommendation of the United Trade Union Committee.

Thus, the question of unity of the South African trade union movement, which is of such momentous importance to the successful struggle of the working class in South Africa, has been shelved once again. To be sure, there is nothing surprising or unexpected in this. It is easy to understand that the Trade Union Congress of the white workers, with its lingering racial prejudices and with its membership of barely 20,000, has hesitated to take in a force of 100,000 native and coloured workers, extending to the latter the same rights as to the white members. Furthermore, it should be remembered that at the head of the trade unions of the white workers, with few exceptions, are reformist leaders who have deliberately obstructed the tactics of the united front and have betrayed the interests of the workers upon numerous occasions.

A particularly stubborn struggle against unity of the trade union movement is waged by the South African Labour Party, which has been consistently following an outspoken imperialist and anti-native policy.

Not only does the Labour Party refuse admission to native and coloured workers, but it also urges that they shall be debarred from the white trade unions.

Under such involved conditions the only organisation in South Africa which advocates consistently the militant class struggle policy is the young Communist Party. In spite of all the difficulties and obstacles, the Party carried on an energetic campaign against national and class prejudices, against the treacherous tactics of the reformists, for unity of the trade unions, and for One Trade Union International. It is true, the activity of the Communists in the labour movement of South Africa is considerably handicapped by the high-handed action of the reformists. Nevertheless the Party, by persistent propaganda and agitation for the native rights in the trade unions and for the amalgamation of the white and coloured trade unions, is gradually winning over the best elements of the working class. If so far the efforts to establish collaboration between the white and coloured trade unions have not been crowned with success owing to a number of reasons (the lingering prejudices of the white workers, the high-handed action of the reformists, etc.), it may be expected that the laws of capitalist development and the revolutionising factors will bring to the natural result in the end. Already now we are witnessing the increasing offensive of the capitalists against the white workers, and the rapid growth of the large cadres of "white paupers". The gulf between the white workers and the bourgeoisie is widened day by day, whilst the growing precariousness of the economic conditions of the white workers is beginning to consolidate the whole of the working class into an united front, irrespective of race and colour.