

ESSAY REVIEW

WHITE MINE-WORKERS, THE DEQUALIFICATION OF LABOUR-POWER AND THE 'AFRICAN ADVANCEMENT' ISSUE IN NORTHERN RHODESIA

IN 1959 THE Northern Rhodesian Chamber of Mines and the Anglo American Corporation commissioned the South African National Institute for Personnel Research to conduct two surveys into the attitudes of the White labour force at Broken Hill and the Copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia. The reports, initially regarded as confidential, were released in edited form in 1973 as the sixth volume in the African Social Research Documents series.* A review produced five years after the appearance of the published text, and eighteen years after the initial research, could not, under normal circumstances, be explained save in terms of the sluggishness of the academic response to commercially produced work in the social sciences. There is, however, currently good reason to subject one of the very few forays into the field of White worker consciousness in Central Africa to critical appraisal, and that is the fact that in South Africa recent changes in the mining industry are creating what are, in many respects, the very conditions to which the White mine-workers on the Copperbelt were reacting at the time the surveys were undertaken. There are certainly differences in the nature of the present South African and former Northern Rhodesian social formations — at all levels. But similarities in White 'working class' ideology are matched by similarities at the level of production in the (mineral) extractive industries. And developments in the technical division of labour consequent upon changes in the production process itself were (in Northern Rhodesia) and are now (in South Africa) responsible for the managerial pressure on the job colour bar that was, and is, fundamentally threatening to White labour.

On the Copperbelt the middle and late 1950s saw the progressive mechanization of underground mining techniques, along with the introduction of large-scale open pit mining. This had as a consequence the revision of the technical division of labour in favour of a broad dichotomy between manager and operative. In South Africa, with the recent changes in the position of certain labour supplier states (Mozambique in particular), and in the light of the altered monetary role of gold, the South African Chamber of Mines has instituted a massively funded research programme to look into the feasibility of mechanizing underground techniques. At the same time certain of the mining groups (notably Anglo American) have been diversifying their mining interests away from gold and into both base metals and coal — with similar consequences. The common result is a call for African 'advancement', and without exploring the parallels further it would seem

* I. F. Holleman and S. Biesheuvel, *White Mine Workers in Northern Rhodesia 1959-1960* (Leiden, Afrika-Studiecentrum, African Social Research Documents, Volume 6, 1973), xi, 136 pp., 12.50 guilders.

reasonable to suggest that the Northern Rhodesian experience has something of value to offer to an understanding of current developments in the ideology, the 'attitudes', of the South African White 'working class'.

White Mine Workers in Northern Rhodesia does not, by itself, do much to explain the worker perceptions that are its subject matter — at least in these structural terms. This is not, however, to suggest that in its own terms, as a piece of 'closed' empiricism, the work is devoid of interest — merely that it has itself to be interpreted if it is to be at all illuminating. It is in fact a marked feature of the surveys that both their content and methodology reveal more about the attitudes of the investigators than the investigated. The original questionnaires are not reproduced save for the survey of attitudes to African advancement (the central issue), but this hints at an extraordinary general methodological approach. In this section of the overall survey, White employees were asked to indicate which of seven attitude formulations approximated most closely to their own views, the formulations being ranked on a scale that moved from 'conservative' at one extremity to 'liberal' at the other. In all formulations the questions of social intercourse and job allocation were inextricably linked, the degree to which advancement was seen to threaten either job security or earnings establishing the place of the formulation on the scale. Strangely, only one formulation made explicit reference to the possible effect of advancement on incomes, and this — embodying the spirit of the principle of 'equal pay for equal work and responsibility' then supported by the White union — was ranked at the conservative end of the scale. Not surprisingly, the daily-paid workers were shown by the survey to be comparatively 'conservative', and management was shown to be comparatively 'liberal'. Also significant for the authors' own interpretation is that the national groups which contributed most to the daily-paid category, the South African and Rhodesian workers, likewise came out as comparatively more conservative than those from the United Kingdom, who contributed most to management. For although the authors state that 'economic factors must not be underestimated as determinants of race attitudes' (p. 122), and although they are careful to assert that their statistics do not necessarily prove anything, the reader is left in little doubt that national origin is a crucial factor in determining worker attitudes to African 'advancement'. The qualifications are, of course, necessary, since it may well have been that South African salaried staff were not nearly as 'conservative' as South African daily-paid workers, although data on this is curiously omitted.

In their wider treatment of the evolution of White employees' attitudes the authors lay heavy and repetitive emphasis on the importance of the South African connection. It is, for instance, argued that the White community on the Copperbelt 'had almost inevitably adopted the essentially conservative and self-centred South African attitude pattern' (p. 8); and again that 'the traditional and deeply entrenched South African attitude with regard to race and the division of labour was firmly transplanted to Southern and Northern Rhodesian soil' (p. 13). But if a racist ideology of South African origin had been 'transplanted' to the White Copperbelt community, the authors are quite clear that — to pursue their agricultural metaphor — the 'European' values of that community constituted fertile ground. Thus 'there is . . . in spite of different national backgrounds the existence of a broadly similar way of living common to Western society, expressed through a common language medium. Above all there is the common heritage of a white skin, the ultimate source of social solidarity

overriding all sectional differences of whatever shade or dimension among the White minorities in the far-flung isolation of a predominantly Black country' (p.28). And again, 'this affluent community has emphatically affirmed its belief in, and loyalty to, the cherished values of the "European way of life"' (p.48).

It is primarily through an assertion of the crucial role of race and South African racist attitudes that the authors divert attention from the relations of men in the process of production, but it is by no means the only way. The 'character' of the mining community is argued to have been determined by 'two interpermeating situations: a *work situation* framed by a unitary structure with a clearly defined status hierarchy; and an off-work *social situation* governed by essentially egalitarian principles' (p. 32). And much of the report is devoted to an examination of the latter: the 'attitudes' of White suburbia and clubland; the articles of faith of a highly acquisitive society. As consumers White workers and managers on the Copperbelt were patently 'equal'. In the boom years of the middle 1950s everyone had a large car, radiogram and refrigerator. Everyone fitted themselves out with expensive sports equipment, took extensive coastal holidays and entertained lavishly. And if, as producers, they were less equal, the authors have taken elaborate precautions to obscure the fact. Supposedly for fear that analysis of the separate structures, functions and attitudes of the Mine Officials Salaried Staff Association and the Mine Workers' Union 'might well have been misinterpreted and therefore resented' (p. 49), they simply avoided the subject — contenting themselves with a few brief allusions to inter-union relations and the internal divisions of the Mine Workers' Union. The omission is the less extraordinary for the managerial bias of the work, but it is crippling to the authors' stated primary aim.

African 'advancement' in Northern Rhodesia meant the promotion of Black workers to semi-skilled posts within a re-stratified labour force — but also within the old dual wage structure. Advancement took two forms. On the one hand certain skilled functions were fragmented or re-defined to provide more numerous semi-skilled jobs, which were then allocated to the Black schedule. On the other, the lowest of the skilled positions in an unaltered production process were transferred directly to Black workers. In both cases 'advancement' was associated with a reduction in the total wage bill which, even if accompanied by a drop in labour efficiencies, was calculated to provide for a greater rate of surplus value. White workers in the semi-skilled and lower skilled categories were thus faced by a double threat. Most immediately, without some form of job reservation, they were in danger of being undercut in the market. And to guard against this in a manner consistent with the principles of worker organization, they admitted the concept of 'advancement', but insisted that it could only take place within the context of a *unitary* wage structure. Thus 'equal pay for equal work' became part of the basic stand taken by the Mine Workers' Union. Under the first form of 'advancement', however, they were also in danger of losing the management functions which gave them access to a portion of the surplus itself. The full slogan accordingly read 'equal pay for equal work *and responsibility*'.

It is increasingly recognized that where the technical division of labour is characterized by considerable complexity, the dual work of management — the productive work of co-ordination and unity, and the non-productive work of control and surveillance — permeate practically every level of the

labour force. And where this technical division of labour is complicated by the use of a racially distinct unskilled labour component involving additional problems over the transmission of instructions, the managerial base tends to be exceptionally wide. Under the conditions pertaining in Northern Rhodesia in the 1950s it was in fact a comparatively small proportion of the White work force which was *not* required to perform the work of management, and which did not get the associated perquisites (consisting of a 'salary' component over and above the basic wage, giving a higher total cash income). And it was to this that the Union referred when demanding equal pay for equal *responsibility*. But given that the restructuring of the labour force involved an increase in the semi-skilled operative component, and a reduction in the unskilled component, work of management at the lower levels was becoming less rather than more important. The new operative grades, though performing productive work of the same character as the old artisanal, quasi supervisory grades, were devoid of any managerial element. The position of the Mine Workers' Union was accordingly highly ambivalent. The Salaried Staff Association had no difficulty in aligning itself with top management in the dispute over 'advancement', but in the ranks of the daily-paid employees there was no such consensus. The conflict of interest deriving from their performance of the functions of both the collective worker and the global capitalist (to use Carchedi's terms) had historically robbed the Mine Workers' Union of that solidarity which is essential if collective action is to be effective. As Holleman and Biesheuvel point out: 'One major problem of the union was (and is), indeed, the lack of interest shown by its membership. It is a common complaint of Union leaders that, even in times of conflict, branch meetings had difficulties in raising a quorum' (p. 50). But their treatment of the causes of this problem is fundamentally satisfactory. They argue that the birth of the union 'appears to have been more the result of an afterthought than a deeply felt need' (p. 50), and far from trying to understand why it is that the union had difficulty in generating much support, the question they set themselves is why the union had not actively collaborated with management. 'The mere fact that daily paid labour has been given a share in the industry's profits (the copper—later metal—bonus) should have made it possible for the Mine Workers' Union to see itself as a responsible partner in a joint industrial enterprise' (p. 51). They argue that it was only the union leadership, operating 'without the guidance or close support of the mass of their fellow workers' (p. 51) which prevented this.

A conspiracy theory of union opposition (with South African racial attitudes at its roots) is not, however, an effective explanation of the reactions of White workers in the context of the complex relations applying in the production processes of the mining regions of Southern Africa. It was the 1950s in Northern Rhodesia which saw some of the most intense conflict between the White mine-workers and management, but by the time these surveys were carried out the Mine Workers' Union had been effectively crushed. And although the union leadership was still seeking to rally its diverse membership behind the 'equal pay for equal work and responsibility' slogan, the battle against 'advancement' was already lost. The White workers, as workers, were increasingly being squeezed out of a 'management [which] it is often said, has become more "remote"' (p. 35). Those workers who constituted the lower tiers of a (still) broadly based management were being bought out, whilst the union leaders were under constant

call, as in the work of Holleman and Biesheuvel itself, to 'rise above ... the dilemma presented by the unavoidable conflict of loyalties in the African advancement issue' (p. 51).

It is right that commercially produced work of this kind should receive recognition from academics. In the historiography of the Central African copper mines the works commissioned by the various private companies (and in particular by the Union Minière du Haut Katanga) have an extremely important place. But it should be emphasized that they do present special problems deriving from their functions as managerial tools. In this, *White Mine Workers in Northern Rhodesia* is no exception. The form, focus and conclusions of the piece all stem from the role it had in support of a particular set of labour policies important to the Northern Rhodesian Chamber of Mines and the Anglo American Corporation during the decolonization of the territory. As an empirical study of the social consciousness of the White mine-workers it is characterized by an extraordinary selectivity of data and, worse, by simple obfuscation of the most vital elements in the ideology of White labour. There is no doubt that race is a central category in that ideology, but racism is not an 'attitude' that exists in a vacuum. It exists within and derives from a particular set of social relations, those relations governing men in the process of production. And without an understanding of such relations it is impossible even to begin to understand the social consciousness which they inform — just as it is impossible to begin to understand the shifts in the strategy of mining capital which gave rise to these surveys in Northern Rhodesia, and which currently menace the White workers of the South African mining industry.

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