

Reforms in South Africa: more rhetoric than substance

by Heribert Adam

Since the South African administration of Pieter W. Botha replaced a corruption-tainted rival faction in 1978, its rhetoric has been one of reform. Four main categories can be distinguished to evaluate the reasons for, as well as the limits and implications of the recent policy shifts in South Africa: (1) labour relations (2) township organization (3) Bantustan planning and (4) constitutional and administrative changes.

In the view of most Blacks in South Africa, successive White governments have been merely engaged in the politics of suspense. Promises of Apartheid's death are now more than ever, dangled before its disillusioned victims. Nonetheless, crucial policy shifts have taken place in industrial Apartheid. Increased politicization of labour relations demanded different responses. A booming economy could not simultaneously cope with a threatening unemployment rate and a serious shortage of skilled labour. Indeed, the greatest brake in the economic expansion remains the shortage of skilled personnel, traditionally confined to whites only. In the entire country, there were only 50 Black artisans in 1980 and a negligible portion of Blacks received technical training at a higher level. The high inflation rate results partly from the inflated wages which the scarce White skilled workers command.

While employers who have long lamented this situation have called for state action as a remedy, the government, however, acting on the Wiehan recommendations, has left it to employers and unions to introduce better training facilities. The much acclaimed Wiehan report still recommends segregated training for White and Black apprentices. It is generally recognized, however, that the few Black in-service training centres are inadequate. Nor can recently relaxed immigration laws, which fuel the frustrated aspirations

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of blacks, cope with the bottlenecks. Whether the announced tax incentives for the training of blacks result in an improvement and thereby a strengthening of the bargaining power of Black labour remains to be seen.

Despite the acceptance of the Wiehan proposal of official recognition of Black unions, Pretoria remains hostile to the Black trade union movement. This became evident when, shortly after the announcement of the Wiehan recommendations, the government prohibited all donations to the major coordinating body, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu). Johannesburg's city council refused to negotiate with the unregistered union of 10,000 striking municipal workers in July 1980, opting instead to deal with a separate house union. State intervention on the side of the employers in a strike remains the rule. Despite their legal protection, reprisals against union organizers continue. Statutory regulations are simply bypassed by workers as well. An Institute of Race Relations survey of labour unrest in 1979 revealed that only one of approximately 50 strikes reported that year was legal. The same pattern continued throughout the next year. The much heralded, albeit restrictive, new labour legislation so limits the bargaining power of workers that attempts are made to subvert the carefully designed control system ignoring its stipulations. Even the Minister of Manpower utilization, Fanie Botha, now exhorts employers to "deal with whatever leadership group holds credibility among the workers."

A few far-sighted businessmen would like to see integrated unions rather than a divided working class as Marxist analysis would suggest. In the South African context, racially separate trade unions would politicize wage conflicts and escalate strikes into racial confrontations which are feared more than the potential strength of an integrated union movement. Industrialist Harry Oppenheimer has expressed this preference most emphatically: "I do think, however, that it's important to try, so far as possible, to draw a distinction between racial problems and industrial problems, and