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PBM - 26
Economic Integration
in Primary Industry

c/o Michael Pennington
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Houghton, Johannesburg
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In the days following my trips to the Hercules Phillips bicycle plant at Springs (PBM-20) and the Germiston Non-European Affairs Department (PBM-21), conversation between me and my friends naturally gravitated to the importance of Native Labor in the economy of the country and the efforts being made to render it more permanent and more efficient. There never seemed to be any disagreement with what I was saying--but invariably, after I had finished, one of my omniscient friends would lean back in his chair, thoughtfully tapping the stem of his pipe against his front teeth or, lacking a pipe, pressing his fingertips lightly together in pensive attitude.

"Well, now," he would say, "it's probably quite all right to say that sort of thing about secondary industry, but you realize, of course, that it just won't do at all for primary industry." And everyone, not having the foggiest idea whether it would or wouldn't do for primary industry, would sit in digestive silence and then nod once or twice to indicate that they had considered the proposition and found it sound.

A statement like this one, made in just the proper setting in just the right tone of voice with just the right amount of pipestem tapping, will be accepted as gospel, right or wrong. I'm sure, for instance, that the axiom that the world was flat was stated in just this way by an impressive old Portuguese scientist in an exclusive Lisbon club just after the third liqueur.

Like Columbus discovering the New World, I've just returned from 10 days at President Steyn Mine in the new South African gold fields of the Orange Free State. I can't think of any more primary South African industry than gold mining, and after spending shifts underground with high speed development and stoping crews and days in the Native training schools and hostels, it's obvious that the trend towards Native Labor as a permanent, efficient factor in South African industry is even more strong in primary than in secondary industry.

This is even more surprising when it is taken into consideration that mine labor is not urbanized or detribalized and that the majority of mine Natives come from South African reserves and the wilds of Mozambique, Nyasaland, East Africa and other "uncivilized" areas of the sub-continent. Fifty-nine per cent of President Steyn's African miners come from outside the Union of South Africa and most of the 3000 Natives, whether from within the Union or not, have never before been exposed to the rigors of efficient, high-speed, mechanized production.

It is mine policy to consider a detribalized African as a potential disciplinary problem and every effort is made to keep life on the mine as tribal as possible. The 10 Natives who share a room in the mine compound are usually of the same tribe. Even underground an attempt is made to form working crews from members of the same tribe.

Training for underground work begins as soon as a new African miner arrives at the mine. The first step is to teach him finagalo, the Esperanto of the South African mines that permits a European miner to give orders to any Native miner, no matter what his

language group. Classes are al fresco, on the sunny slopes of the mine's waste rock dump. A Native instructor stands in front of a group of about 30 Africans and picks up a compressed air hose. "Bamba lo tambo ka lo smoke" ("Pick up the air hose"), he says. Like the chorus of a song his pupils chant "Bamba lo tambo ka lo smoke" in unison, again and again, until they have learned the order by heart. It takes about six days of this repetition for a Native to learn simple finagalo, then he moves on to the mechanical training area, also on the slopes of the mine dump.

The training area consists of concrete mock-ups of the underground working areas; stopes, the cramped, sloping tunnels that follow the line of the gold-bearing reef, and crosscuts and haulages, the high tunnels running from the vertical shafts to the reef. Except for heat, humidity and deafening noise, these models are exact replicas of what the Natives will find underground. Here they can familiarize themselves with rock drills, mine locomotives, mechanical loaders, ore cars, wooden roof supports and shovels under the watchful eye of the training school's superintendent.

After finishing this training course, the Natives go underground for four weeks of actual on-the-spot education. Then they are brought back to the surface for mechanical aptitude and leadership testing. Comparing this testing to that at Germiston is like comparing a baby's teething ring to a Meccano set--the mine tests are harder, more complete and easier to interpret.

They begin with the sort of tests I watched at Germiston, then move on to more complicated problems. To overcome language difficulties, a picture is flashed on a screen at the end of a long, lecture-hall-type room for 10 seconds. Then the testee is given a fixed amount of time to build what he has seen on the screen from the tray of parts on the table in front of him.

The Africans who do well on these tests are considered potential boss boys, machine boys (who run the rock drills), loco drivers and loader operators. The rest are put into categories demanding less mechanical skill--bar boys, who use crowbars to pry loose rock from the roofs of just-blasted tunnels; timber boys, who build the wooden "mat packs" that support the roofs of the stopes; and winch boys, who run the winches which pull ore-collecting scrapers down through the working areas. The Natives who do not do at all well on the tests are classified "lashing boys," a fine-sounding title for Natives who can only be trusted with a shovel.

Some of the trickiest tests are those designed to measure leadership. Those who do best on the aptitude tests are divided into groups of six, taken outside and given a series of difficult problems requiring leadership and teamwork for their solutions. For example, one of these tests began with six Africans standing on a large platform five feet high. Their task was to get themselves and an oil drum from their platform to a second platform, seven feet high, which stood at the other side of a pool of water 20 feet wide. They were not allowed to step on the ground or in the water--to remind them of this a crocodile, carved from wood, squatted menacingly on the edge of the pool showing bloody teeth in a cavernous mouth.

To accomplish the task the potential boss boys were given a length of cast iron pipe and two lengths of wooden pole, all nine feet long, and a few four-foot lengths of rope. The solution, I was told by the fellow in charge, was to insert the two lengths of pole into the ends of the pipe and slide the resulting 27-foot span out over the water, resting on the drum to compensate for the difference in height of two feet between the two platforms. The ropes were for confusion and were unnecessary.

The Natives on the platform all wore pieces of canvas, front and back, painted with large, black numbers from one to six. For a few undecided minutes they stood together on the platform, looking dazedly at the water, the poles and the drum while they mulled over the instructions they had been given. Then Number Two, a young Zulu with fancy ear ornaments, began to talk. The others listened, then began to push the iron pipe out over the water. It was soon obvious that the nine-foot pipe wasn't going to bridge a 20-foot gap, and it was pulled back. There was more talk--then Number Six pointed to the poles and the pipe and the former were inserted into the ends of the latter.

Then, under the combined direction of Number Two and Number Six, the make-shift bridge was pushed out over the water. The end of it was only about four feet from the other platform when the discovery was made that it would have to be raised two feet to bring it to the proper height. A halt was called and a conference was held. The obvious answer was to pull the whole thing back and prop it up with the drum before starting over again.

It quickly became apparent that there was a difference of opinion between Numbers Two and Six and a heated discussion ended with Number Two withdrawing haughtily to one end of the platform and watching while Number Six's plan was put into operation. The plan was simple--three men would lift while the two others pushed. It almost ended in disaster--there was just too much weight out over the water for the men to lift without unbalancing the whole shebang and losing their equipment in the water. The group quickly turned to Number Two who, with a great show of reluctance, came forward to try his luck.

I expected that he would do the conventional--pull the bridge back and start over with the help of the drum--but instead he began knotting together the supposedly useless lengths of rope. When he had finished he had a piece of rope about 10 feet long with a noose at one end. This he handed to the smallest member of the group, Number Four. With himself and the four others sitting on the end of the pole to hold it down, Number Two ordered Number Four to climb out and shinny across. It was quite an ordeal--poor Number Four had to struggle along a wobbly, shaking bridge backwards, in a sitting position.

He made it to the end of the pole--then unwrapped his legs from around it and stood up! He balanced himself there for a few seconds, then began bouncing up and down, gently, like a diver testing the board before his first half-gainer. On his fourth bounce, he jumped--and just made it to the edge of the platform. The rest was comparatively easy. He took his lassoo, roped the end of the pole, then lifted as the others pushed. In a few moments there was a solid bridge across the water and two Natives, one sitting backwards and the other sitting forwards, began to shinny out, rolling the drum between them. When the drum was across, the rest of the Africans followed--until all six and the drum stood triumphantly side by side on the far platform. I couldn't help applauding.

There were other tests of this type--testing to see which of the six boys would take the lead and make the suggestions to get an unfamiliar job done. I learned later that both Number Two and Number Six were made boss boys although the testers gave Two a black mark because he refused to cooperate with Six at one stage in the test I've described above.

Spending several days underground was as revealing as the time I spent wandering

around the bicycle plant. Underground mining is divided into two operations--stoping, the actual process of digging gold, and development, the blasting of tunnels to the gold-bearing reef so that stoping can begin. The basic operations are simple. To break out rock, both in development and stoping, holes are drilled with rock drills run by compressed air. The holes are filled with jellied stick dynamite, tamped solid, attached to fuses and fired, either by electricity or a Native with a "Cheesa" ("fire") stick.

After the explosion, the blasted rock is cleared out. In development this is done with a mechanical loader. In the stopes, which slant at an angle of 30 degrees and which are so low that a man cannot sit up straight in them, the clearing is done by shovel. The blasted rock is then loaded into cars, dumped down a chute which leads to the bottom of the mine and poured into "skips" which carry the ore to the surface. Gold-bearing rock is sent directly to the mill where it is crushed, treated with acids, and smelted.

It didn't take long for me to see that from beginning to end--or almost to end--all the work is done by Natives with the white miners, shift bosses, mine captains and underground managers acting as supervisors. The men on the drills are Natives, the men charging the holes (although this is against regulations) are Natives, the men firing the blasts are Natives, the men clearing the rock are Natives, the men building roof supports are Natives, the men running the underground trains are Natives, the men using the shovels are Natives--everywhere there is work to be done there is a Native doing it. In a stope, for instance, there is one white miner to every 30 Natives--and approximately the same proportion holds true throughout the rest of the mine. The only work that is done entirely by Europeans is the final smelting, in order to prevent the theft of gold or highly concentrated ore.

The proportion of Native to white labor is so great that, if such a thing is possible, production would stop more quickly at President Steyn than at Hercules Phillips if Native Labor became unavailable. The mine management is well aware of this and has been trying to make its more important Native Labor permanent. Around the mine are scattered hundreds of two- and three-bedroomed, hemispherical houses in which the mine expects, eventually, to be able to house many of its boss boys, machine boys and locomotive drivers. These men are the hardest to train, and if the mine can persuade them to stay, bring their families and work longer than their nine, 12 or 18 month contracts, it will mean a considerable saving in training costs.

In other words, the mine is trying to build up a "frozen" skilled labor supply, very much like the Germiston Non-European Affairs Department. Dr. Verwoerd, the Nationalist Minister of Native Affairs, has been opposing President Steyn and other mines strongly, saying that it means building up additional "swart kolle" (black spots) of Natives living on a permanent or semi-permanent basis in a European area. He is even more incensed over the fact that, at the mines, the inhabitants of these bee-hive shaped homes will be Natives from outside the borders of the Union--"foreign" Natives, as if there aren't enough South African Natives for him to worry about already.

There are other indications that the Anglo-American Corporation, which owns the President Steyn Mine as well as several others in the new Free State gold fields, is aware of the absolute necessity of keeping its Native Labor supply happy and healthy. At Welkom, the multi-million dollar "boom town" at the center of the gold fields, is the most modern hospital in South Africa--750 beds, and filled with the latest

equipment for surgery, therapy, radiography and just plain being sick--all for the Natives who work in the mines. At every mine there is a complete, spanking-new, stainless-steel-and-copper brewery for making kaffir beer. There are gleaming, steaming cookers in sanitary kitchens turning out dietician-balanced meals that enable the average miner to gain from five to 15 pounds during a nine-month contract.

The hostels are built around grassy courtyards where Natives off duty can talk and sleep in the sun. The rooms are kept spotlessly clean by a special crew of Africans who work with soap, water, disinfectant and electric waxers while the occupants are underground. Loudspeakers blare all day with a collection of oldish, American popular records. As far as I was concerned, the entertainment value of this particular feature was more than offset by the abrasive effect of 10 hours of Bing and Gary Crosby and Frankie Laine. I'm sure the Africans don't enjoy hearing "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" four or five times a day.

It is normal practice for the mines to maintain stocks of feathers, furs, shields and ornaments for its dancers, but President Steyn goes so far as to employ, full-time, a Machopi Piano maker. This fellow, slightly mad, spends his days making and repairing Machopi Pianos, the xylophone-like instrument that is used to provide music for the Sunday mine dances.

The United Party has not yet officially adopted into its policy the acceptance of economic integration. Yet the evidence is there, in primary as well as secondary industry, that the Native has come to stay--that the flow of Native Labor from the reserves to the industrial centers is not merely a passing phase but is an integral part of South Africa's industrial revolution. Surely the industrialists are quick to see the economic advantage to themselves and the country in having a labor force that is cheap, increasingly more efficient and disorganized.

The Nationalist government must see it too, in terms of increased revenue, productivity, incoming capital and a more favorable balance of trade. But it suits them better to protest that they are afraid of black domination--that Natives are not and can never be a permanent part of South Africa's European industrial set-up. And, in so doing, they win elections.

The election of members to the Transvaal Provincial Council has just taken place, with the Nationalists winning a majority of the seats. This was expected, but it was not expected that the Nationalists, on an overall basis, would win more votes than the rest of the political parties combined. In the 1953 general Parliamentary elections the Nationalists won a majority of Transvaal seats, but failed to "win the election" with a clear majority of the votes cast. This was possible because in the country districts, where the Nationalists won most of their seats, there are fewer voters per constituency than in the urban districts where the United Party is strong.

Since the 1953 elections the United Party has been complaining bitterly that the Nationalists are running the country without a majority of the people behind them. It seems that even this feeble claim is being snatched away from the U.P. Something drastic will have to be done at Bloemfontein in November if the United Party is not to lose more ground. Economic integration may be the answer.

Sincerely,

Peter Bird Martin

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