

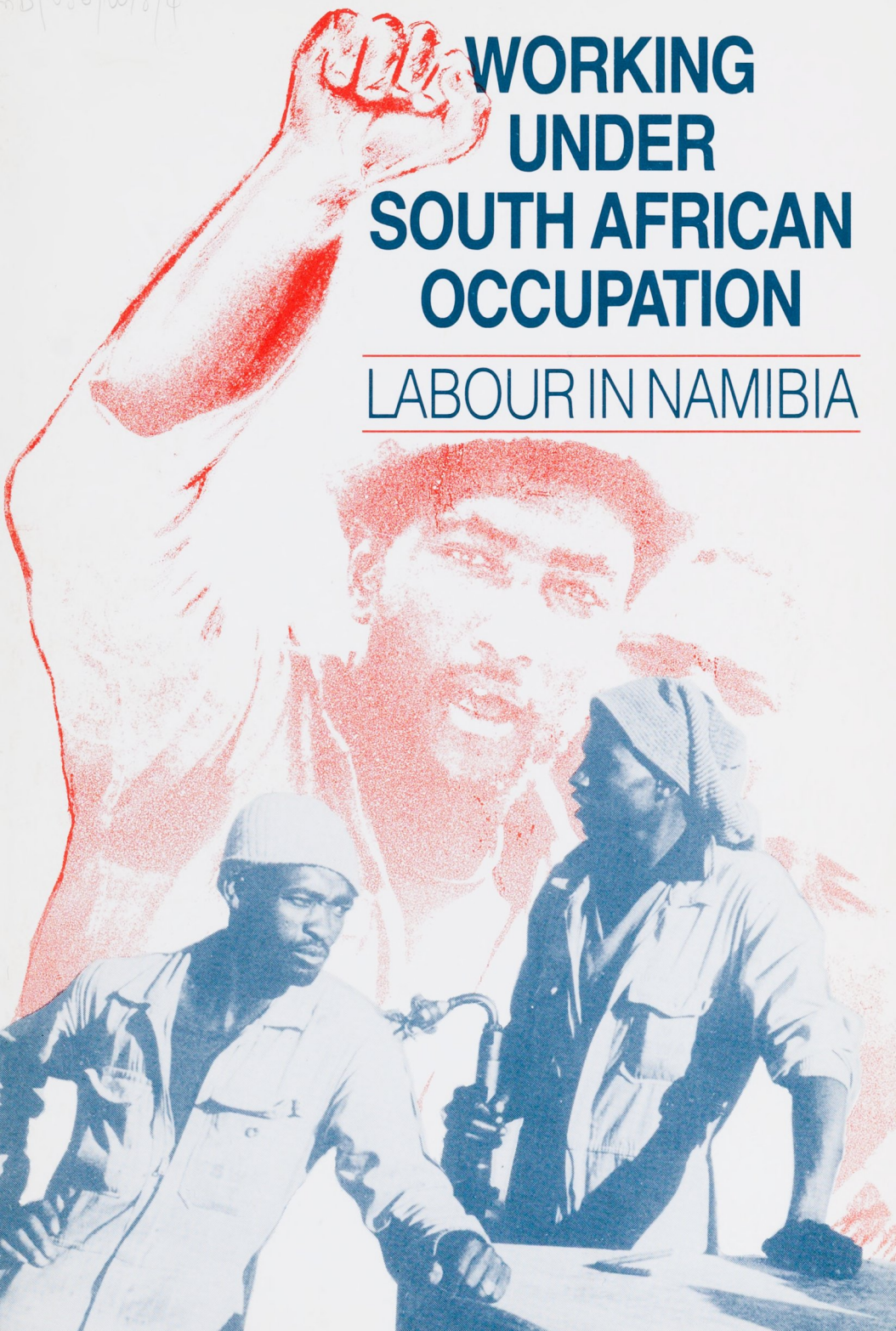
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# WORKING UNDER SOUTH AFRICAN OCCUPATION

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## LABOUR IN NAMIBIA

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Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 14

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## **LABOUR IN NAMIBIA**

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**International Defence & Aid Fund**, Canon Collins House,  
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# ABBREVIATIONS

CDM	Consolidated Diamond Mines
DTA	Democratic Turnhalle Alliance
GST	General Sales Tax
HSL	Household Subsistence Level
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISCOR	(South African) Iron and Steel Corporation
LACAB	Legal Aid and Community Advice Bureau
MPC	Multi-Party Conference
MUN	Mineworkers Union of Namibia
NAFAU	Namibian Food and Allied Union
NBIC	National Building and Investment Corporation
NUM	(South African) National Union of Mineworkers
NUNW	National Union of Namibian Workers
OPO	Ovamboland People's Organisation
PHSL	Primary Household Subsistence Level
PLAN	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
RTZ	Rio Tinto-Zinc Corporation PLC
SADF	South African Defence Force
SWACOL	South West African Confederation of Labour
SWANLA	South West African Native Labour Association
SWAPO	South West African People's Organisation
SWATF	South West African Territory Force
TCL	Tsumeb Corporation Limited

# PREFACE

For the black workers of Namibia, the occupation of their country by tens of thousands of South African troops, and the system of apartheid and colonial rule in the territory means repression, coercion and exploitation.

The international community has recognised South Africa's occupation of Namibia as illegal since 1966, when the United Nations General Assembly ended South Africa's mandate over South West Africa, as Namibia was then known. The UN noted that South Africa had failed in the terms of the original mandate to promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being of the Namibian people. The territory was made a direct UN responsibility until it should gain internationally recognised independence. Although this decision was confirmed by both the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice, it has been defied by South Africa. The most powerful Western governments have yet to bring effective pressure on South Africa to agree to Namibian independence. Pretoria continues to rule Namibia through an Administrator-General, though since June 1985 several small parties known as the Multi-Party Conference (MPC) have been installed in a client administration.

In 1974 the UN Council for Namibia enacted Decree No. 1 for the Protection of the Natural Resources of Namibia, prohibiting the export of Namibia's resources without the consent of the UN. Adopted in response to the activities of companies taking advantage of the conditions created by South African rule, the decree has been widely ignored.

This Fact Paper explains the nature of the labour-control system in Namibia and its origins in colonial rule. The violent expropriation of land by the white minority laid the basis for the migrant-labour system, a key factor in the exploitation of black Namibians. Periodic adjustments in the legislation affecting labour have not altered the fundamental basis of apartheid and the migrant labour system on which it rests.

Namibian workers have a long history of struggle against the conditions imposed on them. Workers have played a vital role in the movement, led by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), to liberate the people of Namibia. This national liberation struggle has combined armed struggle with political mobilisation as well as organisation around labour issues. The Fact Paper documents recent developments in the struggle of Namibian workers to organise in the face of repression.

Owing to restrictions on the media and South African neglect in obtaining and providing reliable statistics, accurate and comprehensive information on the Namibian economy and work-force is not always available. Nevertheless, there is sufficient information to make the situation of workers in Namibia clear. This publication draws together the available information on the labour situation in Namibia at present, placing it briefly in historical context. A more detailed historical treatment of the subject up to 1978 is given in an earlier book published by IDAF, *The Workers of Namibia* by G. and S. Cronje.





# 1. THE ECONOMY AND THE WORK-FORCE

Namibia possesses a rich variety of natural and human resources. However, the territory's history both under German colonialism and, since 1915, under South African control, is characterised by the extreme impoverishment and exploitation of its black majority by white colonial rulers.

German colonialists dispossessed the Namibian people of most of their land during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Campaigns of genocide were waged to stamp out African resistance. Central and Southern Namibia was laid waste. Most of the land was divided up among concession companies, white settlers and the colonial government. However, the north of Namibia never came under German colonial rule. As a result of the loss of their land and livestock, surviving Africans in the south were forced into labour on settler farms, usually under conditions amounting to slavery. After the discovery of copper and diamonds, workers were recruited from the north for the mines and railways, returning home after completing short contractual terms.<sup>1</sup>

The colonial system was extended after the South African occupation of Namibia during the First World War, and white South African settlers took over much of the best farming land. Resistance in the north was crushed. Migrant labour was entrenched through segregation and the restriction of the black population to marginal 'reserves' later known as bantustans. Africans were forced into wage-labour through a Vagrancy Proclamation which threatened the homeless or jobless with imprisonment, and in 1922 the 'pass laws' were introduced, requiring Africans to carry identity documents and restricting their movement. Taxes placed further pressures on Africans to enter the labour market. After 1948, South African apartheid laws were extended to Namibia and the system of contract labour was expanded.<sup>2</sup>

By ensuring that the bantustans lacked the resources to support the population assigned to them, white employers were guaranteed a supply of labour. And by forcing the families of African workers to live in the bantustans, employers were freed from responsibility for providing for their welfare.

## THE COLONIAL ECONOMY

The present state of the Namibian economy is the result of decades of colonial exploitation. It has become closely integrated with the South African economy, providing a source of primary products, a captive market for South African exports, and – until the recession of the 1980s – a profitable area for South African investment. Fluctuations or crises in the South African economy have invariably affected Namibia.<sup>3</sup>

Foreign corporations, mostly from South Africa, the UK, USA, the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Canada control and exploit most

of the mineral resources in Namibia. South African companies and state corporations have substantial interests in the mining, fishing and other sectors, amounting to 20 per cent of all foreign investment in the late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Namibia imports 85 per cent of the goods it consumes, including half its food. Ninety per cent of items produced in Namibia are exported with very little processing to South Africa and elsewhere. The economy is imbalanced, underdeveloped and mismanaged.<sup>5</sup>

Every year between 20 per cent and 37 per cent of the gross domestic product leaves the country, mainly in the form of profits to foreign companies or salaries remitted to expatriates or South Africans working in the territory.<sup>6</sup> In terms of income per head of the population, in 1981 white Namibians received twenty-five times the income of black Namibians in rural areas and twelve times as much in urban areas.<sup>7</sup> In 1986 the average ratio of white to black incomes was estimated at 18:1.<sup>8</sup> The black population, constituting over 90 per cent of the population, received only one-eighth of the gross domestic product in 1977.<sup>9</sup>

Public expenditure is highly imbalanced, with over 40 per cent being expended on administration, and 60 per cent of non-capital spending being allocated to governmental wages and salaries.<sup>10</sup> This expenditure – a result of South African efforts to build up bantustan administrations and to establish a multi-tiered complex of apartheid structures – has placed a tremendous strain on the economy. In addition, the war against SWAPO has severely disrupted agriculture and created a climate of economic instability. Gross financial mismanagement and corruption have accelerated the economic decline.<sup>11</sup>

The mining industry contributed 26 per cent of the gross domestic product in 1984. Three transnational corporations control 95 per cent of mining production and exports, chiefly uranium, diamonds and base metals.<sup>12</sup> Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM), owned by the South African transnational De Beers, holds a monopoly over diamond mining in Namibia. Rossing Uranium Limited, whose majority shareholder is the British-based transnational Rio Tinto-Zinc, operates the largest open-cast uranium mine in the world near Swakopmund. The Tsumeb Corporation Limited (TCL), in which the British company Consolidated Goldfields has a major interest, mines, smelts and refines more than 90 per cent of Namibia's total base-metal production, including copper, lead and zinc.<sup>13</sup>

The depletion of Namibia's mineral resources was revealed in a report published in March 1986 by the Thirion Commission of Inquiry.\* The Commission found that both CDM and TCL had systematically overmined, severely depleting resources, and had stockpiled vast quantities of Namibian minerals outside the country. Furthermore, mining companies had paid only minimal taxes – TCL, for example, the report said, had paid no tax on its Namibian holdings between 1979 and 1985. Official bodies, such as the Diamond Board, Customs and Excise and the Inspectorate of Mines, had failed to exercise effective control and the mining companies had engaged in various practices such as transfer pricing, avoidance of export duties and the mining of only high-grade ore.<sup>14</sup>

\* *Commission of Inquiry into Alleged Irregularities and Misapplication of Property in Representative Authorities and the Central Authority of South West Africa: Control by the State over the Prospecting and Mining for, and Disposing of Minerals in South West Africa.*



**Table 1**

Namibia's Gross Domestic Product by Kind of Economic Activity, 1984

	<i>Million rands</i>	<i>%</i>
Mining	510.4	26.1
General government	411.5	21.0
Wholesale and retail trade, catering and accommodation	272.2	13.9
Finance, insurance, real estate and business services	150.4	7.7
Agriculture and fishing	136.8	7.0
Transport and communication	131.3	6.7
Manufacturing	102.6	5.2
Electricity and water	74.3	12.1
Construction (contractors)	62.2	
Other products	60.9	
Community, social and personal services	39.9	
GDP at factor cost	1,952.2	

*Source:* SWA/Namibia Ministry of Finance.

The two other significant sectors of the Namibian economy are fishing and agriculture, which employ three-fifths of the economically active population but contribute only one-sixth of the gross domestic product. The fishing industry, which is dominated by South African and other foreign interests, suffered serious decline in the late 1970s as a result of overfishing. A number of fish-processing plants in Walvis Bay were closed, dismantled and shipped to other countries. Walvis Bay was annexed for political reasons by Pretoria in 1977 and is administered as part of South Africa. Taxes and profits from the fishing industry and the port, Namibia's only deep-water facility, accrue directly to South Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Agriculture is divided into a commercial sector under white control and ownership and a marginalised black sector. This division is a direct result of the colonial expropriation of land from the black majority under German and South African rule. White settler farmers using black labour occupy large ranches on which beef and karakul (Persian lamb) pelts and wool are produced for export. Some 5,000 white-owned ranches take up over 80 per cent of the good stock-raising land. In contrast, with few exceptions black farmers are restricted to the bantustans. In the northern bantustans they engage in mixed stock and arable farming and in the central and southern bantustans in raising cattle, karakul sheep and goats. Two-thirds of the Namibian population live in the rural areas and depend wholly or partly on agriculture for their existence. In the north, subsistence agriculture is seriously disrupted by the South African army. Farmers have repeatedly complained of armoured vehicles deliberately driving over ripened crops and knocking down fences. In some areas, local agriculture has also been disrupted by the establishment of farms to supply army bases.<sup>16</sup>

The secondary sector of the Namibian economy is very small, contributing about one-seventh of gross domestic product and one-sixteenth of employment. Manufacturing contributed only about 5 per cent of the gross domestic product in 1984. The closure of fish-processing plants in the early



1980s led to the further undermining of the secondary sector, despite a slight recovery in these industries in the mid-1980s.<sup>17</sup>

There is a large informal sector, which is partly a result of massive and growing unemployment in Namibia's black population. (*See Chapter 3.*) The north of the country is dotted with 'cuca-shops' – general trading stores often doubling as bars – and vendors operate in all urban centres. Without unemployment benefits, many unemployed Namibians are forced to make ends meet through a variety of marginal economic activities: recycling paper or bottles, brewing beer, selling produce by the roadside, making tourist trinkets and so on. Women and children especially are involved in such activities in an effort to supplement household incomes. For many Namibians, these informal activities make the difference between life and death. Often their initiatives are suppressed by the authorities – for example, market vending is illegal in Windhoek.

## THE LABOUR FORCE

The black work-force in Namibia has been shaped by decades of colonial and apartheid policies, with the bantustan and contract-labour systems the determining factors. Under a blueprint drawn up in 1962–63 by the Odendaal Commission of Inquiry into South West African Affairs, the process by which the black population was dispossessed of most of its land was accelerated. Black Namibians were divided into 'population groups', ostensibly on the grounds of 'ethnic' difference. Whites, although they come from Afrikaans, English, German and other backgrounds, were treated as a homogeneous group. Separate administrative authorities were established for black Namibians in order to entrench the population divisions created by apartheid.

A constant supply of cheap black labour for the white employers has been ensured from the bantustans. Poor soil conditions or overcrowding relative to available farming land, lack of services and water supplies and the almost complete absence of local employment opportunities contribute to this. Virtually all households in the bantustans depend for at least part of their income on cash wages from relatives employed in the white-owned commercial economy.<sup>18</sup>

Statistics on the size and composition of the work-force are fragmentary and official figures tend to be lower than those estimated by independent researchers. This is consistent with discrepancies between independent estimates of the total Namibian population and lower official figures which are generally regarded as inaccurate. The 1981 official census put the total Namibian population at 1,009,900. A study prepared for the United Nations Institute for Namibia estimated the population at 1,250,000 in 1977, while it was estimated by the UN in 1985 to be 1.6 million. Only a tiny proportion of the population – about 85,000 – is classified as white.<sup>19</sup>

The UN Institute for Namibia has estimated the economically active population of the territory at over 500,000, of whom nearly half are engaged in subsistence agriculture. A further 56,500 are employed on commercial farms and ranches, leaving 220,000 Namibians engaged in non-agricultural employment. The official South African figure for the economically active

population is only 200,000, excluding peasants, household employees, the self-employed and members of the armed forces. This huge discrepancy illustrates the difficulties involved in making use of official South African statistics.<sup>20</sup>

Of the total work-force, in 1977 the UN Institute for Namibia estimated that 36,500 workers were classified as white and 42,000 as Coloured. This left approximately 170,000 African workers employed outside traditional subsistence agriculture. Of these it was estimated that 110,000 were migrant labourers working on contracts. In contrast, almost the entire white labour force was employed as professionals, managers, businessmen, supervisors, technicians and other relatively high-paid jobs.<sup>21</sup>

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Discrimination in education and skills training perpetuates the exploitation of black workers. With the exception of church-run establishments, schools are segregated. Schools for black children are overcrowded, lack facilities and suffer from a serious shortage of adequately qualified teachers. The amount spent on each white schoolchild is six to ten times that spent on an African child, depending on the bantustan administration involved. Many black parents are required to pay school fees which they cannot afford.<sup>22</sup> In white schools the teacher/pupil ratio was 13 to 1 in 1985, while in those controlled by the Ovambo and Hereroland administrations it was 44 to 1 and 31 to 1 respectively. Similarly, while there was one classroom for every 11 pupils in white schools, in schools controlled by the Ovambo and Hereroland authorities there was one for every 59 and 38 pupils respectively.<sup>23</sup>

In Katutura, where most Africans who work in Windhoek live, 60 per cent of adults have only primary-school education, while only 6 per cent have completed secondary school. Nationally, the situation is far worse, with less than 1 per cent of black Namibians having completed secondary school. There is a 70 per cent drop-out rate between primary and secondary school. Every year only 300 to 400 African students finish secondary education, and only a fraction of these gain the exemption needed for university entrance. In 1984-85, more white pupils gained university exemption than the total number of black students who finished secondary school, even though only one out of every thirteen Namibians is classified as white.<sup>24</sup>

There are three agricultural schools in Namibia. The main school for blacks in the Ovambo bantustan had twenty pupils in 1982. By contrast there were sixty white trainees at the agricultural college at Neudam, which is reserved for whites.<sup>25</sup>

Poor education and training facilities result in bleak employment prospects for black Namibians. Very few are employed in senior administrative or technical jobs. Black workers fill the most menial, unskilled and low-paid jobs, with little chance of advancement. Traditionally, nursing and teaching have been virtually the only fields in which Namibians have been allowed to advance beyond the level of unskilled or semi-skilled labour. As a result of South African attempts to establish bantustan administrative structures and to set up structures inside Namibia to allow a transition to nominal South



African-controlled 'independence', a tiny black élite has been developed. At the top of the scale are the appointees filling central administrative posts in Windhoek, as well as a few black businessmen and managers. Beneath this small group lies a larger class of bantustan, military and police employees, most of whom are substantially better paid than blacks working in other fields. The contrast is particularly acute in the bantustans, where the army and the bantustan authorities often provide the only local employment possibilities.<sup>26</sup>

These changes have not affected the majority of Namibians. According to one study, published in 1984, whites occupied 97 per cent of administrative, commercial and managerial posts. Of the total number of Africans employed, only 1.5 per cent were in white-collar jobs, and only 8 per cent of employed Coloured people were in white-collar jobs. Ninety-eight per cent of unskilled workers were black; 60 per cent of skilled workers were white.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years some of the corporations operating in Namibia have established scholarships, donated funds to educational institutions and helped establish training colleges. These measures have had the effect of alleviating a shortage of artisans by training some black workers for semi-skilled jobs previously held by white artisans who could command higher wages. Although considerable publicity has been given to these schemes the numbers benefiting from them are small. The great majority of black Namibians are excluded from advancing beyond the level of unskilled, low-paid workers.<sup>28</sup>

Black women suffer additional disadvantages in education, training and employment opportunities. A survey carried out in 1980 by SWAPO Women's Council in the Namibian refugee settlements in Angola and Zambia found that 99 per cent of women aged between 36 and 50 were illiterate. Only 1 per cent had attended school for three to four years.<sup>29</sup> Almost all vocational training is for boys or men. The main opportunities for black women in skilled or professional work are in nursing or teaching. The majority of black women in paid employment work as domestic servants in white households, as cleaners or laundrywomen, or on farms.

## ECONOMIC RECESSION

Since 1981, the economy has been hit by a severe economic recession. South Africa's war against the national liberation movement SWAPO has inflicted serious damage on the infrastructure, services and agriculture in the north of the country. The war has forced thousands of Namibians to flee into exile or into urban centres in search of work and safety. A prolonged drought between 1980 and 1983 decimated animal herds. Coupled with market changes, this led to the closure of meat-processing plants. World recession in mining has resulted in the closure of several mines, with many redundancies. The decline of the fishing industry in the late 1970s and the resultant closure of fish-processing plants left the majority of black workers in the Walvis Bay area unemployed, and unemployment has risen sharply throughout Namibia.



## 2. CONTRACT LABOUR AND THE PASS LAWS

One of the main instruments of colonial control over black labour has been the pass-law system, under which all African workers were required to possess documents and official permits regulating where they were allowed to live and work. Under the *Native Administration Proclamation* of 1922, all Africans were required to show their passes on demand to the police, and faced arrest for failing to produce the documents. Other legislation, such as the *Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation* of 1924 and the *Masters and Servants Proclamation* of 1920, exerted control over Africans in Namibia. Unless Africans could prove to be gainfully employed, they were deemed to be 'idle' and 'disorderly' and could be summarily evicted to the reserves.

The rationale of this system was to ensure that the required number of labourers was available to work for white employers, while those without employment did not remain in the area designated 'white'. It also acted to prevent competition between employers so as to keep wages as low as possible. Furthermore, employers could more easily wash their hands of responsibility for caring for dependants, the sick or the retired. Very few Africans were permitted to reside permanently in urban areas. A survey carried out in the late 1960s in Katutura, the African township outside Windhoek, found that only about 30 per cent of the adult men living there could claim permanent residence. Even then, redundancy, a change of jobs, or a visit to another area, could lead to the loss of residence rights. Insecurity governed every African worker's life.<sup>1</sup>

Various techniques of 'influx control' ensured that at least a quarter of black workers in the south and central parts of the country were forced to reside in the bantustans and work as migrant labourers. All labour from the northern bantustans was recruited on a contract basis.

### THE CONTRACT-LABOUR SYSTEM

Before the general strike of 1971–72 led to a change in conditions, all migrant workers from the northern bantustans had to register with the SWA Native Labour Association (SWANLA), a semi-official recruitment body set up in 1926 by the large mines. The alternative to registering was generally a life of poverty since there was little work or income to be found in the bantustans, and no one was permitted to leave them except through SWANLA. Women were not allowed to register with SWANLA and were forced to remain in the bantustans. Once registered, workers had no choice over what kind of work they did, where it would be or how much they would be paid – this was controlled by SWANLA. A worker could be sent to work in a mine, on a farm, or in domestic service, regardless of skill or preference. He could neither choose his employer nor negotiate his pay.

Vinnia Ndadi, a contract worker who was employed as a clerk at SWANLA's headquarters in Grootfontein in the 1950s, described the recruitment process:

They were put in groups for the fishing industry, diamond mines, smaller mines, farms, hotels, domestic work, and so on. The loudspeaker called them to the office. SWANLA officials assigned jobs, matching names with the notices from companies and individuals wanting workers. . . . Each man's name was called and he was given a contract to sign . . . of course there was no choosing or refusing.<sup>2</sup>

Migrant workers from the northern bantustans were usually given contracts lasting between twelve and eighteen months. On completion, they were required to return to the bantustan within three days before starting a new job. This prevented migrants from gaining permanent residence rights in the urban areas.

## MODIFICATIONS

Since the early 1970s growing resistance inside Namibia and increasing international pressure has forced the South African regime to modify some aspects of the Namibian apartheid system. In 1971, contract workers initiated a general strike which became an organised expression of hatred of the contract-labour system. The main organisers of the strike were from the SWAPO Youth League; and the contract workers were soon joined by thousands of other black workers from almost every town in Namibia. In the wake of the strike a number of adjustments were made to the system. SWANLA was abolished, and some sections of influx and labour legislation were amended. These changes were designed partly to undercut worker resistance and to mollify international opinion, and partly in response to the changing labour requirements of employers.

SWANLA was replaced by a network of labour bureaux operated by bantustan authorities and by white employment officers. Migrant workers were required to register with these bureaux and accept the jobs offered. In practice, the bureaux were often bypassed by workers, and control over workers was eased. Some of the large mining companies, for example, began to recruit contract labour directly. Through the 1971–72 strike, workers gained a number of tactical victories, and some of the harshest conditions of contract labour were lifted – for example, breaking a contract was no longer a criminal offence. However, the basic system remained in place.

Further changes came in 1975, when South Africa set up the Turnhalle Conference. This conference, consisting of figures participating in South Africa's administrative structures, aimed to draw up a constitution for a nominally independent Namibia. To achieve a measure of credibility, the Turnhalle Conference established a committee to consider the workings of the pass laws.

After warnings from an official of the white South West African Administration of the 'chaotic economic and social conditions' that would result from abolishing existing controls, the Turnhalle abandoned its initial intention of recommending the abolition of pass laws. It proposed instead that every Namibian should, in addition, be required to carry an identity document. (These cards were introduced in 1979.) It was evident, however, that the old 'pass laws' were no longer an effective way of controlling labour.



Thousands of Namibians were illegally employed or resident in urban areas and there was continuing labour unrest.<sup>3</sup>

Resistance inside Namibia as well as international pressure led to the collapse of the Turnhalle in early 1977 and to preparations for the transition to independence under a United Nations plan (UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978) negotiated by five Western members of the UN Security Council. In terms of this plan, South Africa installed an Administrator-General in Namibia who was charged, among other things, with repealing repressive legislation. (The independence plan, originally approved by both SWAPO and the South Africa regime, and still the only internationally accepted mode for Namibian independence, has since been continually sabotaged by Pretoria.)

The Administrator-General, with full powers to legislate and administer Namibia on behalf of the South African regime, introduced a flurry of decrees. On 20 October 1977 he repealed eight sections of the Native Administration Proclamation of 1922, and sections of the Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation of 1924. Africans were no longer required to carry passes, and could remain in an urban area without a permit beyond the previous limit of 72 hours. This apparently fundamental change – the abolition of influx control – was, however, qualified by restrictions. African work-seekers still could not seek or accept jobs without official permission through registration at a labour bureau, and had to register their contracts. Fines for employers failing to register their workers were increased from R100 to R300 or six months' imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

Although the period after 1977 has been characterised by a shift towards a partially open labour market, serious restrictions on movement of Africans to urban areas remain. In particular, the South African authorities have attempted to restrict urban influx through their control over housing and by using residence certificates to police black urban dwellers. Overcrowding in the segregated African urban residential areas had always been a problem: housing stock has not been increased sufficiently to cope with increased migration into urban areas. The housing shortage has been exacerbated by the introduction of leasehold and home-ownership schemes which put houses beyond the reach of most black Namibians. As a result, huge squatter settlements have grown up in urban areas.

In theory, Africans were granted the right to form or join registered trade unions by an amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Ordinance introduced in 1978. They were also theoretically entitled to strike, but only after compulsory conciliation procedures had failed. In practice, unions had to be registered before they could be legally recognised as bargaining partners and registration was subject to several restrictive criteria, including official approval of the constitution and finances. Moreover, the organisation of legal strike action is virtually impossible under the 1978 amendment and the host of security laws. The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), which is allied to SWAPO, was prevented from registering by a clause in the legislation prohibiting any affiliation to a political party. Farm workers and domestic workers were prohibited from joining even registered unions. (*This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.*)<sup>5</sup> In 1977 the pass laws were extended to Walvis Bay, Namibia's only deep-water port, which is now administered by South Africa as part of the Cape

Province. African residents of the enclave were compelled to carry passes in the same way as Africans in South Africa and could be 'deported' to a bantustan. South African labour legislation, in many ways more restrictive than that in Namibia, was also imposed.<sup>6</sup>

## CONTROL TIGHTENED

In the early 1980s the possession of an identity document (ID Card) was made compulsory, and a reintroduction of influx control was proposed. The *Identification of Persons Act* (AG63) was introduced in November 1979. It required every person in Namibia aged 16 and over to be in possession of an identity document, which must be presented to police, military or other authorities on demand or within a 'reasonable period'. Failure to produce the document incurs a R500 fine or six months' imprisonment. The measure was widely criticised as an attempt to provide a population register to enable the regime to conscript black Namibians into the South West African Territory Force (SWATF), the local component of the South African Defence Force (SADF). The ID cards were a prerequisite for employment although, unlike the old passes, they did not directly regulate the movement of Africans. Previously, during the Turnhalle period, there had been numerous reports of employers demanding membership cards of the South African-backed Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) before employing people.<sup>7</sup>

In 1984, a draft *Manpower Bureau Proclamation* directly linked possession of an identity card with securing employment. It provided for the creation of a central Manpower Bureau under the authority of the Secretary of Civic Affairs and Manpower, and of local labour bureaux in particular districts.<sup>8</sup> The legislation would enable the authorities to keep tight control over a registered work-force, and possibly deny employment to those deemed 'undesirable'. The measure provoked widespread protests from a number of organisations, which condemned it as a further attempt to reintroduce the pass laws. In July 1985 the authorities announced that the draft proclamation would not be enacted.<sup>9</sup>

Control and repression of the Namibian work-force also takes place through general restrictions imposed on the Namibian people. Detention without trial is provided for by at least four separate pieces of legislation: *Proclamations* AG9 and AG 26, the *Internal Security Act* (1950) and the *Terrorism Act*. Proclamation AG 26 is also used to impose restrictions after release similar to South Africa's banning orders. Meetings throughout the country are restricted by the *Prohibition and Notification of Meetings Act* (1981), while other gatherings fall under the *Riotous Assemblies Act*. In the northern bantustans curfews are in force preventing movement after dark. Since 1985 entry without police permit into the northern and north-eastern bantustans has been forbidden, effectively sealing them off from the rest of the country. All of these measures constrain workers' freedom of movement and interfere with attempts to organise labour.

With the repressive powers at their disposal, the occupation police and military forces have been given a free rein to intimidate and repress the Namibian population. Throughout Namibia's history, efforts to organise and



resist the illegal South African occupation – including efforts at labour organisation – have been met with what a visiting British church delegation to Namibia has described as ‘a reign of arbitrary terror against which the local people have no redress’.<sup>10</sup>

Although the official ‘pass laws’ have been repealed, many legislative restraints remain which restrict black workers’ rights. South African policies have led to the creation of a small black élite, but the lot of the vast majority of workers is poverty, ill-treatment and insecurity. Black workers remain oppressed and exploited. Health, unemployment and retirement benefits are grossly inadequate and discriminatory. Despite the relaxation of official segregation in housing, black workers live in generally overcrowded and inadequate accommodation; families are prevented from joining workers who are accommodated in ‘single quarters’ at workers’ compounds; there is inadequate legal protection against victimisation and maltreatment at work; for the growing numbers of unemployed, there is no unemployment pay and little chance of finding a job. Furthermore, the political repression carried out by the South African occupation authorities, as well as specific restrictions on trade unionism and repressive actions by employers, prevent workers from organising effectively to improve conditions. It is these aspects which will be examined in the following chapters.

### 3. WAGES AND POVERTY

No comprehensive official statistics are available for the distribution of income and wages in different sectors of the Namibian economy. Information has to be gleaned from newspaper reports and some partial surveys carried out by researchers or journalists. In the mining sector, wages increased after the 1971–72 strike. All the main mining companies have introduced non-racial wage scales since the late 1970s and now pay well above the national average. However, almost all skilled and managerial posts continue to be filled by whites. Over 85 per cent of the 1,000 specialists employed by TCL in 1983 were white and at Rossing 78 per cent of skilled workers and 97 per cent of those in the professional grades were white.<sup>1</sup>

In 1985 Rossing stated that none of its 2,500 employees earned less than R356 per month.<sup>2</sup> A CDM spokesman stated that the minimum wage for an unskilled employee was R310 a month.<sup>3</sup> These two companies were paying some of the highest wages in Namibia. Rates of pay at other mines, such as TCL, which with a work-force of around 5,200 in 1986 (4,000 black) is the largest mine employer, are substantially lower.<sup>4</sup> Only 5 per cent of the income from Namibian mining operations in normal years is estimated to be paid out in wages to black workers.<sup>5</sup>

Employment in the mines accounts for approximately 5 per cent of the waged work-force.<sup>6</sup> In most other sectors, wages are considerably lower. For example, in 1985 the starting wage for an unskilled worker with the Windhoek Municipality was R174 a month.<sup>7</sup> A survey of Katutura township in Windhoek carried out by the Catholic Church in 1986 revealed that 31 per cent of workers earned less than R100 a month, more than two-thirds earned less than R200 and only 14 per cent earned over R300.<sup>8</sup>

Domestic workers and farm labourers are among the lowest-paid Namibian workers. It was revealed in 1985 that most domestic servants earned between R50 and R70 per month.<sup>9</sup> A reporter found in November 1984 that domestic servants in Mariental in the south of the country earned between R20 and R40 per month.<sup>10</sup> Domestic workers in Katutura were found in 1986 to have an average income of R60 per month.<sup>11</sup> A booklet published by a group of white women in 1984 drew attention to the extremely low wages paid to domestic workers, and to their lack of bargaining power because of their isolated position and the high level of unemployment. The author of the booklet recommended that a full-time domestic worker not living on the employer's premises should be paid R145.50 per month if unskilled, and R177 per month if skilled. For a full-time unskilled domestic living on the premises, she recommended R125 per month for a 47-hour week, excluding meals, working clothes and transport costs.<sup>12</sup>

There is little recent information on wages paid to farm labourers. Their isolation on white-owned farms makes them entirely dependent on the goodwill of the employer, with little scope for bargaining. A large part of their wages is paid in the form of consumer goods such as maize, sugar, meat, tea, coffee etc. – although it may consist only of sacks of maize and occasional meat. The benefits of payment in kind to black farm workers are largely illusory, food and housing provided by the employer being generally



very poor.<sup>13</sup> Contract workers are paid less than local workers, and women and children are paid less than men. The minimum wage for agricultural workers was around R16 per month in the early 1980s, according to one researcher, but in one reported instance in 1980 a farmer was paying a worker R4 per month.<sup>14</sup> In 1984 it was reported that some farmers had not been paying cash wages to their workers at all.<sup>15</sup>

Reports on the situation of workers employed in the fishing industry in 1984 spoke of 'hundreds of workers in Walvis Bay facing starvation'. Fish-factory workers were being paid between 50 and 65 cents an hour, while domestic servants in the area were paid on average 63 cents an hour.<sup>16</sup> A report by the University of Port Elizabeth had recommended a basic wage of R1.80 per hour.<sup>17</sup>

By comparison, white employees enjoy high salaries and a comfortable standard of living. According to a recent survey by the UN Institute for Namibia, white wages average R20,000 annually and black wages only R1,000.<sup>18</sup> Namibia has one of the world's most extreme disparities in income distribution, with the top 10 per cent receiving 56 per cent of total income and the poorest 40 per cent of the population receiving only 6 or 7 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

## **RISING COST OF LIVING**

Inflation rates in Namibia have been in the region of 15 per cent in recent years, with food prices registering even higher increases.<sup>20</sup> In 1981 and 1982 food prices rose by over 25 per cent each year.<sup>21</sup> In July 1984, the cost of many goods rose further with an increase in general sales tax (GST) from 7 to 9 per cent; this followed an increase from 6 to 7 per cent in 1983.<sup>22</sup> Prices of staples such as brown bread have increased and there have been moves to end subsidies on basic foodstuffs.<sup>23</sup> These increases in GST and in the price of basic commodities have hit the poor hardest. Prices, especially of food, have outstripped wage increases. This is reflected in a fall in individual consumption figures.<sup>24</sup>

## **UNEMPLOYMENT**

Economic recession, drought and the disruption caused to the economy by South Africa's military onslaught are factors which have led to growing unemployment. Retrenchments and redundancies have affected workers in the mining, agricultural and commercial sectors. Unemployment is also used as a political tool – former detainees and SWAPO activists are deliberately refused jobs. There is no provision for unemployment payments to black workers, although white unemployed parents can apply for maintenance grants for their children.<sup>25</sup>

According to official figures unemployment grew from 10.5 per cent in 1969 to 12.3 per cent in 1975, with a sharp rise to 20.6 per cent in 1984. The 1984 figure was based on a potential labour force of 33 per cent or 379,500 potential workers out of a total population of 1,150,000 with 301,500 people in employment. This would leave 78,000 unemployed. The number of people entering the labour market every year between 1975 and 1984 was about



8,700. Of these, only an average of 2,035 people (23 per cent) could be absorbed annually.<sup>26</sup> These official figures are based on inaccurate and partial statistics.

It is difficult to give an overall estimate of unemployment owing to the large number of people self-employed, engaged in subsistence agriculture or working in the informal sector. A study by the UN Institute for Namibia has estimated that about half the overall labour force is without full-time paid employment. Although about half of these people are engaged in peasant or informal-sector activity (leaving 25 per cent of the work-force formally unemployed), very few of the peasant or informal sector incomes are sufficient to sustain households.<sup>27</sup> The same study noted that many of those regarded as employed by the South African authorities are substantially 'underemployed' in terms of the number of hours they work. Many Namibian workers, particularly those in the fishing, fish-processing and commercial agriculture sectors are employed only on a seasonal basis. The study also stated that if 'underemployment' was defined in terms of 'abnormally low income from low-productivity economic activity which is inadequate for meeting basic needs' then 80 per cent of people engaged in small-scale agriculture in the bantustans could be classed as 'underemployed'.<sup>28</sup>

Urban unemployment is severe and only partly ameliorated by informal-sector activity. A church survey of Katutura revealed that 43 per cent of workers were unemployed and said that they were looking for work. More than 40 per cent had been unemployed for longer than two years. Many of them had given up hope of finding a formal job and were barely making a living by selling goods on the streets or in illegal markets.<sup>29</sup>

Rumours of possible vacancies draw large crowds of work-seekers. In Windhoek's industrial areas, people wander around or queue up outside offices and factories in the hope of a day's employment.<sup>30</sup> In Katutura, more than a hundred job-seekers were seen gathering outside the Municipal Building on work days during 1984. Approached by a reporter, many said they were destitute and becoming desperate in the search for a job. A large number had left their families in the rural areas, thinking they might have more luck in Windhoek.<sup>31</sup> Huge crowds of job-seekers were also reported to have congregated before the gates of Swavleis, a meat-processing plant, in early 1985, in the hope that new workers were needed.<sup>32</sup> In January 1986 a crowd of between 150 and 200 women who gathered outside the Manpower and Civic Affairs building in Windhoek was forcibly dispersed by the police.<sup>33</sup> A 1986 survey carried out by the parastatal National Building and Investment Corporation revealed that in the Tsumeb, Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz areas, unemployment in black townships ranged between 37 and 55 per cent.<sup>34</sup>

Unemployment in virtually all sectors of the Namibian economy has increased in recent years. In the mining sector, total employment fell by 13.6 per cent in 1983, reducing the work-force from 19,580 to 16,903. During 1984 a further 11 per cent drop was reported.<sup>35</sup> In December 1983, TCL announced the closure of its Matchless mine near Windhoek and the retrenchment of 920 workers (690 of whom were black) and there were reductions at Tsumeb in 1984.<sup>36</sup> Rossing stated in July 1982 that it had stopped recruiting new employees, and that the forty to fifty vacancies arising each

month by employees leaving would not be filled.<sup>37</sup> Employment at Rossing fell from 3,200 in 1983 to 2,500 in 1985, according to the company's general manager.<sup>38</sup>

The drastic decline of the agricultural sector has led to thousands of farm workers being laid off. The depletion of the karakul and cattle population as a result of drought reduced the contribution of agriculture to Namibia's gross domestic product from over 9 per cent in 1982 to 6.5 per cent in 1983. During that period many white farmers abandoned their farms, often moving to South Africa. A factor contributing to the abandonment of farms by their white owners has been SWAPO military operations in the heartland of the farming region around Tsumeb and Grootfontein. Many white farmers are reported to have moved permanently into nearby towns.<sup>39</sup> In late 1984, it was calculated that of the 5,200 commercial farms owned by 4,500 white farmers, only 3,500 remained occupied.<sup>40</sup> As a result of the decline of agriculture thousands of job-seekers have poured into the towns from the rural areas, exacerbating urban unemployment.<sup>41</sup>

The meat-processing industry, relying directly on the farming sector, has also been hard hit. Damara Meat Packers announced in August 1983 that it was closing its abattoir in Otavi, leaving nearly 400 workers jobless. Workers at the Karoo meat plant had been laid off, as had employees at the meat-canning factory in Oshakati. The abattoir in Windhoek was closed for several months in October 1984, owing to insufficient stock. 'Superfluous' staff were told to return to the bantustans for four or five months. Even in mid-1986, after the drought had broken, the Swavleis meat plants at Otavi and Okahandja remained closed, while black workers in Windhoek were faced with redundancies or pay cuts and reduced working hours. The Windhoek workers threatened strike action, protesting that a planned reduction in working hours would be applied only to African employees.<sup>42</sup>

Jobs have been no more secure in commerce and industry. Metje & Ziegler, a large locally owned retail business, cut its work-force by 11.5 per cent in 1982 and further cuts followed in 1983.<sup>43</sup> Sixty-five per cent of jobs in the construction industry were cut between 1981 and 1983.<sup>44</sup> Workers in public sectors also faced lay-offs – South African Transport Services axed 170 workers between July and October 1982. Further cuts were made to the rail service in later years.<sup>45</sup>

While official concern has been expressed over the high level of unemployment, virtually nothing has been done to alleviate the problem. In his 1984 budget speech, the Administrator-General asserted that 'unemployment will necessarily have to be high to ensure that price increases will stay under control'.<sup>46</sup>

The Multi-Party Conference (MPC) administration made a number of calls for job-creation programmes and relief to the unemployed but no major concrete measures were introduced and unemployment continued to climb. In early 1986 a survey by the National Building and Investment Corporation (NBIC) revealed that overall unemployment in African townships had reached between 37 and 55 per cent.<sup>47</sup>

## POVERTY

As a result of discrimination, the bantustan and contract-labour systems, low wages and widespread unemployment, poverty is the overwhelming



characteristic of life for black Namibians. A report by the British-based charity Oxfam in 1986 stated: 'In Oxfam's experience some of the worst examples of chronic poverty and suffering in Africa are to be found amongst Namibia's black population, alongside the wealthy and privileged lifestyle enjoyed by the minority white population.' The report noted that in the bantustans 'the women of migrant labourers' families struggle to bring up the next generation of labourers, and to care for the old, discarded generation. Unable to earn even a subsistence . . . [they] have to depend on the often insecure remittances of their menfolk.'<sup>48</sup>

For most black Namibians in rural areas, life is a struggle for survival. Basic sanitation and electricity are invariably lacking; water has to be fetched from boreholes and firewood laboriously gathered for cooking. In most areas, the land is incapable of supporting the people forced to live on it – many families survive on hand-outs from church or neighbours, as government food aid is inadequate. As parents have moved to towns in search of work, children are brought up by grandparents subsisting either without any pensions or on meagre pensions which are manipulated by the bantustan authorities for political control. Of the children in the bantustans one researcher wrote in 1986:

Born into a life of poverty and hardship the young have never known anything better. They entered and struggled to grow up in a society bereft of the most basic human comforts. Many have never known their fathers who have moved to towns or white-owned farms in search of cash and work. Some only vaguely remember their mothers who have been forced to follow suit. They live with grandparents whose major means of livelihood has, since 1978, been furnished by minimal government pensions. Many young men have, through want of any alternative, been forced to sign up with the South African army which has been at war with the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military wing of the national liberation movement, since 1966. Others have, with their sisters, fled the country to join SWAPO in exile.<sup>49</sup>

Poverty and social dislocation is also rife in urban areas. In Windhoek, the infant mortality rate among Africans is 165 per 1,000; for whites it is 21 per 1,000. No national infant mortality rates are available, but the situation is likely to be much worse outside the capital.<sup>50</sup>

A graphic description of urban poverty and its social effects was provided by the Catholic Church survey of Katutura in 1986. The investigation revealed that the average range of incomes of households (with an average of eight people per house) was between R188 and R902. The Primary Household Subsistence Level (PHSL) – the minimum income needed to stay alive – was R394 for a family of six. However, this figure excludes house rental, fees for education and health, household bills for services, and other basic requirements. To provide for basic needs, the researchers calculated that a six-person household (two adults and four children) would require R604 a month. While the average household income for Katutura was R579, each household had on average 7.9 occupants and in many cases two families were crammed into one house. In lower-income areas, less money was shared by more people. For example, in the cramped 'single quarters' (*see*



page 30) the average household income was R439, with eleven people in each household. Many respondents reported that they regularly ran out of money to buy food and only survived through the support of their neighbours.<sup>51</sup>

Poverty has created endemic health and social problems for Katutura's 70,000 inhabitants. Malnutrition is widespread, particularly amongst children whose parents are unemployed. Alcoholism is rife, and for women and children prostitution is sometimes the only way to earn money to buy food. At rubbish tips children can be seen scavenging for food. It is estimated that 70 per cent of families in Katutura are one-parent families; 60 per cent of households are headed by women, who usually earn less than men. The dislocation of families is a direct result of migrant labour, poverty and its associated ills.<sup>52</sup>

A survey of Khomasdal, zoned for occupation by people classified as Coloured, was carried out by the Windhoek Municipality in 1982. It found that 30 per cent of households (with average occupancy of between seven and thirteen people) had an income of less than R300 a month. Sixteen per cent of workers were unemployed. There were virtually no entertainment or recreational facilities – 45 per cent of the adult population could be regarded as total or 'weekend' alcoholics.<sup>53</sup>

## 4. DISCRIMINATION AT WORK

### LEGISLATION

Namibia's black workers have little protection in law against the hazards of industrial injury, illness, redundancy or old age. Where social provisions exist, they are applied on a discriminatory basis. Black workers, especially contract workers, are generally excluded from fringe benefits, pension opportunities, medical-aid schemes and other privileges accorded to white workers. Contract workers have no job security beyond the expiry of their contract.

In April 1986 national regulations setting out basic conditions of employment were introduced for the first time when the *Conditions of Employment Act* was passed by the South African-appointed administration in Windhoek. This provided for some improvements but failed to tackle many of the most fundamental issues. The Act laid down a maximum of forty-six working hours per week, overtime pay of one and one-third the ordinary rate, annual leave of fourteen or twenty-one consecutive days depending on circumstances, and the requirement for employer and employee to enter into a written agreement concerning basic conditions of employment. The bill also prohibited the victimisation of workers. However, domestic workers and farm labourers were excluded from many provisions. According to the MPC official in charge of Health and Welfare, it was 'impracticable to legislate specific hours of work or overtime' for these categories. No minimum wage was legislated, an omission seen by one newspaper as a major obstacle to promoting 'sound and equitable labour relations', and particularly affecting farm workers. The legislation came into effect in July 1986.<sup>1</sup>

Other legislation also discriminates against many black workers. The *Factories, Machinery and Building Works Ordinance* of 1952 does not apply to mines and farms. Mine workers, farm workers and trade and construction workers are not entitled to any benefits arising from the system of inspection, licensing and regulations established under the ordinance.<sup>2</sup>

The *Workmen's Compensation Act* of 1956 excludes domestic workers. Compensation for disability arising from accidents or illness at work is calculated as a percentage of earnings. Since most black workers have unskilled, low-paid jobs, they generally receive a lower compensation payment than white workers. Moreover, since white employers and managers must certify any injury to black workers, many workers are unable to claim compensation. White employers do not usually provide information to black employees about their right to claim compensation.<sup>3</sup>

### SOCIAL PROVISIONS AND BENEFITS

Black Namibian workers facing redundancy can expect little or nothing in redundancy pay or unemployment benefit. A spokesman for the Department of Civic Affairs and Manpower confirmed in 1983 that



employees were not entitled to any compensation on being discharged. Employers had the right to dismiss workers if the company had financial problems or if there was a drop in production, he said. The Conditions of Employment Act introduced in 1986 did not provide for any unemployment insurance or redundancy pay.<sup>4</sup>

Pension and disability allowances discriminate both between white and black workers and between the various 'population groups'. A survey in 1975 found that about 12 per cent of the labour force was eligible for pensions. To qualify, workers had to be in permanent posts or to have had long service, both provisions which tended to exclude black workers, who had to enter short contracts and face arbitrary dismissal.<sup>5</sup>

A complex system for the payment of pensions and allowances has been established, reflecting the division of the country into bantustan and 'ethnic' administrations known as the 'second tier' of government. The Department of National Health and Welfare is responsible for payment on an agency basis to pensioners assigned to the Tswana and Bushmanland bantustans. It also deals with pensions and allowances for those living outside, but assigned to, the bantustans of Ovambo, Kavango, Caprivi and Damaraland. There are separate pension services run by the White and Coloured administrations, and by the Rehoboth Baster, Namaland and Hereroland bantustans. The central administration pays a standard rate per pensioner but the second-tier authority may make additional payments. This results in gross disparities between black and white pension and disability allowances. In 1986, white pensioners received R150 per month, Coloured R122, and African between R55 and R70. The disparities are even greater than this when private or company pension funds are taken into account. Many whites in fact receive far more substantial pensions from private funds.<sup>6</sup>

Those who receive and rely on a pension may suddenly find that it has been reduced or that they are no longer eligible. The Rehoboth second-tier authority, for instance, announced in June 1984 that it would reduce pension payments. The cut-back would affect people who were not totally disabled, and those receiving maintenance grants, for example unmarried mothers where the father was still alive.<sup>7</sup>

Most white employees in Namibia use private insurance to obtain high-quality medical treatment and other benefits but this is far beyond the means of most black workers.

Sickness and unemployment benefit are virtually non-existent for blacks and few employers try to fill the gap. A survey conducted in 1981 on various aspects of labour relations, covering 296 firms and some 59,000 employees, revealed discriminatory provisions. More companies provided pension schemes for white workers than for African and Coloured workers. A similar pattern prevailed with regard to medical services and, to a lesser extent, annual leave and bonus benefits. These findings were based on employers' replies.<sup>8</sup>

The burden of unemployment, industrial injury, illness, and care of the sick and elderly falls disproportionately on to families in the bantustans. Regardless of the fact that most of those living in the bantustans rely on wage-earners for their own survival, workers no longer of use to white employers because of disablement or old age are expected to return to the bantustans. There are numerous examples of workers simply being sacked, with no compensation or means to survive.



In a case reported in April 1983, a black employee who had worked for a construction corporation for sixteen years was told on his return from leave that his services were no longer needed. He had overstayed his leave by two weeks owing to family problems. He was earning R80 per month. He was given no severance pay. His wife and two children in the Ovambo bantustan were dependent on his income. Since the company were also paying for his accommodation at the workers' hostel in Katutura, he found himself without job or accommodation.<sup>9</sup> In another case a black employee of SWAWEC, the state electricity corporation, found his job filled when he returned from three months' hospital treatment for tuberculosis. He had been with SWAWEC for four years. He was eventually given all the back pay due to him but told that the firm could not re-employ him.<sup>10</sup>

## WORKING CONDITIONS

In all sectors of employment black workers generally occupy the lowest positions, doing the most dangerous jobs and working long hours under harsh conditions. Treatment by their employers ranges from the regimented discipline of the big mines to physical violence and frequent humiliation by small employers in the towns and on ranches. A SWAPO guerilla sentenced to twenty-four years' imprisonment in 1985 explained in court that he had taken up the armed struggle partly as a response to his experiences as a Namibian worker. Sam Munjindji told how he had worked for low wages at a garage. He had been unable to afford food for lunch and his employer had regularly insulted and beaten him.<sup>11</sup>

In a document issued in 1984 the SWAPO Department of Labour wrote:

In Namibia, most employers regard their workers as virtually non-human units of labour power. Few black workers are given either adequate toilet, washing and changing-room facilities or proper protective clothing. Industrial machinery is frequently dangerous – there is little safety legislation and even less enforcement – and the rule for sick or injured workers is often 'no work, no pay'. Food consists usually of a bare, monotonous diet. . . . The workers are at the mercy of authoritarian white supervisors and bosses . . . who are frequently less competent on the job than the workers they command and to whom racism and violence are usually second nature.<sup>12</sup>

The introduction of the Conditions of Employment Act had little initial effect. According to Ben Uulenga, a SWAPO leader who interviewed workers in Windhoek during 1986, there had been 'no visible attempt at enforcement' of the Act.<sup>13</sup>

The Legal Aid and Community Advice Bureau (LACAB), which was established in Katutura in 1985 to provide legal assistance to residents, reported that cases concerning unfair and unlawful labour practices dominated its work. It stated:

The victimisation of workers is usually in the form of dismissals without notice and without payment in lieu of notice as well as the withholding of leave-pay which has accrued. In this regard LACAB has had notable successes in that all the employers reacted favourably to our first

telephonic enquiries or letters of demand by offering to settle out of court. They normally ascribe the initial failure to pay out the employee to an 'oversight' on the part of a junior/inexperienced clerk in their finance department; the truth is of course that they merely seek to exploit the ignorance of workers as to the limited rights they have, and there is every reason to believe that in over 90 per cent of cases they succeed.<sup>14</sup>

Working conditions in the big mining companies have in recent years shown relative improvement and are comparatively better than in other sectors. Nevertheless, black workers complain of racial discrimination in job advancement, the provision of facilities and in the treatment they receive from white supervisors. Dissatisfaction with working conditions at the Rossing mine was expressed by workers in December 1985. A spokesman for the workers cited grievances over the wages system, pensions, conditions of employment, the annual increment and the question of trade-union activity.<sup>15</sup>

Workers in smaller companies, on farms and in domestic service do not even have the minimal benefits introduced by the mining companies.<sup>16</sup>

Working conditions in the hotel and catering trade involve long hours, low pay and little job security. Eleven workers at a hotel in Swakopmund were fired in October 1982 after protesting at a reduction of their tea break from fifteen to five minutes. The eleven workers were paid off at a rate which they said was less than their usual pay. When a group of the remaining staff demanded an explanation, they were told that those fired had 'failed to show respect', and that there were 'plenty of unemployed who could be hired and who would show respect'. Twelve other workers resigned in solidarity and were attacked by police when they tried to collect their back pay. No bonus or pension money was paid out to any of the staff, all of whom had worked at the hotel for between two and five years.<sup>17</sup>

Black workers in commerce or in the public sector also face discriminatory treatment. A group of workers employed to operate water pumps were working seven days a week at R60 per month in 1982. They received no fringe benefits, health insurance or holidays.<sup>18</sup>

Little concrete information is available on the conditions facing the most exploited of all Namibian workers, the farm workers on white commercial farms in the south and centre of the country. A church worker who worked at a hostel for farm workers' children in central Namibia gave a graphic description of the plight of farm workers in 1985:

Most farm labourers round here live little better than slaves. They earn about R20 a month plus a fixed food ration, regardless of family size. People can hardly survive on the low pay, and, as a result, many of the children we look after at the hostel come to us with malnutrition. The white farmers round here are very hard; most of them do not allow their labourers the 'privilege' of growing a little food on their land. The children we take care of have grown up under oppression, and they don't know anything else but a life of poverty.<sup>19</sup>

An indication of the prevailing regime of brutality and exploitation on the white-owned farms is provided by the numerous cases which have come to



public notice of farm workers being assaulted or being killed by their employers. One case which provoked international protests in 1983 was the brutal killing of Kasire Thomas, a young man released on parole from prison to serve his sentence working for a white farmer under a prison labour scheme.<sup>20</sup> Thomas was chained to a pole by the farmer, van Rooyen, and assaulted and beaten for three days. The farmer asked friends to take photographs of him holding Thomas by a chain round the neck, forcing him to give a clenched-fist salute. The young man died soon afterwards and was buried in a shallow grave, which was later uncovered. In his defence, van Rooyen claimed he had suspected Thomas of being a SWAPO member. Van Rooyen was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for culpable homicide.<sup>21</sup>

In May 1984, another farm labourer, Sagarias Gawas, was assaulted by a white foreman who claimed he had been drunk and 'made a nuisance of himself'. Gawas subsequently died. Mrs Gawas strongly denied that her husband had been drunk; her eldest son said it was the fifth assault on his father. The foreman had stabbed Gawas twice before, and had knocked his teeth out and hurled a rock at his broken leg. 'Where will an old labourer, who was molested time and time again by a farmer, find the courage to confront him?' the son asked.<sup>22</sup>

In another incident, a white farmer brutally assaulted a black worker, Piet Block, after an argument. Block went into a coma and died in hospital on 3 January 1985. No details of any subsequent trial appeared in the press.<sup>23</sup> Another farm worker was killed at the end of 1984 by the son of his employer, a leading member of the local air-force unit. The son opened fire repeatedly on the worker with an automatic rifle, but claimed it was an accident. No prosecutions were brought.<sup>24</sup>

Workers in domestic service face a similar situation of isolation, powerlessness and exposure to the whims of employers. In addition, women face sexual harassment. One domestic worker interviewed in 1983 said: 'The missus smokes one cigarette after another, and I follow her all over the house . . . to remove the ashes, and the baas fondles my breast, that's not being domestic, is it?'<sup>25</sup>

A Namibian student describing her mother's work as a domestic servant spoke about the attitude of the white employer:

She expected my mum, after cleaning the house and after doing all the laundry and cooking, to go outside and work in the garden. . . . So my mum at times had to call my brothers to come and sweep the garden and clean out the front. . . .

What is so painful about the domestic servants, is the different types of work they do for their employers, and what they get in return. My mother would wash . . . every little thing and scrub every dirty place, you put so much effort in it, but when you are offered food or when you are given a cup of coffee, you have to drink out of a tin . . . whereas a dog will be given food in a proper plate.<sup>26</sup>

While little comprehensive information is available, it is evident that child labour is widespread in Namibia, particularly on farms and in domestic service. With no compulsory education, migrant labour and widespread poverty, conditions are ripe for the exploitation of child labour. Children as

young as 12 have also been recruited into the police force in the war zones, while many children turn to prostitution or crime to make a living.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of black Namibian workers are employed under conditions in which, in the absence of effective legislation, health and safety provisions are at best rudimentary. An area of serious concern has been the provision of health and safety measures on mines.

At UN Council for Namibia hearings into uranium mining in Namibia in 1980, expert evidence was heard on the dangerous effects on health and environment of uranium mining and processing. The Council noted:

While it is widely known that uranium miners face an increased risk of cancer and genetic damage, great concern was expressed over the unusually limited and racially discriminatory health care given at Rossing. . . . Enormous piles of ground-up ore, called 'tailings', left after the uranium oxide has been extracted, contain almost the same amount of radium as the original ore. These heaps of dangerously radioactive materials are eroded by wind and rain spreading radiation over a wide area.<sup>28</sup>

The Rossing management has denied that its workers are exposed to unacceptably high levels of radiation or that the tailings dumps are a health risk. Any risks arising from living close to the Rossing mine would be greater for black employees than white. In accordance with the pattern of residential segregation under apartheid, black and white employees live in separate areas. Most white employees live in Swakopmund, 50 kilometres from the mine, while African workers live in Arandis near the mine itself.<sup>29</sup>

In 1982 the *Windhoek Observer* reported the findings of researchers from an unnamed foreign university who had carried out scientific tests on samples taken from the Swakop river below the Rossing mine. The researchers had found that uranium contamination of the river was extremely high.<sup>30</sup> This report was disputed by an expert brought in to advise Rossing. Two months later the general manager at Rossing stated that thirty boreholes had been drilled to monitor possible seepage from the tailings dam.<sup>31</sup>

Health hazards are also associated with other mining operations. High levels of arsenic contamination in the atmosphere alerted Namibians to the hazards of TCL's smelter operations in 1983. The alarm was raised when a businessman living downwind from the smelter was found to have unacceptably high traces of arsenic, lead and cadmium in his system. The company denied that the concentration of arsenic had at any time exceeded one-tenth of the maximum prescribed by international health agencies. For years allegations had been reported that workers were transferred to other departments of the mine when regular blood counts revealed undue levels of contamination. Such workers were returned to the smelter site once their blood counts returned to normal.<sup>32</sup>

In 1986 an investigation by the Department of National Health and Welfare revealed that workers at the Deblin zinc and lead mine near Swakopmund, where conditions were described as 'extremely primitive and disorderly', were exposed to the danger of lead poisoning. No tests had been made on the workers to determine the lead content in their blood.<sup>33</sup>



## 5. LIVING CONDITIONS

Namibian workers live either in barrack-type accommodation in urban townships or in shanty and squatter settlements. The abolition of formal residential segregation since 1977 has benefited only a small élite of black salaried officials and businessmen who have been able to move into white suburbs. For the vast majority of workers conditions have deteriorated in recent years as a result of accelerated rural-urban migration and the failure of the authorities to meet black housing needs. In part, this has been a deliberate strategy by the authorities in order to discourage urban migration. The result has been the mushrooming of shanty and squatter settlements and the further overcrowding of available accommodation in the townships.<sup>1</sup>

A study by the UN Institute for Namibia has summarised the effects of years of apartheid on accommodation for black Namibians:

Apartheid legislation ensured that permanent settlement of black migrant workers does not take place in urban areas. Second, it minimized the social overhead capital costs of the public and private sectors on housing and other social infrastructure, as families were not taken into account. Third, it ensured that wages were kept low, resulting in an inability by the workers to build themselves better houses. Thus, the migrant labour system and its intimate linkages with the economy and the apartheid legislation introduced by the illegal regime has seriously affected the expansion of the housing sector in occupied Namibia.<sup>2</sup>

### TOWNSHIPS

In urban areas, black workers not housed in hostels or company accommodation are left to find accommodation in the overcrowded townships. Some sublet space in houses already occupied by several people – often two or more families are crammed into a tiny township house.

A 1982 survey of Khomasdal, the Windhoek township originally zoned for people classified as Coloured revealed that an average of thirteen people – two families – occupied each rented house. Some houses were found to be occupied by up to thirty-five people. Conditions in privately owned houses were considerably better, with an average occupancy of seven people.<sup>3</sup>

Average occupancy of houses in Katutura in 1985 was 7.9 people, but in the poorest sector this rose to eleven. A report by the Catholic Church noted that many people were sleeping 'in old cars, in backyards, in toilets and in chicken coops'. It also noted that many workers were unable to take advantage of the home-ownership schemes introduced in recent years as the new houses were too expensive and the owner had to enter a thirty-year contract. Many workers who had bought houses on these contracts had subsequently lost their jobs and been evicted as a result of their inability to continue with repayments. Many families had also been made homeless as a result of evictions from rented accommodation.<sup>4</sup>

Since the early 1980s, the Windhoek Municipality has ceased providing new rented accommodation in Katutura. The National Building and Investment Corporation (NBIC) was established to promote homeownership. However, in May 1986 the director of the Corporation, Gordon Merrington, disclosed that more than half the employed people in Katutura could not afford even the lowest-cost house built by the NBIC as 'the present depressed economic situation had eroded the financial resources of the low income population'.<sup>5</sup>

The situation is considerably worse in other parts of the country. In Tsumeb, an NBIC survey revealed that only 17 per cent of householders could afford to buy housing.<sup>6</sup>

In general, houses in black townships lack proper sanitation, hot water and electricity. In many townships, sanitation is still based on the bucket system, there is no street lighting, roads are untarred and water is available only from outside taps serving several houses.<sup>7</sup> There are few health, recreational and shopping facilities in the townships and workers usually have to commute considerable distances. For example, the average Katutura resident has to travel 30 kilometres a day to and from work.<sup>8</sup> As bus services are expensive and inadequate many workers walk the distance.<sup>9</sup>

Conditions in rural areas are worse than in urban centres. Housing and living conditions for farm workers on white-owned farms are notoriously inadequate. Accommodation is provided at the discretion of the farmers, and many provide no housing at all, leaving their workers to build shelters with what materials they can find. In recent years, some farmers have built concrete huts for their workers, but failed to provide fuel or electricity, so the workers have to burn scrap wood for cooking and heating.<sup>10</sup> A number of cases have been reported of workers being asphyxiated by fumes from their fires while asleep.<sup>11</sup>

## WORKERS' HOSTELS

Some of the major companies and municipalities in Namibia have provided on-site, single-sex dormitories for their black male workers. Most are extremely overcrowded with few washing, cooking, electrical or recreational facilities. They are designed for maximum social control of the work-force. In contrast, housing for white employees is of a much higher standard and usually caters for families. Recently, a few privileged black workers have been allowed to use the lower class of such houses.

At CDM, migrant workers made up about two-thirds of the work-force in 1982. Contract workers lived in hostels, twelve men to a room in the old hostel and three to a room in a new hostel. Family accommodation was provided only for the few skilled black workers. In 1985 the hostels housed 3,400 migrant workers.<sup>12</sup> At Rossing, which has a policy of providing family housing for African workers, a third of its unskilled workers were still living in 'single quarters' in 1983.<sup>13</sup>

Provisions for housing at TCL are similar to those at the smaller mines – bleak 'single quarters'. In 1983 only 15 per cent of Tsumeb's black workers had housing where they could live with their families.<sup>14</sup> Workers at its Matchless mine lived twelve to a room. In late 1984, some 340 people living



as squatters near Windhoek were forcibly evicted by the authorities, and the women and children sent to the Ovambo bantustan. The majority of the men were employed at the Otjijase copper mine, owned by TCL. The men were rehoused in 'single quarters'.<sup>15</sup>

A Namibian pastor who regularly visits worker compounds on his pastoral duties described conditions at the Oamites copper and silver mine in 1982. Black workers lived four to a room at a hostel, without their families. Loneliness and alcoholism were a frequent problem. The 450-strong workforce was composed mainly of African workers. The few Coloured workers lived on a separate site in family accommodation. At the mine clinic there was a separate entrance for Africans.<sup>16</sup>

In Katutura many workers are housed in two hostel complexes: the 'single quarters' and a large hostel specifically for contract workers from the Ovambo bantustan. Conditions in both complexes are appalling and disease is widespread. The 'single quarters' are no longer restricted to single migrant workers and are now occupied by families – but no extra facilities have been installed. Malnutrition amongst the children living there is common.<sup>17</sup> Raw sewage flows through the streets as a result of faulty sanitation and dustbins overflow. Families of twelve are reported to be living in tiny single rooms.<sup>18</sup> The *Windhoek Observer* described the 'single quarters' in 1984 as 'a sprawling hotbed of unspeakable dirt and crime. . . . Thousands of people are cramped in those quarters with its odours of excreta and urine, its open cooking lots.'<sup>19</sup> Conditions at the hostel were even worse. According to one survey, only 40 per cent of toilet facilities were usable. Water taps, electric fittings, wash-basins, windows and other facilities were in a state of disrepair.<sup>20</sup>

A 1983 survey by the Windhoek Municipality, which owns the Katutura hostel, revealed that 71 per cent of resident workers were married with dependants. Fewer than one in five were single workers without dependants.<sup>21</sup> In 1984 the Windhoek City Council decided to close down the hostel, but by 1986 this had not occurred and the Council indicated that it would take four years to find alternative accommodation for the 1,800 residents.<sup>22</sup>

Conditions for workers in other black townships are similar. Describing the hostel for contract workers in Otjiwarongo as a place of 'squalor and utmost filth', the *Windhoek Observer* stressed in 1981 that compounds in Grootfontein, Walvis Bay, Keetmanshoop and the rest of the country were the same. Despite these conditions, workers often smuggle in their families, who would otherwise have nowhere to live. Police raids are regularly carried out to remove these illegal residents. For example, in May 1984 police raided the hostel in Mondesa, near Swakopmund, arresting 319 residents.<sup>23</sup>

## POLICE RAIDS

In 1980 armed police Special Constables, comprising Ovambo bantustan police under the command of white South African policemen, were introduced into the Katutura hostel on a permanent basis to 'maintain order' and keep a check on 'illegal residents'.<sup>24</sup> Their presence caused growing tension and their ruthless behaviour led to numerous violent incidents. In

May 1982, for instance, a group of Special Constables was reported to have 'gone on the rampage' attacking several residents with knives. According to eyewitnesses three people were killed and five were treated for wounds. Several residents told a Namibian newspaper: 'They beat, arrest and kill our people. . . . Compound residents are taken away without being heard of again.'<sup>25</sup>

Further police raids on the Katutura hostel were reported in June and July 1982. In June, armed police assisted by municipal guards surrounded the area before dawn and forced thousands of workers to leave their beds and pass through the exit posts for ID checks, while police searched rooms. Twenty-five people were arrested. In July, three people were reported to have been killed, and twelve seriously injured during fighting. According to a spokesman for the residents, the killings and assaults had been carried out by Special Constables.<sup>26</sup>

Again in July, tension flared between police and residents of the 'single quarters', causing panic among hundreds of men, women and children.<sup>27</sup> A Namibian newspaper reported in August 1982 that in the previous three months, 379 'illegal squatters', 178 of them women, had been charged and convicted following police raids on the quarters. According to the head of Windhoek prison, there was no more space available for such detainees awaiting trial.<sup>28</sup>

Similar raids were reported in 1984. In March, a squad of municipal police, backed by Special Constables, was reported to have beaten at least two people and threatened several women at knife point. A reporter watched as at least fifteen men in camouflage uniform moved through eight rows of houses, chasing people with batons, sticks and steel rods, and searching rooms.<sup>29</sup> In another incident, two workers were clubbed with rifle butts, and punched and battered with a torch by Special Constables during an early morning raid in April 1984. Hundreds of workers waiting for transport outside the compound watched in silence, stopped from intervening by the sight of the constables' sub-machine-guns.<sup>30</sup>

In May 1985 plans to house some 300 policemen from the police counter-insurgency unit in two hostel blocks were postponed when it became clear that workers would strongly oppose such a move. One local official said he feared the move would lead to strike action and violent clashes between police and workers.<sup>31</sup>

Raids and police brutalities are not confined to Katutura and have occurred in many other areas where black workers live and work. In August 1981 there were violent incidents in the Orwetoveni township near Otjiwarongo. These were dismissed by the authorities as 'faction-fighting' between workers. Later reports revealed how members of the armed forces, including the security police, had forced workers to assemble on a soccer field outside their dormitories and had searched their belongings. The police then hurled a total of about fifty tear-gas canisters into the crowd and set about beating the workers indiscriminately.<sup>32</sup> In February 1982 forty-six men were arrested by police in a raid on a workers' compound at the TCL copper mine. According to police, the men were illegally inside the compound of the mine. All were employed by the mine but none had proper documents.<sup>33</sup> One of the men was reported to have been 'accidentally' shot at the local police station when a policeman threatened the detainees with his revolver.



Six of the detainees were later reported to have died in detention, according to a worker who escaped. They were reportedly given no food and, after four days, no water either, and were forced to work in the prison garden.<sup>34</sup>

In another raid, on a compound in Tsumeb in October 1983, police arrested 300 men and shot one worker, wounding him in the arm. The men were found guilty of being in the compound without permission, and given sentences of R30 or thirty days' imprisonment.<sup>35</sup>

In September 1985 police raided the TCL 'single quarters' and Tsumeb municipal hostels, arresting 294 people described as 'squatters'. They said the action was a joint effort by the mine management and the police to 'get squatters out of circulation' as they were 'taking over the living quarters of bona fide employees'. While claiming that the operation had not been undertaken at the request of the mine, the managing director of TCL admitted that he had been informed of the police action and had made provisions to ensure that no TCL staff members were arrested.<sup>36</sup>

## SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS AND SLUMS

Unable to find rented accommodation or to buy houses in the townships, a growing number of black workers and their families are forced to live in makeshift structures set up illegally without any facilities and known as 'squatter camps'. Often the 'camps' spring up as a result of the failure of local employers to provide company housing. For example, black workers employed by the Department of Water Affairs near Okahandja were living in 1983 in two squatter settlements, each with about a thousand inhabitants. Conditions in both settlements were described as 'appalling', with seven to twelve people living in each of the shelters they had erected. At one of the camps there were only four water taps for 150 dwellings housing 1,000 squatters.

At Deblin zinc and lead mines situated in a desert area near Swakopmund, 124 black employees and their dependants – a total of nearly 400 people – were forced to live for several years in an unsanitary squatter camp as a result of the mining company's failure to provide any accommodation. There were no toilet, washing or refuse facilities.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from 'camps' established by workers at specific farms, mines or other enterprises, urban squatter settlements have mushroomed as a result of accelerated migration to the towns and the lack of approved accommodation. Shanty settlements have been established near Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Tsumeb and Keetmanshoop while the town of Kalkfeld, between Otjiwarongo and Omaruru, has been virtually absorbed by a squatter settlement.<sup>38</sup>

## 6. STRIKE ACTION AND TRADE UNIONISM

The denial of individual or collective bargaining rights to black workers, including the right to strike, has been central to the system of labour repression and exploitation in Namibia.

An array of repressive laws makes it extremely difficult for black workers to engage in legal industrial action. *The Wage and Industrial Conciliation Ordinance* of 1952, which allowed white and Coloured workers limited rights to form trade unions and to strike under certain conditions, completely excluded almost all of the African work-force until 1978. Africans were not entitled to strike, nor could they use the provisions of the Ordinance for the settlement of disputes or the improvement of conditions of employment.

In 1978, the Ordinance was extended to cover African workers, but it still excluded workers on farms and in domestic service. The law was designed as a control measure, particularly because a union can only be recognised for collective bargaining purposes if it represents 'all grades' of workers in an enterprise or industry. This means that white and privileged workers can exercise an effective veto on any such union. The new legislation also contained political restrictions, making it illegal for a registered union to receive funds from or affiliate to a political party. This regulation was promulgated specifically to prevent the registration of the National Union of Namibian Workers, which is affiliated to SWAPO.<sup>1</sup>

Other repressive laws give the regime sweeping powers to arrest, detain, harass and ban trade-union activists. Many unionists, including almost the entire leadership of the NUNW, have been detained without trial under repressive legislation such as the Terrorism Act. The Terrorism Act prohibits actions likely to 'cripple or prejudice any industry or undertaking . . . or the production or distribution of commodities or foodstuffs' or to 'cause substantial financial loss to any person or the State'.<sup>2</sup>

Any direct resistance by workers invites victimisation or maltreatment. The cost of mounting organised trade-union action can be loss of job, being branded as an 'agitator', detention, assault and torture. Coupled with high rates of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy amongst black workers, this hostile environment has presented almost insuperable barriers to the emergence of organised trade unionism.<sup>3</sup>

### WORKERS IN STRUGGLE

The history of workers' struggles in Namibia goes back to the early days of colonial rule. The first recorded strike took place in 1893 at the Gross Otavi mine near Tsumeb. Workers in the mines and fisheries generally used tactics such as go-slows and overtime bans to improve their conditions, rather than strikes, which would have resulted in mass sackings and evictions to 'reserves'.

Early attempts to organise trade unions were savagely crushed. A branch



of the South African-based Industrial and Commercial Union in Lüderitz did, however, survive for a few years in the early 1920s. In 1949 and 1952 the Cape-based Food and Canning Workers' Union of South Africa sent organisers to Lüderitz to set up a branch among fish-canning workers, and union officials investigated wages and conditions. The canning workers forced employers to negotiate an agreement. The official response was swift: police broke up branch meetings, intimidated local officials and banned the union organiser. Contract workers in Lüderitz mounted large strikes in 1952 and 1953. During the second strike, police opened fire and killed three workers.<sup>4</sup>

Contract workers were at the centre of mass actions. They provided the base from which the liberation movement SWAPO was formed. In 1957 Namibian workers and students in Cape Town, under the leadership of Andimba Toivo ja Toivo, formed the Ovamboland People's Congress, which was renamed the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO) in 1958. While the most immediate and burning issue was the contract-labour system, the basis of mobilisation increasingly became the fight for national liberation. OPO branches were rapidly established in many work-places and compounds throughout Namibia.

Peaceful forms of organising were met with brutal repression. An attack by armed police on a peaceful demonstration in Windhoek in 1959 was a watershed. At least 11 Namibians were killed and 54 wounded in this attack on people protesting against their forced removal to a segregated township on the outskirts of the town – Katutura. In the aftermath, the police ruthlessly persecuted the OPO leadership. The Windhoek massacre convinced them that demands for the abolition of the contract-labour system and other changes could only be won with the ending of the South African colonial occupation. In April 1960, OPO was reconstituted as the national liberation movement, SWAPO.

## THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1971–72

Resentment and frustration over the contract-labour system reached a peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in a national strike by contract workers. The strike was launched in December 1971, after considerable organisation by the SWAPO Youth League. A leaflet produced by the elected strike committee stated the workers' demands. The most important were:

- abolition of contract labour
- wives and children to be allowed to live with workers
- salary according to merit
- abolition of the passbook system
- freedom to look for jobs of their choice

By mid-January 1972, 20,000 workers had taken strike action affecting twenty-three urban centres, including eleven mines.<sup>5</sup>

Police harassment became more brutal as the strike progressed. Most of the strikers had followed an appeal by the leadership to return to the areas from which they had been recruited, as an act of defiance and to raise crops to feed themselves and their families.

The Ovambo bantustan became the centre of ruthless actions by the South African authorities aimed at crushing the strike. Large police reinforcements were flown in from South Africa, and in January 1972 the South African Defence Force (SADF) was called in. The bantustan was sealed off from the rest of the country and a state of emergency declared on 4 February 1972. The authorities banned all public meetings, and used the police to break up 'illegal gatherings'. Hundreds of people were arrested and a number were killed. Those arrested were held in detention camps, many being kept in cages.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the regime and the major employers acted quickly to contain the situation by offering some concessions.

At a meeting in Grootfontein on 19 January 1972, South African authorities, bantustan leaders, white employers and SWANLA officials agreed to abolish SWANLA. However, it was immediately replaced with labour bureaux run by the bantustan authorities. This was presented as a major concession, allowing for negotiations to be opened on wages and conditions of employment. The regime launched a propaganda drive to persuade workers to accept the new arrangements. Slowly, driven by repression and the need to support their families, workers began to drift back to work, but anger and frustration at the unchanged conditions led to many further walk-outs and protests.

The strike produced few gains in terms of the demands put by the workers. In some cases higher wages were paid, although the increases were quickly eaten up by inflation. The official terminology of the contract-labour system was changed – instead of contracts, workers were said to have 'written agreements' and 'compounds' were renamed 'hostels'. But all the essentials of the system remained in place and contract labour remains in force today.

What had changed fundamentally was the basis of popular struggle in Namibia, and the consciousness of the workers themselves. Out of the experience of the general strike the national liberation movement emerged strengthened, with new forces being drawn into the struggle for independence.

## **A BROAD FRONT**

The immediate goals of the 1971–72 strike were not fulfilled, but much had been learned. A new spirit of self-confidence expressed itself in many and varied actions against the pass system, bantustan policies and work-place conditions. Workers refused to work long hours without overtime pay, or left before their contracts finished and went 'underground' to evade the pass system. The authorities tried to tighten up by increasing pass checks in the streets, mounting raids on workers' hostels and deporting 'illegal absconders' to the bantustans. Growing evasion and resistance to the pass laws made them an increasingly ineffective form of control, a factor contributing to the official abolition of passes in 1977.

The regime was faced with opposition on many fronts, with workers' actions playing a crucial role in support of the national liberation movement. In particular, workers were in the forefront of opposition to the bantustan policy. Legislation enacted in 1968 provided for elected bantustan authorities to be set up, and for elections to be held in the various



bantustans. Elections in the Ovambo bantustan in 1973 were boycotted by 97 per cent of the population, in response to a call by SWAPO. In Windhoek, workers refused to register as voters, and only four voted out of 3,000 eligible to do so. A less successful boycott was again implemented in further elections in the Ovambo bantustan in 1975.<sup>7</sup>

Between June 1973 and June 1975 there were at least seventy strikes, some involving hundreds of workers, in every sector of the economy.<sup>8</sup>

During February 1978, in response to the shooting of twenty-six black workers in Katutura township by armed bantustan auxiliaries, thousands of black workers in Windhoek came out on strike for several days demanding an end to the reign of terror. The regime was forced to withdraw the auxiliaries.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s many major companies in Namibia experienced strikes and disputes. In 1979, 5,200 workers staged a two-day strike at the CDM diamond mine at Oranjemund. Two hundred contract workers demanding a wage increase went on strike at the Krantzberg tungsten mine near Omaruru, and were sent back to the Ovambo bantustan. At the Uis tin mine, owned by the South African Iron and Steel Corporation (ISCOR), 500 workers went on strike, and a pay dispute was also reported at TCL's Tsumeb copper mine.<sup>9</sup>

In 1981, strikes occurred at the Oamites copper mine and at Damara Meat Packers.<sup>10</sup> At the Table Top fish-processing factory in Walvis Bay, half the factory's female work-force of 150 went on strike in December 1982 over a holiday-pay dispute. They returned to work after winning their claim.<sup>11</sup> In April 1983, the entire 660-strong work-force at the TCL's Otjihase mine staged a 40-hour walk-out in protest at a new work regulation. The strike was initiated by 100 mechanical equipment operators, who were followed the next day by the rest of the labour force. The company refused to accede to the workers' demands and threatened to sack anyone who failed to return to work within thirty days.<sup>12</sup> A month later, workers at Rossing reported that eighty-four truck drivers had staged an eight-hour strike over dissatisfaction with a supervisor. Rossing management denied that the strike had taken place.<sup>13</sup>

A confrontation between CDM management and black workers was reported in June 1983, arising from the arrest of a worker by the security police. Police found and confiscated a large quantity of SWAPO badges and SWAPO literature. Members of the SWAPO branch at CDM organised a demonstration outside the general manager's office, alleging that CDM had collaborated with the South African occupation of Namibia and demanding that the confiscated material be returned. The manager denied company involvement in the police operation and agreed to take action to retrieve the SWAPO material.<sup>14</sup>

## NATIONAL UNION OF NAMIBIAN WORKERS

The struggle for Namibian freedom took on new forms in the 1970s, including an intensification of the armed struggle launched by SWAPO in 1966. At a consultative congress at Tanga, in Tanzania, in 1970 SWAPO decided to establish a department of labour, with a brief to promote trade unionism among Namibian workers and prepare the ground for a national

trade-union centre. The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) was formally constituted on 24 April 1970.<sup>15</sup>

The tasks of the NUNW had, of necessity, to be carried out largely underground, backing up local workers' campaigns and strikes, encouraging the formation of plant-based shop stewards' committees, promoting unity and self-reliance among workers and overcoming the apartheid divisions imposed by the South African occupation.

After the strikes in Windhoek against the bantustan auxiliaries during February 1978, the regime amended the Wage and Industrial Conciliation Ordinance (*see above*) so as to try to coopt black workers into the small white employee associations. However, the NUNW seized the initiative and by and large prevented the white associations from gaining the support of black workers. With the change in the law, the NUNW adopted an open profile. The key organiser was Jason Angula, who was also the SWAPO Secretary for Labour inside Namibia. By the end of 1978 the NUNW had begun to mobilise on a national scale, establishing structures at plant and factory level. It had a head office in Windhoek and several full-time organisers.<sup>16</sup>

At this stage the South African regime was preparing to impose a client administration on Namibia in defiance of the UN. South Africa had sabotaged negotiations for internationally recognised independence through UN supervised elections and instead prepared to hold 'internal elections' in Namibia in December 1978. SWAPO called for a boycott of the elections. To force people to vote many SWAPO supporters were threatened with the loss of their jobs, and old people were told they would be deprived of their pensions if they did not participate.<sup>17</sup> Reports of widespread intimidation to force people to vote came from churches and from international observers.<sup>18</sup>

In November 1978, the Divisional Inspector of Labour warned that black workers engaging in strikes would be charged and tried in court unless the strike action was legal in terms of the Wage and Industrial Conciliation Ordinance.<sup>19</sup> During the election, key NUNW organisers were detained for several weeks under the Terrorism Act, together with many SWAPO leaders.<sup>20</sup> In subsequent months, NUNW leaders constantly faced harassment and arrest. In April 1979, in the wake of the CDM strike, NUNW leaders and members as well as the entire SWAPO leadership were among a large number of people arrested throughout the country. Several trade-union leaders, including Jason Angula, were again arrested in early 1980. On their release later in the year they were issued with restriction orders preventing them from attending meetings, travelling outside their area of residence, or receiving visitors. In early 1980, the authorities closed both the SWAPO and NUNW headquarters in Windhoek, seized records, confiscated NUNW vehicles and property, and froze all NUNW funds.<sup>21</sup>

While being forced underground in Namibia, the NUNW continued to promote trade unionism by providing Namibians in exile with opportunities to study and train for the future. In August 1983, the NUNW opened the Nduuvu Nangolo Trade Union Centre at the Namibian refugee settlement at Kwanza in Angola. The centre aims to teach Namibian students the principles of trade unionism, as well as general subjects such as mathematics, English, history of Namibia, and labour-related studies. Literacy classes are



also held.<sup>22</sup> The Centre launched a new journal, the *Namibian Worker*, to publicise its activities.

In his speech at the opening ceremony, the National Chairman of SWAPO, David Merero, described the background to this initiative:

In Namibia, the African workers have been totally deprived of exercising their trade-union rights. Therefore, the African workers have always recognised the need to train and develop their workmates in the struggle for higher wages and improved working conditions, as well as for the wider task of political and social emancipation. Genuine democracy and socialism cannot arise except on the basis of the fullest participation and control by the working people over their own destiny, over production and over society, nor can it be established except by the mass of the working population.

By 1986 there were reports that the NUNW was organising secretly among workers at Rossing and in the Tsumeb area, and was in the process of reviving shop-steward committees which were destroyed in the 1970s. In Windhoek a Workers Action Committee was distributing information and running an education campaign to encourage the growth of trade unionism.<sup>23</sup>

## **UNDERMINING TRADE UNIONISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION**

In many instances, employers have collaborated in the repression of trade unionism by undermining or actively preventing the establishment of genuine negotiating structures, and fostering compliant and powerless works committees instead. While suppressing the NUNW, the only trade-union organisation clearly aligned to SWAPO's goal of national liberation, the regime has promoted and publicised trade-union organisations linked to political groups prepared to collaborate with apartheid. By allowing a restricted form of trade-union activity within the overall goals of apartheid, the regime has aimed to present an image at the local and international levels of free trade-union activity in Namibia.

In 1983, the general manager of Rossing stated that the company operated an employee representative council, through which it consulted workers, but did not negotiate with them.<sup>24</sup> In late December 1978, about 2,000 workers at Rossing went on strike in protest at discriminatory wage scales despite the introduction of a new wage system said by the company to be non-racial. They also protested at the effects of radiation and the victimisation of workers by security police at the mine. Newspapers speculated that the strike was connected with the South African-controlled elections earlier in the month, and noted that the turn-out of voters at Rossing had been very low.<sup>25</sup> Police used a bomb explosion at Swakopmund on 30 December as a pretext to raid the workers' living quarters. Several men involved in the Rossing strike were arrested, including Arthur Pickering, the secretary of the newly established Rossing NUNW branch.<sup>26</sup>

Commenting on industrial relations and trade unionism in a statement in 1985, the manager of Rossing said it would be 'tragic' if the 'excellent relations' at the mine were damaged by unionisation. It was essential that

existing channels for direct consultation between employees and management were not replaced by communication through union officials only, he argued. However, he stated that he was not against the concept of unions and his company regularly reminded its employees that they were free to join a union if they wished.<sup>27</sup>

In September 1983, the Administrator-General stated that unregistered trade unions should not be recognized as legitimate bargaining partners, and that no enforceable agreement could be negotiated between an unregistered trade union and any employers. He was addressing the Annual Conference of the South West African Confederation of Labour (SWACOL), an organisation to which mostly white-dominated staff associations are affiliated. SWACOL president, Hennie Bernar, told the conference that political and labour struggles should be kept apart, and he criticized the labour militancy of SWAPO.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the staff associations, mainly amongst whites employed by the railways, municipalities, civil service or police and teachers, the only affiliate of SWACOL is the South West African Mineworkers' Union based at TCL. In 1982 it claimed to have recruited 300 of the 5,000 black workers employed by TCL. The union has had no success in recruiting at other mines. Despite the white domination of SWACOL (all affiliates had white general secretaries in 1983), its lack of support from black Namibians and its support for the South African occupation of Namibia, the SWACOL general secretary, Ben Schoeman, has made several attempts to gain recognition from international trade-union and labour bodies, including the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The failure of SWACOL to attract significant support from black Namibian workers has led to attempts to set up trade-union organisations by political groups working within the apartheid framework, but these have found little response among black workers. Such bodies have confined themselves largely to issuing calls through the media for workers' organisations to be formed, giving advice on individual grievances or calling for changes in labour relations. There is no evidence that they have any significant organised presence among Namibian workers.

In 1982 a defector from SWAPO, Solomon Mufima, and a few followers received backing from the US labour federation, the AFL-CIO and its African American Labour Centre, to set up a 'Namibian Trade Union Council' which attempted to run a labour complaints service in Windhoek. In 1983, after a study trip to Israel, Jackson Kambode established a 'Namibian Federation of Trade Unions' based in Oshakati. Kambode had talks with TUCSA, the conservative South African union federation, and attempted to achieve unity with Mufima so as to obtain recognition from the ICFTU and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which recognises SWAPO.<sup>29</sup> However, both Mufima's and Kambode's bodies received little support and by 1986 were defunct.

Another attempt to set up an anti-SWAPO labour body began in 1985 with the announcement of a 'Namibian National Trade Union' by followers of Moses Katjuongua, one of the members of the South African-installed MPC administration. Katjuongua was made responsible for labour affairs in the client administration. The new body stated that it would 'seek the understanding of employers and government' and would 'recognise the



United Nations Council for Namibia'.<sup>30</sup> The latter claim appeared to be a ploy to gain recognition at the ILO. Katjiuongua and Schoeman of SWACOL attempted to gain such recognition early in 1986 by appearing uninvited at the ILO headquarters in Geneva, but ILO officials refused to meet them.<sup>31</sup>

SWAPO's Labour Department in exile, headed by John ya Otto, has continued to provide support for the NUNW, even when it has been driven underground. It has established vocational training facilities and workers' brigades in the SWAPO settlements to enable Namibian workers to learn skills for an independent Namibia and to care for exiled Namibians. The SWAPO Labour Department is in many ways like an embryonic 'Ministry of Labour', conducting research and planning and representing Namibia's interests at the ILO and other international forums. It helped the NUNW get established in Namibia in the 1970s and, after the severe repression of 1979, it has helped the NUNW re-establish its public presence. Through this process of mutual assistance, the NUNW has been given recognition by many trade-union movements throughout the world, such as the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity, the Commonwealth Trades Union Council, the World Federation of Trade Unions and many national trade-union bodies such as the two Swedish federations.<sup>32</sup>

## SECURITY SYSTEMS

The existence of extensive surveillance and security systems at the major mines and on farms underlines the co-operation of employers with South Africa's military occupation of Namibia and inhibits trade unionism. In addition, police raids on workers' hostels intimidate workers. (See Chapter 5.)

A leaked internal document from Rossing, entitled 'Security Scheme' and dated November 1978, was presented by SWAPO to a United Nations Hearing on Namibian Uranium in 1980. The secret document contained details of Rossing's security plans 'to establish and maintain a state of preparedness for civil or labour or terrorist attack against the mine'. The document described the existence of three separate units at Rossing: the Rossing security department, the security department auxiliary, and the Swakopmund commando controlled by the SADF. Armaments held at the mine included automatic rifles, 9-mm pistols, semi-automatic shot-guns and tear-gas. The chairman of RTZ admitted the authenticity of the document in 1982, after first denying any knowledge of it. He minimised the significance of the arrangements, claiming that they were 'for the protection of employees and equipment'.<sup>33</sup>

In an interview with the *Namib Times* in July 1985, the general manager of Rossing referred to the mine's 'high profile with SWAPO - who don't want us here'. He stated: 'We have to enforce security measures . . . we have fences around the mine like any other operation. We have security measures to keep the baddies out - the goodies are more than welcome.'<sup>34</sup>

Strict security arrangements are in force at the CDM mine, which is surrounded by high fences and patrolled by security guards.<sup>35</sup> Nobody is permitted to live or work in the diamond area without authorisation. Workers have to carry security identification cards at all times.<sup>36</sup> A private

security force is also in existence at TCL, and the mine has advertised for recruits with experience in the South African armed forces.<sup>37</sup>

Security arrangements on the white-owned farms have been tightened over the years. White farmers have been given subsidies to install electronic fences, alarm systems, floodlights and watch-towers in areas where SWAPO's armed wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) has mounted guerilla operations. According to a South African army spokesman, 70 per cent of farmers in the Otjiwarongo area had erected barbed-wire fences around their homes by early 1985, or had installed radios linking them to army headquarters through the Marnet (Military Area Radio Network) system. SADF troops had been deployed on farms and farm workers were being trained as members of Area Force units – locally based part-time military units.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, many farm workers have assisted PLAN guerrillas in operations. A farm worker, Markus Kateka, was sentenced to death in 1980 (a sentence later reduced to seventeen years' imprisonment) for assisting guerillas who attacked the farm on which he worked.<sup>39</sup>

Since 1980, when South Africa extended compulsory military service to black Namibian men between the ages of 16 and 25, workers have increasingly been forced into the apartheid army. In 1984, the call-up was further extended by introducing compulsory registration for military service to all males aged 16 to 55 in four northern districts. There have been numerous reports of job applicants being told by employers that they must first complete their military training.<sup>40</sup>

Such incidents underline the direct relationship between the repression of workers in Namibia and South Africa's illegal occupation of the territory.

## FURTHER RESTRICTIONS ON UNIONS

In late 1985, confronted by determined moves from CDM mineworkers to set up a branch of the militant South African National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the MPC administration attempted to impose further restrictions on trade unionism. Negotiations between officials of the South African NUM and CDM to register a branch of the NUM were brought to a halt. A *Wage and Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act* was introduced in November 1985 to prevent any unions based outside Namibia from registering or assisting workers in the territory. The Act also prohibited non-residents of Namibia from 'advocating, encouraging or promoting the establishment of a trade union' without the permission of the administration. Non-residents could not be office-bearers or officials of any trade union. The Act provided for a R2,000 fine or a maximum of two years' imprisonment, or both, for any contravention of its provisions.

Following threats by the NUM to take the matter to the courts, the Administrator-General referred the legislation back to the MPC administration on the grounds that it might have contravened the constitutional framework of the MPC.<sup>41</sup> On 1 April 1986 the MPC introduced a new law providing it with powers to ban or deport aliens and obliging visitors to the territory to obtain permits after more than 30 days' residence. These provisions of the *Regulation of Residence of Certain Persons*



in *South West Africa Act* could be used to prevent the entry to Namibia of South African or other trade-union officials, in much the same way as the blocked Wage and Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act had intended.<sup>42</sup>

In May 1986 the MPC established a National Labour Council to oversee the 'administration of labour matters'. Consisting of administration officials and other appointees, it was empowered to summon trade unionists and others involved in labour matters to 'furnish information' and to provide books and documents. This gave the administration further powers over the trade-union movement.<sup>43</sup> The only labour representatives on the council were drawn from white unions and staff associations.<sup>44</sup>

## ORGANISATION CONTINUES

In an interview in 1986, SWAPO Secretary for Labour, Jason Angula, stated that the NUNW was determined to rebuild itself inside Namibia. 'We have done away with trying to play South Africa's game,' he said. 'We have decided to continue. The National Union of Namibian Workers, registered or unregistered, is going to cater for the workers.'<sup>45</sup> Angula stated that he was barred from leaving the Windhoek magisterial district without first making a written application giving all the details of his visit to the police and then reporting to the police at his place of destination.

During 1986 NUNW members engaged in concerted organising in Namibia's towns and mine compounds. Workers' committees affiliated to the NUNW were established at all the large mines: Rossing, TCL, CDM, Otjiase (owned by TCL), Klein Aub and Uis. Preparations were made to launch a mineworkers' union and other industrial unions. A leading role was played by the National Organiser of the NUNW, Ben Uulenga, recently released from long-term imprisonment on South Africa's notorious Robben Island. He and other NUNW organisers were assisted by the Council of Churches, which was increasingly concerned with the worsening state of poverty amongst Namibians.

On 20 September 1986 the first publicly launched NUNW industrial union came into being, a historic occasion because it was the first industrial union formed and initiated by black Namibian workers. This was the Namibian Food and Allied Union (NAFAU) with nearly 6,000 members in twenty-seven firms. The union's aims, apart from the radical improvement of workers' wages and working conditions, included the demand for the implementation of the UN plan for Namibia's independence (UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978).<sup>46</sup> The general secretary of NAFAU, Alfons Pandeni, was another ex-long-term political prisoner from Robben Island. In the first two weeks of its public existence, NAFAU won two major industrial disputes, after strikes by black employees at the Taurus Chemical factory in Lüderitz and the Swavleis abattoir in Okahandja.<sup>47</sup> Black workers at the Windhoek abattoir, also members of NAFAU, refused to work in solidarity with the striking Okahandja workers.

The NUNW-linked Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) was launched at a founding conference in Katutura on 23 November. Over a hundred delegates from all the major mines attended and drew up a programme to

campaign for an adequate minimum wage, improved living conditions and the implementation of UN Resolution 435 for Namibian independence. Ben Uulenga was appointed general-secretary.<sup>48</sup>

This union activity followed sustained public mobilising by SWAPO in 1986, during which some of the largest rallies in Namibia's history took place. In a special message from the President of SWAPO, Sam Nujoma, read out to a huge Namibia Day rally in Katutura in late August 1986, the leadership of SWAPO once again challenged the South African government to implement the agreed UN plan for Namibia's independence so that the Namibian people could freely choose their government. Failing this, SWAPO would be forced to take more drastic action, including staging a general strike.<sup>49</sup> In late 1986, there were large SWAPO rallies at the Rossing and the Tsumeb black workers' compounds. During the week ending 24 October 1986, the entire black work-force of CDM, about 3,000 strong, organised a week-long boycott of the company's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. Spokesmen for the workers said that the company's activities were an 'insult' and that they would not take part in celebrations of 'the colonial dispossession of the Namibian people and exploitation of our country'. The workers stated:

In view of the United Nations Decree No. 1 on the Natural Resources of Namibia, a systematic theft of the birthright of the Namibian people is taking place. We, the toiling, sweating and oppressed Namibian workers, have nothing to celebrate for we strongly feel that we have been discriminated against for too long . . . to us fifty years of celebration is a reminder of fifty years of exploitation, overmining and oppression of the Namibian people.<sup>50</sup>





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