

Callinicos, L. 1987. *Working Life: 1886 - 1940* Ravan Press, Johannesburg (R22,00)

The book under review is Volume Two of a proposed three-volume pictorial labour history of South Africa. Volume One is titled "**Gold and Workers: 1886-1924**" and Volume Three is still to be published. Whereas Volume One is disappointing because it deals rather superficially with its subject, Volume Two is a much more substantial and satisfying work.

A number of works dealing with the labour history of South Africa have been published here and abroad over the past two decades. This growing interest in the labour field can be attributed to two factors. Firstly the revival of the Marxist mode of analysis to explain historical, economic and social phenomena led to a renewed interest in labour relations in South Africa where — according to the neo-Marxist — race consciousness in the past seemed to have obscured the proper understanding of the class conflict. Secondly the growing militance among black trade unions in South Africa since the 1970's added an urgent relevancy to the academic study of this matter. The works published so far have, however, been extremely scholarly and academic in their approach. It is highly unlikely that the controversial works of economic historians such as H. Wolpe, D. Ydelman, F.A. Johnstone, and R. Davies would attract a large reading public outside the field of economic and labour historians. With **Working Life**, however, it is quite different.

Written in a simplistic manner, **Working Life** makes for good popular reading, not only for academics and scholars of history, but also for the general public. The author steers clear of getting involved in the controversial viewpoints contained in the works mentioned. The author maintains that the specific race order that evolved on the Rand can be attributed to capitalistic interests, state intervention and the race consciousness of the white workers rather than merely being the outcome of a class conflict. The author give credit to racial prejudice among the workers:

"Racism and division were a part of everyday life. The society - encouraged by the state, the schools, the press, the church and employers - had created a racial world in which people were expected to behave according to the colour of their skin as well as the class they belonged to. Race therefore cut across class lines — most workers thought of themselves first as blacks or whites, and not foremost as workers. (*Working life*, p.200)

Working Life concentrates on the Witwatersrand. Being the scene of all the major developments in South African labour, the Rand has often been termed the 'play within the play'. This work shows how both Black and White arrived on the Rand and were compelled to join the labour market. The Blacks were forced off the land by continued droughts, backward farming methods, lack of land and government taxation. They had no other option but to submit to the 'pull factors' — the opportunity of making a living as wage earners on the mines or in the growing industrial sector. Similarly the Afrikaners arrived in the cities where they joined the ranks of the Poor Whites and where they had to compete with the Blacks for positions as unskilled labourers.

The book also deals with workers' resistance. It shows how the Whites resisted the growing tendency of the capitalist groups to replace them with cheaper black labour. The 1922 — strike is covered as well as attempts by the Whites to safeguard their position in the labour field by using their

political power, as was illustrated by the Pact Victory in 1924. Black trade unions were also covered in great detail and attention is paid to the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union — a trade union that claimed to have a following of 100 000 members.

On the whole the work represents a thorough analysis of the history of workers belonging to all racial groups coming from all ranks of society on the Rand. But **Working Life** is more than a mere labour history of the Witwatersrand. The work, written by a member of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand, reflects the aims of the Workshop in that it attempts to write history from 'below'. Instead of focusing on the history of the ruling classes — governments, politicians and political parties — a concern for the ordinary people is reflected. In this case the emphasis is on ordinary workers and their perception of a world shaped by politicians. Interviews that were conducted with ordinary people are included in the text, such as the stories of Ngkono Mma-pooe and an Afrikaner bywoner family. (pp.28-32)

The main themes that are covered in this book show that an inter-disciplinary approach is followed. In this the author had the benefit of a competent team in the workshop to provide ample information on economics, social life, art and literature. The economic history of mining, factories and industries is augmented by the social life of the workers, race relations, sport and family life. Even songs and poetry are included.

Although the work does not pretend to be a political history, a

closer look at politics may well have served to clarify certain issues more. Very little mention is made of political matters, in fact no mention is even made of the role played by Afrikaner Nationalism in creating the specific political order that became characteristic of South Africa. On the whole the book provides very entertaining reading. It is also an extremely handsome production packed with fascinating illustrations, cartoons, source material and photographs. The large collection of black and white photographs provides good study material in itself. The author must have gone to great trouble in collecting all the material which include some very unusual photographs.

The thematic approach and various subheadings make the work easy to use. The use of difficult terms and concepts is avoided. Footnotes and references are supplied at the end of each chapter, to substantiate the facts without making the work appear unduly scholarly and daunting. One short-coming, however, is the numerous cross-references to other chapters and topics in the book without supplying page numbers. The absence of a topic index does not clarify the confusion either.

For the History teacher and especially for the teaching of the matric syllabus, the book would prove extremely valuable and I would recommend that both school libraries and history teachers seriously consider adding this publication to their collections. I look forward to the appearance of Volume Three which I hope will maintain the same standard of the other two works.

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