SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE BLACK MINE WORKERS ON THE ORANGE FREE STATE GOLDFIELDS, 1947-1957

Midas H. Chawane*

1. INTRODUCTION

The commencement of mining activities on the Orange Free State Goldfields resulted in the influx of black migrants who came to work in these mines. Once on the mines, they found themselves working under deplorable social and economic conditions. This was in spite of attempts made by Ernest Oppenheimer to improve these conditions. Oppenheimer's efforts were frustrated by government legislation which was in place before 1947.

The social and economic aspects of all mines in South Africa were dominated by the colour problems. Therefore in the mines of the Free State the colour bar,[1] according to which specific jobs had to be preserved for Whites, was implemented.[2] The implication of this was that social and economic conditions for Black and White differed.

With the opening up of the Free State mines, Ernest Oppenheimer (chairman of the Anglo-American Corporation) placed socio-economic advancement in the very forefront of his hopes and aspirations for the new venture.[3] The meaning of this was that favourable social and economic conditions were to be created not only for white, but also for black workers in the Free State mines. But, as stated already, the mines of the Free State entered into a socio-economic environment already shaped by the apartheid policies and as a result his hopes and aspirations were to be shattered. With some improvements made on compound accommodation and health, conditions such as those concerning wages, work arrangements, accidents, and work relations remained similar to those of other South African mines.[4]

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* Vista University (East Rand Campus).

1 The Colour Bar Act was the product of the 1911 Mines and Works Act and it (Colour Bar Act) was further strengthened by the 1926 Mines and Works Amendment Act.

2 GV Doxey, **The industrial colour bar in South Africa** (London, 1961), p. 3.

3 T Gregory, **Ernest Oppenheimer** (Cape Town, 1962), p. 572.

4 The reason for this was that provision with regard to the latter services was made by the central government's regulation.

2. WAGES AND WORK ARRANGEMENTS

The tradition of paying Blacks low wages had been established as early as the 1880s in the diamond mines.[5] The Chamber of Mines,[6] formed in 1889, further undertook to reduce black wage rates.[7] The reason given by the Chamber for this reduction was that it was necessary to pay a small cash wage which would supplement the peasant earnings of a migrant labourer. The most obvious reasons however, could have been the type of work performed by Blacks, (i.e. unskilled labour), which also made it justifiable to pay Blacks low wages, and the desire by most Whites to be paid higher wages than Blacks.[8]

The wages of black mine workers were strongly influenced by the fixed price of gold which held until 1972. The meaning of this was that mine-owners could not pass on any increase in production costs to consumers, but had to absorb it internally by paying black workers low wages. [9]

In order to optimise the economic benefits of the mining industry, the Chamber of Mines engineered and administered employment packages to restrict black wage rates to a uniform and static minimum.[10] Various techniques were employed to achieve this. The Chamber fixed time and piece work wage rates at a very low level and confined black workers to unskilled manual work such as shovelling, tramming and drilling. Another technique was a system of maximum average according to which any mining company paying more than the stipulated average would be liable to a fine. The main reason for this was to prevent the mines from competing for piece work labour and to inhibit the richer mines from paying high wages to their workers. The Chamber also introduced a technique called extra-contractual labour or unpaid labour time. An example of this technique is that Blacks employed as "machine boys" (drill workers) were paid at piece rates according to the number of inches drilled. In defence of the adoption of these techniques, the Chamber used the same old argument of claiming that the low wages payable to Blacks was meant to supplement subsistence farming in the reserves.[11]

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5 WH Hutt, **The economics of colour bar segregation in South Africa** (London, 1964), p. 58.

6 The main task of the Chamber of Mines was to control and determine a uniform policy and wages for all mine workers.

7 CR Diamond, **African labour problems on the South African gold mines with special reference to the strike of 1946** (MA dissertation, Cape Town, 1969), p. 6.

8 P Kallaway, **Twentieth Century South Africa: Source material on South African history** (London, 1984), pp. 35-6.

9 WG James, **Our precious metal** (Cape Town, 1970), p. 18.

10 D Ncube, **The influence of apartheid and capitalism on the development of trade unions in South Africa** (Johannesburg, 1985), p. 26.

11 **Ibid.**

To counter this justification of exploiting black workers, it can be argued that low wages payable supplemented the mines which otherwise could not make any profit, especially lower-grade mines.

In spite of the effort made by the Chamber of Mines to reduce black wages, some mines were by 1911 paying better wages and seemed satisfied with the return they were getting in increased motivation and higher efficiency.[12] This natural development was curtailed in 1912 when all important mining groups agreed that no one mine would pay Blacks more than a fixed maximum average wage.[13] This maximum average amounted to £16,15 (R80,75) per year from which there had to be a deduction of £13,17 (R65,85) for clothing and fare home.[14]

For the new mines of the Free State the chairman of Anglo-American Corporation, Ernest Oppenheimer argued that because the mines were expected to be lucrative, if good wages were paid to Blacks they (the mines) would get the pick of the labour market. Higher wages for Blacks were, according to Oppenheimer, not only necessary for the workers to enable them to maintain their families in health and decency, but would increase the labourers' reliability and efficiency thereby reducing the degree of white supervision.[15] In their response, the mine owners reflected a generally held opinion that a large increase in wages would defeat its object as the black worker would more rapidly attain his object and therefore work for a shorter period.[16] Another argument put forward against any rise in the black labourers' wages was that any such rise would mean the closing down of many mines that could not afford high payment.[17]

By the year 1952 the mines of the Free State had an average of 27 817 black employees who were all paid about £2 237 312 (about R11 million) which amounted to £80 (R400,00) per worker per year. When compared to Blacks in the mines of the Witwatersrand who were paid £54 (R270) those of the Free State were better paid. It is interesting to note that while Blacks in the mines of the Free State were paid better than those on other gold mines, they were paid far less when compared to their white counterparts. By the same year (1952) the Free State mines had an average of 4 770 white workers earning about £4 762 851 (about R22 million)

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[12] "Sir Ernest Oppenheimer's village settlement plan in the Orange Free State", **South African Outlook**, Vol. 76, July 1946, p. 107.
[13] "The gold mining industry: Investigation into wages of African labourers", **South African Outlook**, Vol. 73, August 1943, p. 110.
[14] **South African Outlook**, Vol. 76, July 1946, p. 108.
[15] **Ibid.**, pp. 108-9.
[16] ST van der Horst, **Native labour in South Africa** (London, 1971), p. 177.
[17] **South African Outlook**, Vol. 76, July 1946, p. 108.

amounting to £999 (R4 995) per worker per year.[18] It is, therefore, clear that black labourers in the mines of the Free State were in general paid exceedingly low wages.

Low wages payable to Blacks were made possible by the presence of monopolistic elements amongst employers such as common recruiting organisations. The Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, for example, not only played a recruiting role, but also prevented mines from competing with one another and raising wages.[19] Moreover, pressure exerted by white workers who were unprepared to permit any levelling of wages between Black and White forced the government to pass the Wage Act of 1957. The purpose of the Wage Act was to establish the Wage Board which was to conduct investigations and submit reports concerning salaries and wages to the Minister of Labour.[20] The Wage Board, however, only served the purpose of widening the wage disparity between black and white workers by law.[21]

As far as work arrangements for Blacks were concerned, the government's policy was the maintenance of a labour pattern based on the colour bar, i.e. job reservation.[22] The Mines and Works Act of 1926 empowered the Governor-General to make regulations for certificates of competency in skilled occupations. One of the stipulations of the act was that Blacks in the Orange Free State could not be granted such certificates, hence unskilled labour was left to Blacks.[23] This meant that Black and White were to work together, the former performing menial labour and the latter skilled or supervisory work.

Thus work arrangements for Blacks in mines of the Free State were determined by the existing general policy as stipulated by government regulations. For workers to reach the shaft head at 05:00 a.m., they had to rise at about 03:00 a.m. If the worker was late according to predetermined schedule, the day's work was forfeited. Whilst black workers were the last to leave the mine shaft after work, they were the first to arrive at the shaft in the company of their team leader (who was also black) who supervised preliminary clearing before the arrival of white workers.[24] Once work commenced, there was no allowance for an official break. This means that for the shift span of eight hours without a break, they had to take

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[18] "Mine labour salaries and wages: Comparative statistics, 1952", **South African Mining and Engineering Journal**, Vol. 64, No. 1, April 1953, p. 199.
[19] Hutt, p. 9; Diamond, p. 63.
[20] A de Kock, **Industrial laws of South Africa** (Cape Town, 1964), p. 401.
[21] James, p. 20. Major changes in the wages of black mine workers took place in 1972 when the fixed price of gold was abandoned.
[22] A Hepple, **South Africa: A political and economic history** (London, 1966), p. 207.
[23] **Ibid.**
[24] WR Böhning, **Black migration to South Africa** (Geneva, 1981), p. 94.

advantage of a lull in work to eat, drink and rest. White workers on the other hand had nothing to do either than sit and chat whilst delegating orders.[25]

The heaviest work underground was drilling by means of a pneumatic jackhammer which operates on air pressure. [26] It required someone with fairly powerful arms and legs as the constant vibration adds to the fatigue at the end of the shift, hence the pneumatic jackhammer was nicknamed "Madumelane", meaning it knocks you down. [27] The pneumatic jackhammer was operated by a "machine boy" who was an important link in the production chain. His ability to drill holes as indicated and to operate the machine properly had a direct bearing on the tonnage produced. Since "machine boys" were paid an incentive bonus, the more holes they drilled, the more they enhanced their earnings and that of their white supervisors because they also scored financially when the output of holes increased.[28]

The work of "engineering boys" was not as arduous as that done by "machine boys". Engineering boys were paid normal basic rates but could increase their earnings as they were often called out for overtime work. They generally worked in gangs of three or four under direct or indirect white supervision. Their work included carrying tools and equipment, dismantling or assembling machines, cleaning parts, removing heavy equipment by mechanical means and the laying of cables.[29]

The most attractive work envied by most black mine workers was that of a boss-boy or *induna*. This work carried with itself a certain prestige. Boss-boys were given badges and authority to direct and control the activities of those working under them. The wages payable to them were considerably higher than the normal basic rate and they also received a few privileges in the compound. They acted as a link between black workers and their white bosses.[30] The boss-boys' selection was based on their mine experience and their degree of compliance with management hence their unpopularity amongst black workers. Some boss-boys were reported by miners to be exerting considerable power over the miners and thus becoming targets of bitter attacks denouncing them as management-fearing and informers.[31] A large number of black workers were those who worked with picks and shovels.

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[25] **Ibid.**
[26] WT v S Naudé, **The African mine labourer: A study of six tribes employed in the mining industry** (Ph.D. thesis, 1962), p. 9.
[27] Interview, J Radebe, 2710 Kutlwanong, 13 June 1992.
[28] Naudé, p. 10.
[29] **Ibid.**, p. 11.
[30] **Ibid.**, p. 12.
[31] Böhning, p. 100; an interview with A Mabaso, 7260 Thabong, 16 March 1992.

Even though Blacks had to perform unskilled jobs, work arrangements for them included some training in mine work. This training included schools for boss-boys[32] and training in first aid. [33] In March 1954, Dr GF Jacobs was already working on the establishment of aptitude testing for selection of mine workers. According to him, two tests had to be written. The first was a general adaptability battery in which all workers had to take part. The second was a special test for selected workers which would make it possible to assess supervisory ability and leadership. The main aim of the test was, according to Dr Jacobs, to determine the nature of the subsequent training to be received, as well as the job to be performed, and by so doing minimizing wastage of labour as a result of misplacement.[34] The aptitude testing department was created on 1 July 1954 and by August, nearly 900 workers had already passed through the test at Welkom No. 2 Shaft.[35]

Thus the mining industry, faced with the problem of cost minimization, was assisted by the government which imposed statutory job reservation through the Mines and Works Act of 1926, which in turn provided a platform from which racial discrimination in the sphere of employment could be intrenched and perpetuated by white unions. In short, as for the "wage colour bars" and "job colour bars", it can be said that the one complemented the other since the so-called unskilled black labour could not be paid higher wages.

3. ACCIDENTS AND HEALTH CONDITIONS

Tough working conditions on the mines were exemplified by an old Sotho miner who described it as an agonizing, painful experience. [36] Inherent dangers of mining included death or injury caused by rock falls, flooding, technical faults and carelessness, while other factors detrimental to health also prevailed.[37]

Apart from the already mentioned dangers, methane gas was found to be among the hazards of mining. It was reported that since the beginning of mining operations until 1956, 76 blacks were killed and more injured as a result of methane explosions underground. According to the Department of Mines in Welkom, methane gas originates from the coal seams of the Karoo system which overlies the rock formation in which the gold reefs of the Orange Free State are found. The department maintains that what makes the gas dangerous is that it is colourless and

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[32] Boss boys were Blacks who supervised other black workers on behalf of white foremen and usually they were not liked by most workers.
[33] Kallaway, p. 35.
[34] **Welkom News**, 6 March 1954.
[35] **Ibid.**, 24 August 1954.
[36] D Moodie, **Mine culture and miners' identity on the South African gold mines**, p. 180.
[37] AP Cartwright, **Golden age** (Cape Town, 1968), p. 302.

odourless, and highly inflammable when ignited.[38] In an attempt to prevent dangers caused by methane gas the Free State mines were declared fiery mines (i.e. liable to explosions) and became the first metal mines in the world to be declared as such. Regulations applying to other such mines were adapted to suit the Free State mines. Black underground workers were to be searched for tobacco and matches before going underground. Other regulations included special precautions to prevent sparks from machinery which could ignite the gas.[39] A major accident took place in 1953 at Merriespruit mine when the mine shaft was flooded with water. Hundreds of people were reported dead in this accident.[40]

To try and prevent accidents in general, the Prevention of Accident Committee of the Chamber of Mines agreed on the request of mine managers to establish a "safety first" competition for black employees in the Free State mines in 1950. Active publicity and propaganda to encourage safety consciousness were undertaken and films were made available.[41] In addition, first aid competitions were held between black workers to try to keep accidents at a minimal point.[42]

Compensations for employees involved in accidents were laid down in the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1934. The act required all workers to carry compensation insurance. However, there was a wide disparity between compensation payable to Black and White. This was so because the act set up a scale for compensation based on wages received by employees.[43] The act stipulated that on the death of a black employee as the result of a mine accident, compensation based on a minimum monthly wage of £5 (R20) was payable to his dependants. Depending on the degree of the handicap, some miners who became physically handicapped as the result of mine accidents were after compensation returned home while some were given jobs on the surface.[44]

Black mine workers were also faced with unfavourable health conditions. According to the **Mining and Industrial Magazine**, the greatest number of deaths arose from diseases of the heart and pericardium, followed by pneumonia, bronco (inflammation of bronchial mucous membrane) and lobar diseases (diseases affect-

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38 **Welkom News**, 5 July 1957.
39 **The Friend**, 9 April 1952.
40 Interview with A Mabaso, 7260 Thabong, 16 March 1992.
41 **Welkom News**, 7 March 1950. In respect of the safety first competition, each mine had to train workers on safety and competitions were to be held between mines.
42 **Ibid.**, 9 June 1951.
43 "Social services and the Witwatersrand gold mining industry", **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 32, October 1944, p. 613.
44 **Ibid.**, p. 323.

ing the outer part of an ear), and cancer and sarcoma (becoming fleshy).[45] Other common diseases were tuberculosis and silicosis. Silicosis was caused by mineral dust produced by mining operations such as drilling.[46] It must be noted that the incident of silicosis was found to be lower among migrant workers than among those who worked continuously.[47] It is also worth noting that after it had been discovered that silicosis was caused by drilling, drilling was no longer classified under skilled labour, but was to be done by Blacks, an example of discrimination.

Heat-stroke was another affliction many underground workers suffered from. Like other gold mines in South Africa, the mines of the Free State are having a working place with temperatures above 86,4 degrees Fahrenheit. In an attempt to overcome this problem, an underground research laboratory was established in the Johannesburg Deep Gold Mine where all workers had to go through for acclimatization.[48] To lower the incidence of chills, pneumonia and other ills related to exposure to changing temperatures, hostels were connected to the shaft by a tunnel. This enabled workers to leave the mine and go straight to their dormitory blocks and have showers without exposure to the cold open air.[49]

Health precautions taken in other mines of South Africa also applied to the mines of the Free State. For example, regular monthly checks took place where workers were weighed and figures compared with the previous month's data.

One of the social aspirations of Oppenheimer was the improvement of the health conditions of black workers. According to him, higher standards of comfort and hygiene in hostel accommodation, better feeding and medical services all combined to make employment in the gold-mining industry attractive.[50] It was this emphasis that made the mines of the Free State unique.

In almost all gold mines of South Africa, Blacks were provided with the barest essentials and little care was taken with the preparation of food. The result of this was that deficiency diseases manifested themselves in most compounds.[51] The housing of Blacks in the mine compounds of the Free State was seen as a positive

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45 "Diseases and hygiene: Mine workers' death rate", **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 45, 1955, p. 384.
46 ST van der Horst, **Native labour in South Africa** (London, 1962), p. 191.
47 "Acclimatizing Native mineworkers to conditions underground", **Mining Survey**, Vol. 4, No. 6, 27 December 1953, pp. 26-7.
48 "Native hostel at Welkom", **South African Mining and Engineering Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 1, 1 July 1950, p. 625.
49 **Ibid.**
50 Gregory, p. 582.
51 "Diseases and hygiene: Mine workers' death rate", **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 45, 1955, p. 384.

departure aiming at improving their health.[52] Each room was occupied by only ten men, with greater floor space per individual, thus reducing the risk of the spread of infectious diseases. To improve feeding and nutrition, a dietician was permanently attached to the hostel kitchen and all food handlers were regularly blood-tested.[53]

A major breakthrough in improving black mine workers' health was made on 18 December 1950 when Oppenheimer laid the foundation stone of the hospital in Welkom named after him.[54] The design and layout of the hospital were decided upon after a comprehensive tour of overseas hospitals, thus making it one of the biggest and most modern in southern Africa. The hospital was built at a cost of £935 000 (R4 675 000) and accommodated some 800 black patients.[55] In addition to this a system of mass miniature, where all miners were to be vaccinated and checked, was introduced.[56]

Compensation to miners suffering from diseases arising from the mining operations was only made to those who contracted tuberculosis or silicosis. Subject to certain limitations such as a minimum period of service underground, black miners were, according to the Miners' Phthisis Consolidated Act of 1925, entitled to compensation for contracting the two diseases. However, just like compensation arising from accidents, compensation for contracting diseases was dependent on the workers' monthly earnings.[57]

The nature of work performed by Blacks and the attitude of white miners who sometimes forced them to work under dangerous conditions, made them vulnerable to work-related diseases and accidents. The high standard of medical treatment Blacks received whilst on the mines was a good thing but once they returned home, they had to see to themselves. Moreover, compensation received for injuries and diseases was not enough to see them through once they returned home.

4. WORK RELATIONS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

JMB Hertzog's "civilized labour policy" laid foundations for work relations that existed between black and white workers. This policy was built on a recognition that there had already existed a powerful prejudice on the part of white em-

[52] **South African Mining and Engineering Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 1, 1 July 1950, p. 625.
[53] **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 45, 1955, p. 384.
[54] Gregory, p. 581.
[55] AP Cartwright, **The gold miners** (Cape Town, 1963), p. 308.
[56] **Ernest Oppenheimer**, p. 581.
[57] **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 32, October 1944, p. 621.

ployees against working side-by-side with blacks, unless the latter were subordinates.[58]

Work relations between Black and White were characterized by hostile attitudes on the part of Whites and tension (arising from their subordinate position) among black workers. An old miner associated this with the so-called boss-boy (master-and-servant) relationship that existed in the work place. According to this relationship, all Whites were, in the eyes of Blacks, seen as masters whilst they (Whites) saw all Blacks as servants. Therefore, whenever there was a white man in the work place, Blacks had to work harder than when he was not there. The presence of Whites in the work place usually caused tension among Blacks, sometimes leading to accidents or mistakes.[59]

Generally, most Blacks did not like their bosses because of their attitude and consequently the Blacks did not enjoy their work. One worker described the situation as follows: "Every time you come out of the shaft, you felt relieved and every morning you wake-up you don't feel like going to work when you think of your bosses. They (bosses) always make you feel foolish every time you make a mistake and sometimes scold or insult you".[60] Whenever insulted or unfairly treated by their bosses, it was fruitless for Blacks to report their bosses to the managers because most of the time judgement was passed in favour of the white boss. Another reason why black workers were reluctant to report their bosses was that they were afraid that such action could only serve to worsen the already hostile attitude of their bosses. In spite of this, some Blacks did report their bosses and they (the bosses) also complained that Blacks were not working hard and that if pushed to work hard, they resorted by taking them to court.[61] Whites did not have any choice but to extract more production because, as already mentioned, their earnings depended on output. An interesting point to note is that not all bosses were the same. While other black workers never complained about their bosses, some did report sound relationships with their bosses.[62]

The general attitude of white mineworkers towards Blacks was reflected in the speech made by Gert Lombard, white union organiser. Lombard told white workers that there was no room for both races in the mines, and that giving greater responsibility to Blacks was tantamount to creating trouble. Blacks, he maintained, could not be left to work without white supervision because they were incompetent, lazy

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[58] Hutt, p. 62.
[59] Interview with J Rhadebe, 2710 Kutlwanong, 13 June 1992.
[60] Interview with A Mabaso, 7260 Thabong, 16 March 1992.
[61] A Hocking, **Oppenheimer and son** (Johannesburg, 1968), p. 319.
[62] Interview with A Mabaso, 7260 Thabong, 16 March 1992.

and insolent.[63] Thus, from the point of view of white miners, there was no question of allowing Blacks to supplant white labour and for them, even parallel development was a concept to be entertained in the future only.[64]

An attempt by mine management to maintain the boss-boy relationship (i.e. a sort of master-and-servant relationship) in the Free State mines was first made by the management of Van Dyk Consolidated Mines. In 1955 it issued to its white mining staff guidelines on the handling of black workers. To make it clear that the Blacks were not their equals, bosses were advised never to play or joke with their boys, criticize officials or discuss other Europeans with their boys, borrow money from him, discuss morals with him, or swear at them. The guidelines further suggested that all cases of insubordination and disobeying instructions were to be brought before the Inspector of the Native Affairs Court and that all cases of assault by a boy on a boss were to be reported immediately and be dealt with by a higher court.[65]

Black mine workers, unlike their white counterparts, did not enjoy inter-mine recognition. This means that if a black miner for some reason such as dissatisfaction with conditions on one mine wished to be transferred to another, his work records could not be transferred with him. This was the case even if such miner was working for the same mining company. For a black worker to relocate, he first had to weigh the cost of revoking his previous work record. Associated with relocation was also a risk of relegation for miners occupying certain positions.[66] Black miners who had been laid off from their former mines at the expiry of their contract had to start from scratch with a new contract on another mine. The reason for not recognising inter-mine work amongst Blacks was, according to the chamber, the effect it would have on the labour supply between unpopular and popular mines.[67]

What further made relations between blacks and whites worse was the tendency by the government and mine owners of offering to Blacks unfavourable working conditions as opposed to their white counterparts. For example, on signing the contract with the mining company, Blacks undertook to comply with any management decisions or orders made in terms of their contract. Failure to comply with these orders, became a matter for civil courts.[68] Thus, what was a civil offence for Whites was regarded as a criminal offence for Blacks.[69] The feeling of superiority amongst

[63] Hocking, pp. 319-20.
[64] **Ibid.**, p. 320.
[65] **Welkom News**, 2 February 1955.
[66] Böhning, p. 95.
[67] **Ibid.**, p. 95.
[68] Diamond, p. 139.
[69] JM Tinley, **The native labour problem of South Africa** (California,1942), p. 146.

Whites over Blacks was further enhanced by the fact that they (Whites) enjoyed benefits in the form of an Unemployment Benefit Fund, superannuation, holiday leave allowances and savings funds which Blacks did not enjoy.[70]

The inability (due to legal obstacles) to organise themselves into labour organisations made them helpless in the face of organised Whites. It also made it impossible for Blacks to collectively complain to management. Therefore, the central government's legislation, the Chamber of Mines and white trade unions interacted to ensure the inferiority of Blacks in the working place.

5. THE COMPOUND SYSTEM

The compound system was the system of housing Blacks on mine property. This system was first used on the diamond mines in Kimberley. These compounds were badly built and were comparable to army barracks. From the management point of view, the reasons behind the adoption of the compound system was to prevent diamond smuggling and maintain soberness of workers. The most obvious reason however was that the mine owners sought to keep the cost low by providing cheap accommodation for Blacks.[71] Another reason was that mine owners acted in accordance with the government's policy of preventing permanent black settlement in the urban areas. From the diamond mines, the compound system eventually became an acceptable method both socially and politically of accommodating Blacks.[72]

For the new mines of the Free State, Oppenheimer proposed the establishment of married quarters for housing Blacks instead of the compounds. In an interview with the **Rand Daily Mail**, Oppenheimer stated that he wanted to see Blacks housed in villages rather than in compounds, with enough provision made for married quarters.[73] Arguing for the establishment of married quarters for black labourers, Oppenheimer said that the sudden disruption of the tribal system was undesirable to the black population and that changes had to be made in the housing of Blacks for which the Anglo-American Corporation would be responsible.[74]

It is important to note that since white workers were to perform supervisory tasks, and were as such needed by mine-owners, housing was provided for them in

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[70] **Mining and Industrial Magazine of Southern Africa**, Vol. 32, October 1944, p. 609.
[71] **Ibid.**
[72] Hutt, p. 52 and Doxey, p. 32.
[73] D Jacobson, **Maize turns to gold** (Cape Town, n.d.), pp. 115-6.
[74] **Ibid.**, p. 116.

villages near the mines and they were encouraged to bring along their families.[75] Thus, Oppenheimer sought to make similar provision for Blacks. The villages, unlike the location, were to be built near the mines at the expense of the mine and to accommodate only mine workers performing special duties on the mine.

This proposal of housing Blacks in villages did not go unchallenged by the government. It clashed with the general policy of housing Blacks either in compounds or locations. The first government official to react was HS Erasmus of the National Party who warned the government and the Minister of Native Affairs of the danger of a surplus black population. This cabinet minister argued that the Free State Provincial Administration would have to take responsibility for unemployed Blacks if ever the mines were worked out.[76] Further rejection of the establishment of villages for Blacks was expressed by the then Minister of Native Affairs, HF Verwoerd. In reply to the question about his attitude concerning the establishment of such villages, he said that his department had been instructed to investigate the position very thoroughly and stop the development of such villages.[77]

Another objection to the establishment of villages for Blacks was that provision of medical services for the dependents of married labourers would be essential, something which the mining industry could not face alone without governmental assistance.[78] Economically, it was argued that village accommodation would inevitably raise native labour costs to an extent which might even make the opening of the new mines unjustifiable.[79] Moreover, the Department of Native Affairs felt that the mines of the Free State had to be treated like other industries and that its married black labourers had to be accommodated in the same way as in the case of other industries. It was this opposition by the government that thwarted the efforts by Oppenheimer and the Anglo-American Corporation to create villages for married Blacks.[80]

However, after an extensive investigation by the Department of Native Affairs into the question of whether or not villages for married Blacks should be established, the conclusion reached was that the establishment of villages for a certain limited number of experienced married Blacks such as boss-boys and those who were needed for night duties or emergency duties should be allowed.[81] Thus the

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[75] L Callinicos, **Working life 1886-1940: A people's history of South Africa** (Braamfontein, 1987), pp. 219-20.
[76] **Ibid.**, p. 117.
[77] Gregory, p. 578. This reflects the general standpoint of the government on what could result in a permanent settlement of Blacks in urban areas.
[78] Jacobson, p. 119.
[79] **Ibid.**, pp. 117-8.
[80] Gregory, p. 580.
[81] **Ibid.**, p. 579.

government only allowed the mines to provide married quarters for a maximum of three per cent of the total labour employed.[82]

In 1949 the Anglo-American Corporation decided to break new grounds and according to the government's approval provided family life for some of its black employees. The Corporation appointed JD Rheinalt (former director of the Institute of Race Relations) as its adviser on Native Affairs.[83] It was decided to experiment with a village of 100 houses to be increased to 500. The first 50 of these houses were built between No. 1 and 2 shafts of the Welkom mine.[84] Each house in the village had three rooms, a bathroom, a shower and a kitchen equipped with a coal stove, a water heater and a sink with hot and cold running water. Future plans for the village included the establishment of shops and schools while in the meantime occupants continued to receive food from the kitchen stores of the hostel and children were schooled in temporary accommodation in one of the houses.[85]

According to Oppenheimer, villages were to be established for workers from within the Union of South Africa while the compound system was to be continued for Blacks who were from territories outside the Union.[86] Black workers who were from the Union but did not qualify for settlement in the villages were also to be housed in the compounds.

The provision of compound accommodation for Blacks in the Free State mines was seen as a radical departure from the old tradition of housing them in army-like barracks-compound to some sort of modern accommodation.[87] Unlike other compounds which were designed to reduce contact between workers and outsiders as far as possible, in the compounds of the Free State mine workers were allowed to leave when they wanted to.[88] Moreover, in planning for the new compounds, medical officers, engineers and Native Administration Officers were amongst those consulted.[89] Each compound was built to accommodate about 2 560 people. In the centre of each compound was a kitchen block where workers ate their meals in the dining hall instead of in their dormitories or outdoors. As opposed to the conventional concrete bunks used in other compounds, double-decked iron beds with rubber mattresses were used.[90]

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[82] Hutt, p. 93.
[83] Jacobson, p. 177.
[84] Hepple, p. 204.
[85] **Welkom News**, 2 June 1951.
[86] **Ibid.**, 5 September 1950.
[87] Jacobson, p. 117.
[88] "Native hostels at Welkom", **South African Mining and Engineering Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 1, July 1950, p. 625.
[89] **Ibid.**
[90] **Ibid.**

In terms of their administrative structure, the compounds of the OFS mines were similar to those in other mines of South Africa. At the top of the structure was the hostel manager. His main task was to maintain a high and stable labour complement and he was assisted by white personnel officers and deputy personnel officers.[91] The second tier was the black personnel assistant who acted as a link between the hostel manager and workers. There was also the headman (also known as the *induna*) who was in control of each major ethnic group. The headman was assisted in the execution of his task by tribal representatives. At the bottom of the structure was an elected representative called the *isibonda* who represented a particular room within the compound.[92]

In the establishment of these compounds, recreation and welfare facilities were also provided. The creation of these facilities was the responsibility of the Native Affairs Department of the Corporation and the project itself was placed under the control of a full-time organizer (or welfare officer) who was assisted by two trained Blacks. The programme included minor and major games, cinema programmes, tribal dances, literacy instructions, hygiene instructions as well as advice on money and other personal matters.[93] With the help of the South African Institute of Race Relations, literacy classes were also organized. Reading and writing facilities in the form of a table and two benches were provided in each dormitory.[94]

In spite of the major improvements, such as providing additional facilities, the compound system did not address the social, economic and political problems of workers. Socially, the compounds continued to separate workers from the outside world and fragmented them along tribal lines and area of origin. As for the economic and political aspects of the compound system only mine owners benefited. Since migrants did not bring along their wives and children, the cost of schools, clinics, hospitals and social amenities were evaded, thus minimizing labour costs on the part of employers.[95] The fragmentation of migrants into local and foreign and along tribal lines not only promoted ethnicity but made it easy for employers to play off one group against the other. The compound system made it easy for employers to suppress strikes and disputes by sending troops to surround all the compounds at the same time.[96]

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[91] Böhning, p. 100.
[92] **Ibid.**
[93] **Welkom News**, 13 September 1950.
[94] **South African Mining and Engineering Journal**, Vol. 61, No. 1, July 1950, p. 625.
[95] Ncube, p. 19.
[96] **Ibid.**

6. CONCLUSION

Oppenheimer's efforts to improve the social and economic conditions of black mineworkers were bound to fail from the outset. The major reason for this was that his move was against the government's policy and the desire of other mine-owners. The government's aim was to put in practice the policy of discrimination which was also introduced in the mining industry. This means that whatever effort Oppenheimer made to improve the conditions of Blacks on the mines was thwarted by the government's policy of discrimination which was extended to the mines. On the other hand the mine-owners sought to maximize profits by accommodating black mine workers in the compounds and paying them low wages. As a result, the dreams of Oppenheimer of paying black labourers high wages and providing them with village settlement were never realized.

Credit must however, be given to improvements made on compound accommodation and in the sphere of health (i.e. the establishment of a new hospital for black miners). Notwithstanding these improvements, the social and economic conditions of black mine workers in the Free State Goldfields remained the same as those of other mine workers in South Africa. Socially, the conditions were characterised by poor working conditions and unfavourable relations between black and white workers. Economically, in addition to the fact that they were paid low wages and had to do the heaviest jobs, they did no enjoy the benefits enjoyed by their white counterparts.