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The white labour forest settlement programme in South Africa, 1917-1938

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Events moved much more quickly than the Department originally expected. The replacement of dead transplants had to be carried out within a year or two of the original planting. As most settlements had planting programmes lasting in excess of a decade, this process clearly started the year following first planting and was an ongoing job. Blanking also took place at the same time as planting and therefore interfered with this important job. Further, the newly established plantation needed constant weeding even though the planted areas had been cleared to bare soil. This task interfered with the clearing and "picking" of new areas. The most obvious way of handling these conflicting demands for labour would have been to expand the size of individual settlements and increase the numbers of settlers. In fact, this did not happen; instead, the total number of settlements was expanded and new areas opened for afforestation. As a result, foresters responded to the problem at their settlement by cutting back on the annual planting programme and lobbying for permission to employ local African labour.[50] Effectively, this meant that the area planted at some settlements was progressively smaller from year to year.

Other factors also led to reductions in the area annually planted. For a start, the areas nearest the settlement were naturally planted up first. This meant that the worker's travelling time in the early years of the settlement was short. Within a year or two, however, the men were walking one or two miles to work every morning and back again in the evening. Tools and plants also had to be transplanted this distance. As distances increased, the men resorted to bicycles to cover the

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50. For examples see the reports in CAD FOR 204 A331/3, Conservators Monthly Progress Reports - Natal.

distances. In a report released in 1940, the Department of Social Welfare noted this and the amazement of its field workers that the Department of Forestry did not realize the losses in worker efficiency it was accruing through failure to provide motorized transportation.[51] At the Natal settlement of Weza, where the furthest work site was some twelve kilometres from the settlement, huts were constructed at the outlying areas and the workers slept in them during the week. As compensation for this inconvenience they were paid an additional sixpence per night.[52] Eventually, the Department of Labour and Social Welfare provided the settlements with motor lorries to transport the men to their work sites.[53]

The last factor was the increasing age of the settlers. The settlements were naturally self-selecting. There is some evidence that the settlers who decided they did not like the job, or their compatriots in the settlement, left within a relatively short time of their arrival. Settlers with marketable skills or contacts in the cities also tended not to stay. There was, however, always a residual who stayed on and, by the late 1930's these men made up the majority of settlers in the older settlements such as French Hoek and Jonkersberg. Their increasing

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51. South Africa, Report of the Department of Social Welfare for the Financial Years, 1937-1939 (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1940), 128-9.

52. CAD FOR 399 E230/F1, Weza White Labour Forest Settlement, Alfred Division, Natal Conservancy: General, memo, J.D. Smuts, Forester, to Conservator, Natal, re: "Weza Forestry Settlement: Complaints by Settler, D.F. Smith," 28 March, 1934.

53. The issue of transportation is discussed in the Department of Social Work's file series CAD VWN 1378 SWA16, Motor Lorries, Forestry Settlements, and in the Department of Forestry file FOR 406 E230/9, White Labour Forestry Settlements: Hours of Work, General.

age and infirmity was of concern to the foresters and to the Department.[54] This concern can be understood when one considers that, by 1938, seventy-seven percent of the settlers at French Hoek (the first settlement) were over the age of forty years.[55] With the end of the Great Depression in South Africa (roughly 1934), the Department of Forestry found it increasingly difficult to attract and keep settlers. This difficulty was of course exacerbated by the Second World War. As a result, by the end of the War, most afforestation and plantation work was once again being carried out by African and Coloured labour.

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54. CAD FOR 400 E230/ F1/2 White Labour Forestry Settlement, Weza, General, clipping, A.I. Ferraz, "Economic Problem to be Faced," Natal Advertiser 24 January, 1937.

55. CAD FOR 373 E230/A1 French Hoek White Labour Forestry Settlement, memo, Conservator, Western Conservancy to Director of Forestry, 27 May, 1938. It should be noted that, since the beginning of the programme, the maximum age of entry of a settler was forty-five.

Chapter Four

The Origins of the Settlement Programme

Introduction

A shortage of locally produced woods products was not the only factor leading to a heavy investment in the settlement schemes. If it had not been for the presence of significant numbers of poor whites and the problem of unemployed, discharged soldiers from the First World War, the programme never would have grown as big as it did nor lasted for so long. Accordingly, this chapter reviews the unemployment and poor white situation as it existed in the 1920s and 1930s. An important feature of the white labour settlement programme was that it was restricted to unemployed whites. It must therefore be borne in mind that all through the 1920s and 1930s African and Coloured workers were also unemployed. In contrast to white unemployment, non-white unemployment was not viewed as a problem by the government of South Africa during this period.

The chapter also reviews the way in which the government arrived at the policy of creating the forestry settlements. Although this is tied closely to the unemployment and poor white problem, it will be seen that there were other factors,

particularly the desire of the foresters of the Department of Forestry to engage in plantation forestry on a large scale and the influence of the agrarian myth and the back to the land movement.

Services for the Unemployed, 1910-1924

From the time of Union in 1910 to the defeat of the Smuts Government in 1924, South Africa had a rudimentary Labour Department and a system of Employment Exchanges. The Department, entitled the Department of White Labour, was actually a division within the Department of Mines which reflects its preoccupation with mine labour. White-only labour exchanges were located in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Durban, Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth, East London and Kimberley. During the period 1921 to 1923, the greatest number of applicants at the exchanges were from "Handymen and Unskilled Labourers," in other words, the poor white class. In this period, over half the total number of applicants were from the two exchanges in the Rand area, Johannesburg and Pretoria.[1] The role of the exchanges was to put the unemployed in touch with employers. In addition, the exchanges provided certain additional services. These included providing free rail warrants

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1. J.E. Holloway (comp.) Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1925), vol. 7(1924), 242-4. Despite the presence of these exchanges, there is no accurate data for the rate of real unemployment within the Union at this time. See Iraj Abedian and Barry Standish, An Economic Inquiry into the Poor White Saga (Rondebosch: South African Labour and Development Research Unit, 1985); _____, "Poor Whites and the Role of the State: the Evidence," South African Journal of Economics 53, 2(1985): 141-65; and J. Iliffe, The African Poor: a History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 114-42.

to the unemployed who had obtained work in another part of the country and lacked the resources to transport themselves, their families and possessions to their new jobs. The exchanges were also responsible for assigning men to the relief camps and, as the forestry settlement programme expanded, choosing suitable men from the ranks of the unskilled unemployed for the settlements. The effectiveness of the exchanges was related directly to the number of available vacant positions registered with each exchange. In 1921, there was a total of 33 729 applications for employment with the exchanges and 13 970 positions were listed. In 1923, however, the number of applicants had swelled to 46 699 while the number of requests for employees had fallen to only 4 985.[2]

Attitudes Towards the Poor Whites

Political leadership within the two Afrikaner Republics came from the ranks of the landed citizenry and from urban professionals such as lawyers and doctors. The landed citizenry were often land speculators as well as farmers and were accustomed to leasing their farms to white "bywoners" and African sharecroppers. The urban professional class also speculated in land and accumulated wealth by holding mortgages. This leadership group maintained its position during the Anglo-Boer War and was able to strengthen it at the creation of the Union in 1910 and in

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2. Holloway, Official Yearbook, vol. 7, 242-44.

the years following.[3]

In the period discussed here, white South African society was divided along class lines and had been since the earliest days of settlement. In the days of the Dutch administration of the Cape, probably as much as fifteen percent of the white population could be classified as "poor."[4] By the time of Union, this figure had changed little. A contemporary economist, W.M. Macmillan, estimated that in the early years of the twentieth century, between eight and fifteen percent of the white population was classifiable as "poor white." Most were of farming background and eighty to ninety percent were Afrikaans speaking.[5] By the beginning of the Great Depression, the Carnegie Commission estimated that the total number of poor whites was approximately 300 000 people, about seventeen percent of the white population.[6]

The attitude of the Union's leaders towards the poor

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3. See: Albert Grundlingh, "Collaborators in Boer Society," in Peter Warwick and S.B. Spies, The South African War: The Anglo Boer War, 1899-1902 (London: Longman Group, 1980), 258-278; Timothy J. Keegan, Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986); Charles van Onselen, Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), vol. 1, New Babylon, 3-10; vol. 2, New Nineveh, 111-70.

4. C. Bundy, "Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen: White Poverty in the Cape Before Poor Whitism," in William Beinart, Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido (eds), Putting a Plough to the Ground (Johannesburg: Ravan Press), 101-28; R. Ross, "The Origins of Capitalist Agriculture in the Cape: A Survey," in Beinart et. al., Putting a Plough, 71.

5. William Miller Macmillan, The South African Agrarian Problem and its Historical Development (Johannesburg: Council of Education, 1919), 9-13, 20-21.

6. J.F.W. Grosskopf, "Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus," in: Carnegie Commission, The Poor White Problem in South Africa: Report of the Carnegie Commission vol. 1, Economic Report (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia-Drukkery, 1932), vii, 32.

whites is important and had a direct effect upon policy. Both English and Afrikaner politicians recognized that poor whites were of a different class to themselves. It appears that there was little difference between the way poor whites were treated and non-whites. This was a direct development from attitudes held in early colonial days.[7] By 1913, however, the Union's politicians were very concerned about the plight of poor whites. There were three reasons for this. First, it was becoming increasingly evident that the poor whites and the nation's leadership were not sharing the same political objectives. Secondly, the poor whites were becoming culturally closer to the African and Coloured population groups than to the urbanized, middle-class culture to which the political leadership increasingly belonged. Lastly, poor whites had the right to vote and this gave them political power.[8] Pieter le Roux proposes that experience with the rebellion of 1913, the civil strife on the Rand during the same period and the Rand Rebellion of 1922, showed politicians such as Smuts, Hertzog and Creswell that the poor whites were not afraid to protest at their position. Le Roux believes that the politicians were increasingly concerned that the government of the Union would be forced at some future time to yield to the demands of the poor whites.[9] An alternative existed, however, and this

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7. Bundy, "Vagabond Hollanders;" J.R. Albertyn, "The Poor White and Society," in: Carnegie Commission, Report vol. 5 Sociological Report, 19-22.

8. Albertyn, "Poor White and Society," 19-22; Grosskopf, "Rural Impoverishment," 229-30; E.J. Scholtz, "Rehabilitation Schemes of the Department of Labour," The Social and Industrial Review 7, 1(January, 1929): 27-33.

9. Pieter le Roux, "Poor Whites," (Paper delivered at the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, Cape Town, 13-19 April, 1984), 6-8.

was to re-educate the nation's white lower class so that it held the same values as the political leadership. In the years prior to the Second World War, this is precisely what the government was to attempt to do in the forestry settlement programme.

The Start of the Programme

The forestry settlement programme started in the financial year, 1916-1917, with the founding of two settlements. Its roots, however, lay earlier in the years immediately before the First World War. The review begins with an interrogation by a government commission of Joseph Lister when he was Chief Conservator.

In 1912, Lister appeared before the Government's, "Commission to Inquire into the Conditions of Trade and Industry." In his presentation, he stated that the area of plantation in the Union was approximately 28 046 hectares and advocated the establishment of a long-term tree planting programme. The Commission agreed with the Conservator and included his suggestions in its recommendations.[10] This appears to be the first official endorsement of such a programme. In the following year, shortly before his retirement, Lister was called before the House Select Committee on European Employment and Labour Conditions. This Committee was the Union government's first assay at the

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10. South Africa, Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Conditions of Trade and Industries (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1912), 39-42.

thorny issue of the poor white problem. Lister now found his Department criticized for its policy of employing African labour for plantation work.[11] J.W. Sauer, the Member for Aliwal and then Minister of Native Affairs, asked Lister "You say that the employment of White Labour was unsatisfactory?"[12] And, later, "You think that the planting of forests is more important than the saving of human beings?"[13] The Chief Conservator naturally denied the charge but it was obvious that, nevertheless, Forestry used African and Coloured labour because it was cheap. Some of the other Forestry officials were not as circumspect on this issue. P.J. Dormehl, the Assistant Conservator for the Western Conservancy in the Cape, for instance, reported that the Department made no special effort to employ whites: "We get the coloured man who does exactly the same unskilled work. Unless I get instructions to the contrary, I employ the cheapest labour." Coloureds, he continued, did not need as good housing as did whites. "You are doing the thing entirely on business principles?" He was asked by the Chairman J.X. Merriman. "Purely on business principles." Dormehl replied agreeing that the objective was "To get as good a return as you can possibly get."[14]

After C.E. Legat became Chief Conservator of Forests he was called before the House Select Committee on Public Accounts in

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11. South Africa, House of Assembly, Report of the Select Committee of European Employment and Labour Conditions (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1913), 496-502.

12. Ibid, 500.

13. Ibid, 502.

14. Ibid, 515-16.

1914 and was questioned extensively about the real cost, and expected profit from Forestry's plantations. Merriman in particular made the point that "the ordinary man wants to know...whether or not it will pay...what he will make out of it."[15] From the above, it is clear that the cost of the plantation programme as well as who was employed in its establishment were concerns of the government.

In July 1914, C.E. Legat received a call from Smuts' Secretary for the Department of Finance. He requested that Legat prepare a proposal on how the government might employ poor whites on an afforestation scheme. The scheme was specifically to help poor white "woodcutters" from the Kynsna region of the southern Cape who had lost their rights of access to the local indigenous forest as a result of the Forest Act of 1913. The Secretary told Legat that he realised the work would be more expensive than if non-white labour were used but "The Treasury would be satisfied if the scheme resulted in the betterment of the people concerned and in some work of permanent value."[16] Thus, early in his term as Chief Conservator, Legat was nicely presented with the contradiction which would bedevil him for most of the years he occupied the position. Government wanted Forestry to be a paying proposition, not a burden on the taxpayer. Yet, it also expected the Department to employ the most expensive labour available and,

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15. South Africa, House of Assembly, Second to Fourth Reports of the Select Committee on Public Accounts (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1914), 58-65.

16. Department of Forestry, Annual Report, 1918, 1-2. See also, Albert Grundlingh, "'God Het Ons Arm Mense Die Houtjies Gegee:' Towards a History of the 'Poor White' Woodcutters in the Southern Cape Forest Area, c. 1900-1939," (Paper read to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 9-14 February, 1987).

it became increasingly obvious over the years, give them the best housing and employment conditions it could.[17]

Aware of the criticism that had been levelled at Lister in 1913, Legat proposed a scheme employing about a thousand workers planting around four thousand hectares a year. The Department of Forestry would provide the workers with housing, free medical care and a garden plot for each family. The pay was to be a nominal three shillings per day with Sunday and two afternoons off per week. In this scheme, the Department of White Labour would be responsible for recruiting the labourers and for their welfare. With the start of the First World War in August 1914, however, interest in the proposal died.[18]

The next occasion that Legat presented his proposal was in 1916 when he was called before the House of Assembly Select Committee on Drought Distress Relief. This time he proposed a project limited to 200 employees and located on the lower slopes of the Cape's south-facing mountains. Legat thought there was about 29 370 hectares of suitable land available in this area, an unfortunate overestimate. With the other details the same as his first proposal, the Chief Conservator was optimistic as to the economic viability of the scheme. "I should not have any fear from the financial point of view," he told the Committee "provided

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17. South Africa, House of Assembly, First to Third Reports of the Select Committee on Public Accounts, 1925 (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1925), 248-54; _____, Ibid, 1930, 137-42; _____, Ibid, 1931, 207.

18. The original memo has been lost but it was rewritten and re-presented several times. One example can be found in CAD FOR 187 A310/286/2 "Relief of Unemployment Occasioned by Industrial Crisis on the Rand: Employment of White Labourers on Afforestation," Memo: Chief Conservator of Forests to Minister of Agriculture, 25 February, 1922. Department of Forestry, Annual Report, 1918, 1-2.

too large a daily wage is not paid to the people employed. It all hinges on that."[19] With a forty to fifty year rotation, Legat calculated that the maximum economic daily wage was two shillings and sixpence but, if the men were paid seven or eight shillings a day, the scheme would be a financial failure. This figure should be compared with the prevailing daily wage of one shilling and sixpence paid to "non-white" labour by the Department. To support his case when questioned by Sir Thomas Smartt and J.W. Quinn (the Unionist member for Troyeville) Legat cited the Department's experience with the Knysna woodcutters it was employing. These men were paid a low daily wage but were given a garden and time-off to cultivate it so as to supplement their low income. In addition, they were given piece-work where possible on the larger projects. Piece-work kept the Department's per hectare costs down while increasing the labourer's take-home pay. This, of course, meant the men had to work harder. Another possibility was that the Department could be subsidized so that the men would receive seven to eight shillings a day while the direct cost to Forestry would not exceed two shillings and sixpence.[20]

The Committee considered that shelter for the white labourers would be a problem and raised this issue with Legat. Since the afforestation projects were to be located in the high rainfall areas of South Africa, temporary housing in tents or portable huts was not possible. One suggestion was that the

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19. South Africa, House of Assembly, Report of the Select Committee on Drought Distress Relief (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1916), 44.

20. Ibid, 45-53.

21. Ibid.

labourers would build their own homes, a proposal with which Legat agreed.[21] There was also some dispute over the cost of the projects and what would be the effect on the cost of providing adequate accommodation. Legat, for instance, estimated the cost per acre of the projects would be ten to twenty pounds, including housing. Senator A.G. Viljoen, on the other hand, considered that the cost of a suitable house for a family would be high, probably a hundred pounds. The only way this could be justified was if the settlements became permanent establishments. The Chief Conservator agreed with this as, once the afforestation was finished, the labourers could be moved on to management tasks. This was especially true as a major drawback of using the scheme as a relief project was that, if the economic situation improved, then the Department might suddenly find itself with the projects incomplete and no labour. Schooling and the provision of adequate health facilities would also be difficult if the scheme employed married men who insisted on having their families with them.[22]

Legat's scheme was supported by two witnesses, Senator Viljoen and the Supervisor of White Labour in the Department of Mine's Department of White Labour, the Reverend J.J. Naude. It is not surprising then that the Chairman of the Select Committee, the Minister of Agriculture, H.C. van Heerden, recommended that his Chief Conservator's scheme be adopted as government policy. Van Heerden's grounds were that it would decrease South Africa's dependence on imported wood, provide employment opportunities for poor whites and introduce this class of people to manual

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22. Ibid.

23. Ibid, xii-xiii.

labour.[23] With the tabling of the Select Committee's Report and the acceptance of its recommendations, Legat's proposal became government policy and, shortly, funds to support it were directed his way allowing him to build the first two settlements, "French Hoek" and "Jonkersberg."

Thus, even before one of the settlements was built, the basic features of the scheme were established. These were, the dual control aspect of the settlements where Forestry had charge of the work while "welfare officers" looked after life in the settlement. The scheme was also to have an educational role in that it was to train poor whites to become employable labourers. This necessity of "introducing" poor whites to manual labour is a persistent theme in Government's rationale for the labour assistance programmes that were operated up to the beginning of the Second World War. Problems that were to bedevil the programme all through its life also appear. These include the high cost of white labour compared to African; the low productivity of poor whites; the necessity of providing better than adequate housing, schooling and social services. In the end, the foresters were right about the cost of the programme being very high if it used white labour only. In the period for financial years 1923/24 to 1937/38, the total labour cost of the programme was some 2 190 001 pounds of which 1 214 424 pounds, or fifty-five percent, was estimated as being the additional cost of using white labour.[24]

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24. CAD FOR 383 E230/D White Labour Forestry Settlements, Future Policy Re, memo to file, "White labour Forestry Settlements," n.d. circa 1938, p4.

The Imperatives that Resulted in the Expansion of the Programme

The catalyst that pushed the government of South Africa into its experiment in social engineering was the prospect of large numbers of unskilled and jobless soldiers returning home from the First World War. Many of these young men came from poor white families or social groups close to the poor whites. Concern as to what to do about South Africa's soldiers after they had been discharged surfaced early in 1915. At this time, back-bench Members of the House of Assembly urged the government to consider creating a land settlement scheme. It was thought that farms could be established and given free to the returned soldiers.[25] The government of South Africa was questioned about its attitude towards taking numbers of British ex-soldiers as settlers after the war when, in 1916, the author and settlement advocate, H. Rider Haggard, visited the country on behalf of the Royal Colonial Institute.[26] The involvement of South Africa in the East African campaign and, later, in France postponed the issue. The civil service and some Members of Parliament were aware, however, that the issue was only lying dormant. From 1916 through into 1917,

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25. South Africa, House of Assembly, Debates (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1915), 1032-42.

26. Peter B. Ellis, H. Rider Haggard: A Voice from the Infinite (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 221-223. While South Africa rejected the call to take British ex-soldiers as farmer-settlers, other Dominions accepted. See: John A. Schultz, "Finding Homes Fit for Heroes: The Great War and Empire Settlement," Canadian Journal of History 18 (1978): 99-110. For Canadian policy as an example see, Vernon C. Fowke, Canadian Agricultural Policy: The Historical Pattern (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 183-8.

military personnel who had been discharged because of their injuries wrote to whoever they thought appropriate requesting an appointment to the civil service.[27]

The Department of Forestry certainly received its share of these requests. It was looked upon as a logical source of employment for young men who had experience in disciplined, outdoor work as a result of Army service. For example, writing to the Editor of the Cape Times G.J.M Melle of Kimberley stated that many ex-soldiers would be unsuitable for agricultural occupations due to physical as well as attitudinal reasons, "whereas they would succeed as foresters, leading an active open-air life."[28]

The degree to which this attitude was held by members of the general public had been made clear to the Department of Forestry in 1916. In August of that year, the Chief Conservator of Forests was verbally requested by Charles Murray, Secretary to the Minister of Public Works, to prepare a memorandum on the suitability of work in the forestry plantations as a means of employing discharged soldiers. Legat's reply stated that the available jobs were labouring ones which were presently filled by locally hired Africans. He doubted if many ex-soldiers would be interested in forestry work as most operations were carried on in the wetter regions of the country and, further, Forestry lacked

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27. See examples in CAD FOR 214, A346/6 "Employment of Disabled and Discharged Soldiers."

28. CAD FOR A346, clipping Cape Times, 1 April 1918. See also, CAD FOR 298 A7742 Resolutions Passed by Public Bodies; "South African Federated Chamber of Industries: Annual Convention, Durban, 16th - 18th June, 1919," South African Journal of Industries 2, 8(August, 1919): 784-95; G.A. Wilmot, "Matches and Matchwood Production," Ibid 4, 10(November, 1921): 826-37.

29. CAD FOR 214 A346/6, memo, C.E. Legat to Charles Murray, Secretary for Public Works, 10 August, 1916.

the funding to expand its programmes.[29] Legat's negative reply elicited a stinging rebuke. Murray told the Chief Conservator, "You do not seem to appreciate the position fully: Government must take steps to provide employment at the end of the war, and everywhere Colonel Mentz (Minister for Lands) goes afforestation is pressed upon him."[30] Faced with this near ultimatum, Legat promised to find labouring jobs in the Elgin Railway Plantation for five hundred ex-soldiers.[31]

In 1917, during a debate on "Land Settlement in the Union," the issue returned with a vengeance. Van Heerden, the Minister for Agriculture, proposed spending some sixty-three thousand, five hundred pounds on establishing farms for discharged soldiers. At the same time, a total of twenty-five thousand pounds was allocated to the Department of Forestry for use in distress relief projects for surplus woodcutters from the Knysna area. Members of the National Party opposed the expenditure on farms for returned soldiers. From their point of view, there was a major problem with the proposal, namely that government intended to give farms to "suitable" soldiers without an open process of selection. According to the Nationalists, the government should first fully recompense the veterans of the Republican forces in the Anglo-Boer War on the same scale as they were planning to provide for the discharged soldiers of the South African forces in the First World War. Having done this, the government should spend a much larger sum on welfare for the existing rural poor whites and those who took part in the abortive revolt of 1913. Whatever

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30. CAD FOR A346/6, Murray to Legat, 12 August, 1916. Underlining in the original.

31. CAD FOR A346/6, Legat to Murray, 23 August, 1916.

was left over after these expenditures could be spent on the discharged soldiers from the First World War. The reason why the Nationalist Party was so critical of van Heerden's proposal was that it was convinced that most discharged soldiers came from urban rather than rural areas and that they were largely English speaking.[32] The issue surfaced again in 1918 over the employment of ex-soldiers in the civil service. General Hertzog stated that because "not a single Afrikander [sic] has left his farm to go to the front," young Afrikaners who had not enlisted were unfairly denied positions in the civil service. Returned soldiers, Hertzog insisted, "should be assigned to factories, not farming" on the basis that their settlement in rural areas would alter the ethnic make-up of rural districts.[33]

Nevertheless, at this time there was remarkably little potential farm land available in the Union for handing out to prospective farmers, poor whites or discharged soldiers. It appeared that most good arable land, not being tilled, was held by speculators and that government attempts to purchase farms were thwarted by high prices.[34] The only option open to government was to provide direct employment for its ex-soldiers. Even at this date the civil service was the country's largest single employer and it was logical that vacancies should first be sought within the service's ranks. During 1919 and for most of 1920, when South African forces were returning home for discharge, this process of

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32. South Africa, State Library, Debates of the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa as Reported in the Cape Times (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1966) vol 3, 95-66.

33. State Library, Debates vol 3, 66, 71-2, 226; Ellis, Rider Haggard, 221-223.

34. State Library, Debates vol 3, 82.

seeking vacancies was carried out on an ad-hoc basis and the situation ex-soldiers found themselves in became increasingly desperate with the advent of the post-war slump of the early 1920s.

When in late 1920, word reached it that some two thousand rural unemployed had moved to the Witwatersrand and there registered with the Labour Exchange, the government was compelled to act.[35] The average age of these men was thirty-five with a range from eighteen to sixty-five. Most, fifty-eight percent, were married and eighty-five percent of the married men had children. As might be expected, the majority of the registrants, eighty-eight percent, came from blue-collar occupations with over half the men being unskilled labourers. Of the total, some nineteen percent were discharged soldiers from the First World War.[36]

Aware that a more organized approach to the problem was needed, the Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, struck a "Departmental Committee on Unemployment."[37] Charged with the task of quite literally finding "jobs for the boys," the Committee was chaired by the Minister of Defence and Lands, Colonel H. Mentz. It was

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35. CAD FOR 183 A310/279/1 "Unemployment Relief Schemes, 1920: Proposals to Employ White Labour," Minutes, Departmental Committee on Unemployment, 6 November, 1920, pp1-2, Annex A "Unemployed on Witwatersrand".

36. CAD FOR 183 A310/279/1, "Summary of Proceedings, Meeting of Departmental Committee on Unemployment," 9 November, 1920, "List of Men Unemployed as at 8th November, 1920." The Government took other action as well. Not part of this story are the events surrounding the Returned Soldier's Conference held in May, 1921. Forestry had a representative at the Conference who presented a report about the relief settlements. For details see: CAD FOR 186 A310/279/9 "Returned Soldier's Conference."

37. CAD FOR 183 A310/279/1, H. Gordon Watson, Secretary to the Prime Minister, to C.E. Legat, 3 November, 1920.

intended that the Committee would act as an adjunct to the Department of Labour's exchanges and increase the number of vacant positions registered with them. Besides canvassing government departments for vacancies, especially in labouring jobs, the Committee also came to oversee the relief camps and settlement schemes operated by the Department of Forestry and the Hartebeespoort irrigation project. The members of the committee were all senior civil servants, heads of departments which were expected to either directly employ or fund projects that would employ a large proportion of the unemployed. In their first meeting, the Committee produced a list of possible projects which it could provide. The Department with the largest number of projects was Forestry. In the few days before the meeting, Legat had canvassed his Conservators for possible relief projects that could be started. There were three main locations for Forestry's temporary relief camps, Cedara and Xumeni in Natal and Hankey near Port Elizabeth in the Cape.[38]

The relief camps operated by the Department were mainly concerned with constructing roads to areas suitable for future afforestation. Each camp took in unemployed ex-soldiers as well as men who had not fought in the war, although Hankey became known as an ex-soldiers camp. The camps, it should be noted, were temporary and were closed in 1922 after wages were reduced from between five and nine shillings per day (depending on the camp and the number of the dependants) to a standard four shillings and sixpence. The importance of these camps is not so much their

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38. Ibid. CAD FOR 183 A310/279/1 Unemployment Relief Scheme, 1920: Proposals to Employ White Labourers, clippings, "The Unemployed," The Star (6 November, 1920); "Unemployment Problem," Rand Daily Mail (10 November, 1920); Holloway, Year Book, 7: 245-6.

success or failure at providing temporary jobs but rather in the mistakes the Department made in running them. Living conditions, in particular, were very bad and there were also problems with wage rates and working conditions.

Despite the efforts of government departments, the unemployment situation continued to worsen through the months of 1921.[39] The situation on the mines was especially serious. Increasing production costs and falling ore values meant that several mines were becoming uneconomic. Because they were costly and increasingly easily replaced by trained Africans, mine owners responded to lowered profitability by laying-off their white workers, cutting their rates of pay and increasing the number of African workers each white miner supervised.[40]

Starting in November 1921 and through to early February, 1922, the situation on the Rand was characterized by failed negotiations and increasing intransigence on the part of both the Chamber of Mines, representing industry, and the South African Industrial Federation, representing the miner's unions. In early January, the white miners came out on strike. Prime Minister Smuts personally entered the negotiations on 5 February 1922 and, although he was able to get the Chamber to modify its demands, his efforts were rejected by the miner's Federation.[41] Following this, Smuts declared himself as supporting the industry's position. Parliament in Cape Town was opened on 17 February and Smuts was

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39. See the Minutes of the Departmental Unemployment Committee for this period in CAD FOR 183 A310//279/1 and FOR 184 A310/279/2.

40. T.R.H. Davenport, South Africa, A Modern History (Johannesburg: Macmillan South Africa, 1978), 192-196

41. Ibid.

forced to defend himself and his action in the debate that followed the opening. Determined to have his way, Smuts authorized police action against the strikers on 27 February precipitating the Federation's call for a general strike and the eventual involvement of the Army during the first two weeks of March.[42]

A meeting of the Conservators of Forests had been called in early February. Chaired by Legat and attended by Sir Thomas Smartt, Minister of Agriculture, the meeting discussed the expansion of the number of white labour settlements. No decision on the total number of settlers and settlements to be established could be arrived at by the participants. But, by the end of the meeting, it was clear that it was the government's intention to create a number of communities housing a permanent population. This was in contrast to the existing temporary relief camp programme. Smartt told the Conservators that the "settlements would be of permanent character and a decent class of people were going to be sent to the settlements, not just the dregs." It was important that the settlers have gardens, he added. "Then," Legat commented, "the idea is to aim gradually at the Continental system of afforestation by a residential population who in the intervals of forestry work pursue small holding farming."[43]

On 6 March, in the middle of the crisis and following an acrimonious debate in the House of Assembly, Smuts called Sir

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42. Ibid.

43. CAD FOR 187 A310/286, "Relief of Unemployed Occasioned by Industrial Crisis on the Rand: Employment of White Labourers on Afforestation," Letter, Sir Thomas Smartt to Prime Minister (copy), 6 March, 1922; Notes on Conference of Conservators, 2-3 February, 1922. The full formal proposal for the scheme can be found in C.E. Legat to Minister of Agriculture, 25 February, 1922.

Thomas Smartt and two of his senior civil servants, C.E. Legat and the Director of Irrigation, into his office. They discussed a plan for greatly expanding the relief schemes and the white labour forest settlement scheme. It was agreed that the Department of Irrigation would make arrangements for an additional two thousand men to be employed on the construction of the Hartebeespoort Dam and its associated irrigation schemes. Forestry would follow its proposal for permanent settlements housing, it was decided, one thousand heads of families. Following this discussion, the Department of Forestry started work on a further five settlements in addition to the two already opened in the Cape. The settlements would now house a total of one thousand and forty-eight families and single men.

On that same day, Smuts wrote privately, to his friend Louis Esselen stating that,

> It is very important that the men should not feel they were being left in the lurch. They have been beaten and they must now pay the penalty of it, but one does not want to drive the iron into their soul and embitter them for ever. They will have to be looked after and got back, as soon as possible, to more remunerative work than they can expect to get as labourers on the roads.[44]

Smuts' idea then was to use the nascent settlement programme to prevent the political alienation of the strikers that he was afraid would follow from his heavy handed policy towards the rebellion. This policy of reconciliation received support from the Johannesburg wing of the South African Party.[45]

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44. CAD Records of the Prime Minister (PM) 8/22/1, letter, Smuts to Louis Esselen, 6 March, 1922.

45. CAD PM Unemployment and Distress in the Union Resulting from the Strike, 1922, letter, J. Lawrie, Secretary, South African Party, to Smuts, 1 May, 1922.

It was on the basis of this meeting with his Minister of Agriculture, Chief Conservator and Director of Education, that nearly two months later, Smuts told the House of Assembly:

> I think it will also be to the advantage of the country to move away from the Witwatersrand, at any rate, part of the population that has accumulated there in recent years. I think we are all agreed that the Rand is not the best environment for the thousands of people who have flocked there from the countryside without any artisan equipment for the struggle before them. The best kindness, the greatest service the Government could do these people would be to take them away. Take them away to Irrigation works elsewhere, settle them on afforestation colonies, put them on railway construction in other parts of the country. Get them away from surroundings which have been very bad for them and worse for the country...The movement is taking place as fast as possible now. Hundreds are being moved from the Rand every month, but the permanent solution can only come when our programmes have been passed and then the Government can go ahead.[46]

In other words, the paternalistic, final solution to poverty, unemployment and civil strife in the industrial area of the Rand was to move the affected section of the population away from the situation with which it was having trouble.

This analysis, though attractive, is too simplistic. True, action was being taken without consulting the poor whites on the grounds that it was ultimately best for them and for the country as a whole. It can be argued, however, that the policy was chosen because it held the promise of turning an uncomfortable situation for those in power into a reality with which they were familiar and which they understood. The government's proposals, as outlined by Smuts, emphasize one of the themes earlier elucidated, namely that poor whites were seen as being "different"

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46. CAD FOR 187 A310/286, typed copy of quotation from the Argus (25 May, 1922).

from middle class whites in more ways than just the fact of their poverty. Smuts and his contemporaries in government acted as if they were afraid of these people. Yet, it should be noted, these same poor whites, when viewed in an agricultural context, were seen in a completely different light. Then, the romantic view of the agrarian myth took over. Hence, the solution to the problem of the poor white was to remove him from the environment in which he was viewed as a negative image and place him back where he could be seen positively. This did not involve any change in the culture of the poor white nor in his economic circumstances. Rather, it reduced the problem to a situation with which the political leadership was familiar. Poor whites, in other words, were not viewed with any special degree of humanity, instead they were images or ciphers.

Support for this analysis is provided by Smuts himself who had expressed similar views to the above in 1914.[47] By August 1922, the situation on the Rand as regards the number of unemployed was not improving. Even though the strike was over and the white miners were, however reluctantly, back at work, the demand for relief work was not slackening. The government's analysis of the situation was that ever-increasing numbers of farmers were abandoning their land for the attractions of the city, particularly for Johannesburg or Pretoria. Once there, the ex-farmer found he had no marketable skills so he and his family immediately joined the ranks of the region's poor whites. Smuts believed that the main attraction for these people was word that the government paid seven shillings and sixpence per day to those

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47. See, "Parliament, Today's Sitting," Star (25 June, 1914): 9-10.

working on relief projects. This sum, he admitted, was considerably more than could be earned as a day-labourer on a farm. It was so high, in fact, that farmers were complaining they could not hire labourers because of the competition.[48]

To deal with the situation, Smuts convened an emergency meeting of the Departmental Unemployment Committee in his office on 2 August 1922.[49] The objective was to agree on the text of a special letter to be sent to all rural District Magistrates requesting that they "strain every nerve to endeavour to encourage people to stick to their farming operations and impress upon them that the market for their products is sure to improve."[50] Only in cases of real need were farmers to be allowed to go to a relief project, such as the Hartebeespoort Dam, for wage labour. In these circumstances, the farmer was to go directly to the project under the direction of the Magistrate; he was not to go to the Rand or Pretoria. Further, his family had to stay behind on the farm where the Magistrate would forward to them over half the farmer's wages. If the family left the farm or the farmer went to the city he would cease to be eligible for work on one of the relief projects. The letter further emphasized that the settlement schemes were intended solely for poor whites already resident in Johannesburg and Pretoria. It was also expected that, once the farmer had earned enough money to purchase his needs for the coming season, he would return to his farm and put in his

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48. CAD FOR 184 A310/279/2 "Minutes of Special Meeting Held in Prime Minister's Office, 2nd August, 1922," pp1-2.

49. Ibid.

50. CAD FOR 184 A310/279/2, Letter to Magistrates, 8 August, 1922.

51. Ibid.

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The Pact Government and Unemployment

As can be seen from the above, the unemployment policy of the Smuts government was never really more than a series of stop-gap measures intended to control the situation until the economic, and hence employment, situation improved. Agriculture was still perceived as being the basic source of livelihood of the mass of whites. According to Smuts, farmers had only to "hold on" and wait for the inevitable improvement in prices. For them, abandoning their land and moving to the city was not a solution to their increasingly uneconomic position as subsistence farmers. In the House of Assembly, however, others had different ideas as to how to assist the increasing numbers of ex-farmers and other unemployed, unskilled whites. During 1923 and early 1924, the leader of the National Party and the official opposition, General Hertzog, was successfully forming an alliance with the Labour Party led by F.H. Creswell. In the general election held on June 17, 1924, the South African Party lost to the Pact between the National Party and Labour.

Founding of the Department of Labour

One of the terms establishing the Pact between the

Labour Party and the Nationalists was that an independent Department of Labour would be created with as its first Minister, the leader of the Labour Party, F.H. Creswell. The new Minister moved fast with a plan he had clearly had in mind for some considerable period. His new Department took over all the functions of the Department of White Labour and the Departmental Unemployment Committee. In the first issue of the new Official Labour Gazette, seven areas of responsibility were listed.[52] These were:

1) Employment generally, including Government and relief works.
2) Conciliation boards, industrial councils, registration of trade unions and employers organizations, private registry offices.
3) Juvenile affairs.
4) Apprenticeship.
5) Wage Boards.
6) International Labour Office affairs.
7) Factories.

These official functions of the new Department meant that it was responsible for all relief projects run by the various Departments. The projects included the Hartebeespoort Dam (Department of Irrigation) and the forestry settlements operated by the Department of Forestry. In all cases, however, the original Department continued to control the work done by those living in the camps. At the same time, the system of Employment Exchanges

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52. "Creation of Ministry of Labour," Official Labour Gazette 1, 1(April, 1925): 10. The Department was created on the 25th of July, 1924. These areas of responsibility were promulgated on the 6th of August.

was enlarged by designating all Post Offices to be sub-exchanges. This action tremendously expanded the availability of the services offered by the new Department to rural areas and meant that the recruitment of rural poor whites for positions in the white labour forestry settlements was an effective proposition.[53]

Creswell and his new Department of Labour moved quickly to institute important changes in policy with regard to the Union's unemployment programmes. An Advisory Council of Labour was formed and a sub-committee put to work deciding policy. So far as the programme discussed here is concerned, the important recommendations made by the sub-committee were that all men on relief works were to be registered and classified. When this was completed, all new unemployed registrants were to be classified. The system divided the unemployed into two groups, A: "town bred" and B: "country bred."[54] Within each of these two groups, registrants were further classified for such aspects as their skills, intelligence, moral character and physical condition. It was intended that scores on these points would be averaged and then grouped. An "a" type would be a man who was highly employable, "b" types were less employable and needed training while "c" types needed intensive re-education and close supervision.[55]

In general, the sub-committee thought that the situation of the rural unemployed was worse than that of the urban

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53. Ibid. For examples of poor whites so recruited, see Weza State Forest, Forestry Office Archives, "Register of Settlers, 1939-1946."

54. "Employment in the Union," Official Labour Gazette 1, 1(April, 1925): 13-18.

55. Ibid.