

. -' i \$;XE3C) F3t3/ (?C7t)r5%2.. (Diy/dggr/  
MIGRANT LABOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA  
by Eli Weinberg

Written for "New Outlook", Tanzania, March 1981.

'Migrant or Contract Labour is an all-pervading feature in the life of Africans in South Africa. An index of this is-perhaps the fact that it is one of the major themes in the African'language literature - in the novel, the play and in poetry. In "Arola"Naheng ya Maburu," the novelist A. theku treats the subject with a degree of wry humour so aharacteristic of an earlier stage of rebellious tolerance which fortunately has long since disappeared from the minds of most Africans; Young Arola leaves his village in Lesotho to seek his fortune in the land of the Boers. After many trials and tribulations, after many encounters with the hostile Boers, during which the poor, illiterate Arola invariably scores some . subtle triumph at the expense of the Boers, Arola inevitably lands ' in jail. After some more years in the white man's cities, he returns to Lesotho, back to his village, with "nothing to show for his years.of hard labour."

In one of J. J. Moilwa's plays ("Jaa o siele motswalle") the author deals (rather naively) with the sad theme of love between a migrant mine worker and his fiancée, whom he has left behind in 'the village and whom he is in danger of losing.

K. L. Ntsame describes the experiences of the mine recruit in a poem "Ha re eya Lejwe Leputswa" ("When we go to Johannesburg"). Here is a free translation of one of the verses: (the scene is at the Labour Recruiting Office):

"The officers and the Magistrate hold bundles of letters;  
What are these bundles in their hands?  
We press our fingers on these bits of paper of the white men -  
' We stamp and sign them in public -  
. And I wrote my sentence without knowing it!  
The contract of the white man is no joke -  
They joked to the gullible Ncheme  
And they hooked him by his own name."

Migrant Labour in Other Countries

The defenders of the migrant labour system in South Africa argue that there is nothing wrong with it, that it is universally used in many parts of the world, that everywhere workers contract to work in foreign countries, sometimes seasonally, sometimes for lengthy periods. In most capitalist countries, it is true, the system operates and migrant workers are subject to discrimination and suffer under many social disabilities arising out of insecurity, lack of trade union organisation, low wages and bad living and working conditions, lack of adequate accommodations and so on. The argument

is that "what is good sauce for the gander, is good sauce for the goose." This equation of the South African model of migrant labour with other countries is, however, highly misleading, for in South Africa the entire legislative and administrative apparatus aims at turning every black worker into a migrant worker.

Nearly every "advanced" Capitalist country has its quota of foreign contract workers. Here are some figures showing the proportion of migrant workers in relation to the total labour force in these countries:

Federal Republic of Germany....	9%
Republic of France.....	6%
Belgium.....	7%
Netherlands.....	2%
Italy.....	0.2%

Possibly, the percentages may be higher in some countries.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the United States has a very large perennial flow of migrant workers, such as Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Countries like Zambia, Zaire, Tanzania have during the colonial stages also drawn heavily on migrant labour, but since the 50's and particularly since independence these countries have opted for a stabilised labour force for many reasons.

i The Highest Proportion in the World

South Africa, the richest country on the African continent and one of the very rich countries in the world, also has the highest proportion of migrant workers in the world. No doubt, a massive accumulation of wealth and an extensive cheap labour system go hand in hand!

At the end of 1978, the economically active population of South Africa was 12.403.000, made up as follows:

Whites .....	1.874.000
Coloureds .....	842,000
Indians .....	247.000
Africans .....	9.440.000

There were at the end of 1978 3.999.387 black migrant workers in South Africa. This is roughly one-third of the total economically active population, but over 40% of the African working population! Traditionally, the two industries chiefly employing migrant labour were mining and agriculture, but this is no longer so. The major employers of migrant labour are now the capitalists in manufacturing, construction and even the service industries.

Page i

' MIGRANT WORKERS

Foreigg South African

Agriculture. 18.120 567.857

Mining 258.017 454.910

Manufacturing 10.522 668:759

Construction 8.152 516;951

-.CommerCe 4.427 350-789

Government Service 7.754 472.191

Domestic Service 13.187 579.648

Others 7.092 301.201

327.071 f3-672-5164

Included in the figure for South African migrants are 16.325 from Bophuthatswana and 500.294 from the Transkei, supposedly "independent" states. Of the total population of about 600.000 in the Bantustan of Vendaland, nearly two-thirds derive their livelihood as migrant workers in the white portion of South Africa. This is the speoific role assigned to the Bantustans, namely to serve as reservoirs of cheap migrant labour, for the racist blueprint of the future envisages the so-called "homelands" as some 50 to 60 fragmented clusters of arid and overpopulated pieces of land, surrounding one huge, highly industrialised prosperous "white area" containing 87% of the best land.

From the figures above it will be seen that about 10% of the migrant labour force is recruited from abroad. That number is declining. The newly independent African states surrounding South Africa are opting for developing their own resources and thereby creating new job opportunities within their own economies. Moreover, South African capitalists find it less attractive to recruit workers from politically independent African states, because they bring with them disturbing revolutionary ideas and are no longer the docile force they used to be.

"Everx black shall be a migrant worker!"

The racists are determined that every African shall be a migrant worker. This dream has a long historical evolution. Ever since the white man set foot on South African soil, he tried to force the black man to come and work for him. This met with resistance from the blacks, who much preferred their own independent way of life. For this reason the Dutch East India Company imported slaves from the Malayas and elsewhere, the sugar planters of Natal recruited indentured labourers from India, the mine magnates at one time even brought out Chinese to work on the gold mines. But large-scale capitalist development could not be carried out with such half-measures. The discovery of diamonds and gold demanded more radical steps to force the blacks to abandon their traditional mode of subsistence and to become wage slaves, Where this could not be

achieved by dispossessing the blacks of their land and by the imposition of heavy cash taxes, it was necessary to apply brute force and the capitalists needed a powerful state and police machine. This was basically the motive force behind the Vereeniging Peace Treaty and the creation of the Union of South Africa. It was an agreement between the Boer Colonialists and British monopoly capitalists to exploit jointly the material and, in particular, the apparently limitless human resources of South Africa. Cheap labour for the "white man boss" was the foundation on which this state was to be built.

#### Political Dangers

But the racist rulers have always been conscious of the political dangers of a huge black working class in the "white cities" and from this grew the two-edged ideology that "there shall be no equality between white and black" and that the blacks should at all times only be "temporary Sojourners" in the "white" areas. These ideas did not originate only with the reactionary Boer farmers, but British governors in the "liberal" Cape era already pronounced that "every white man shall be a gentleman," with which was associated the traditional British concept of a man of "wealth and leisure." It was the British capitalists - the Chamber of Mines - which crowned these ideas with the force of law. In 1921 a Government Commission under the Chairmanship of one Colonel Stallard, a rabid imperialist, proposed that

"the native should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing to enter and minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister...."

. So the present regime took over the handy system of forced segregation or "apartheid" (as they came to call it) from generations of British rulers. They tightened it, perfected it and are now taking it to the logical conclusion that the black man should have no rights at all in the so-called "white areas."

#### Callous Disregard

This imperialist ideology is in total and callous disregard of the interests of the black workers, of their welfare, their family life, their social, cultural, moral aspirations. Cheap labour was needed, but human needs did not enter into consideration. There are monuments to this inhuman callousness in every part of South Africa, in the form of "locations," shanty-towns, filthy, unhygienic "compounds." In the township of Pimville near Johannesburg there probably still stand the "temporary" shelters erected for black workers in 1911. (They were certainly still there in the

early Seventies). These consisted of overturned corrugated iron "half-tanks" in which a man could hardly stand upright with a door at one end and a window at the other. More than 50 years after these "temporary shelters" were erected, they were still occupied, and in use.

The Pimville "half-tanks" may have been superseded in places by more sophisticated concrete sleeping bunks in crowded compounds, surrounded by barbed wire fences and strictly controlled by specially recruited police and bureaucrats. The last ten years have seen the mushrooming of huge blocks of dormitories, housing tens of thousands of either men or women, in crowded, regimented, unhygienic conditions. They are single-sex concentration camps, but to add insult to injury the inmates have to pay rent for this accommodation which has been forced on them. The cattle of the rich white farmers are housed under more humane conditions.'

#### Effects of Migrant Labour system

It would take volumes (and volumes have been written) to describe the horrifying effects of the migrant labour system in South Africa. Top of the list is the deprivation of any kind of decent family life, for migrant workers are not permitted to have their wives and children with them at the places to which they have been recruited to work. They must stay behind in the wastelands of the Bantustans, where thousands of villages contain only women, children and aged people who are no longer of any use to the exploiters. Social experts unanimously ascribe the prevalence of prostitution, drunkenness, lawlessness and violence to the unnatural separation of the sexes in the migrant workers' dormitories.. On the other hand, the families at home are increasingly the victims of malnutrition, kwashiorkor and other diseases, because the high cost of living in the "white man's areas" prevents the migrant workers from ever bringing home more than a tiny fraction of their very low wages. The fable that the families of migrants make a living off the land has long ago been exploded, for there is either no land at all or what there is is overcrowded, eroded and exhausted.

#### The Pass Laws

Foreigners often ask the question: "But why do the black migrants accept these conditions?" The answer lies in the intricate, interlocking machinery of thousands of laws and regulations, generically often grouped together as the Pass Laws, which shackle the black man and woman at every stage of their adult life. No adult man or woman may be in an urban area without being in possession of a "pass," in effect a labour contract proving that he or she is in legitimate employment. The possibilities of infractions of these laws, which only apply to Africans, are literally limitless. In the 20's of this-century the average annual number of blacks convicted under the Pass Laws was 48,000; in the seventies this number

has risen to between 600.000 to 700.000, an increase of over 1100%. Between 1948 and 1973 eleven million men and women have served prison sentences in South Africa under the pass laws. Taking the average black population during these 25 years as about 16 million, this means that at some time or another in their lives every black man or woman over the age of sixteen must experience the humiliation of going to jail. Is there any other country in the world, where such "statistics" would be tolerated?

#### Black Man's Hell

The fact is that the racist regime is hell-bent on turning every black worker into a migrant worker. In 1955 the then Minister of Bantu Affairs, Dr. Verwoerd, drew a picture of the white man's paradise and the black man's hell:

"I see the future economic pattern of South Africa... that there will always be thousands of Bantu on the white farms, in the mines, in industry and also as servants in the white homes. The difference, however, will be that natives will be there, not as a right, but at the bidding and by the grace of the whites. At best they will be visitors in the white area...."

If anybody thought that these crazy men would have come to their senses in the intervening 25 years, then a look at the horrible implications of the most recent legal and administrative measures arising out of the continued Bantustanisation and the Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions should severely disillusion them. Under the cloak of "liberal" phrases, the regime is turning the control of black labour into a fully computerised apparatus from which no African will be able to escape. Chief Sebe, self-appointed "king" of the Ciskei, one of the Bantustans shortly to be declared "independent" against the wishes of its population, gave the game away. He described in detail the kind of computer index which he is setting up in collaboration with the racists in preparation for "independence." This computer network, which will no doubt operate in all the Bantustans, will be perfected by the input of all kinds of personal details, such as:

- I educational and aptitude tests
- records of previous employers
- records of previous offenses (the police can put in a message that this person is required for questioning)
- ethnic origins of urban born black workers
- status under influx control laws
- labour laws qualifications
- information about family
- political or trade union activities
- and many other personal details.

mm

HINHIH

It is becoming blatantly clear that the recommendations of the Tiekert Commission, most of which are already being implemented, are to consummate the Bantustans, with their apparatus of black sthoges and administrators, as the perfect political structure of

super-exploitation of the blacks. ,Even the spokesmen of the "loyal opposition," Mrs. Helen Suzman, said South Africa might be entering an era of bureaucratic control, which will make the page system seem like child's play.

During the strikes in 1980, many workers had a foretaste of things to come. Many thousands of strikers were forcibly bundled into trucks, lorries, railway carriages and military vehicles and carried off - illegally and quite contrary even to the very labour contracts imposed on them - to be dumped in the Bantustans hundreds of miles away. i

#### The Voices Against

There are many voices in South Africa against the evils of the system. Church organisations and many white liberals deplore the effects on the social fibre of the people, the immense administrative costs, the breakdown of parental authority, etc. Even some mining magnates are beginning to question the usefulness of the system and whether there are not perhaps better ways of exploitation. But in all these cases the question is posed from the point of view of those at present holding political power - does it help to maintain the status quo or does the migrant labour system ultimately endanger "white survival," meaning the right of the white colonialist minority to continue to live on the sweat and blood of the African workers. All kinds of ameliorative measures are suggested by various economists and some well-meaning sociologists. It is proposed that industrial growth be decentralised, that rapid transport on a massive scale be provided to and from the "homelands," that the "homelands" be economically developed. The regime itself has been playing about with these alternatives because they offer the attraction - without basically affecting the structure - of facilitating the operation of the whole system of economic exploitation and political domination.

#### The Decisive Issue

For the Africans, and for the African workers particularly, the decisive issue has become the question of political power. For them - after decades of palliatives and ameliorative measures - the answer is becoming ever clearer. It lies in the complete liquidation of the racist state of white domination and the seizure of power through which alone it will be possible to restructure the economic, political, cultural and moral life of the entire nation of South Africa.

The African workers do not expect to sit back and wait with arms folded till political power will fall into their lap. They realise that the road to freedom lies through struggle and sacrifice. The African National Congress and the South African Congress of Trade Unions believe that the black working class constitute the foremost

revolutionary force in South Africa and that its organisation and mobilisation on behalf of its own demands, its own charter of rights, is a precondition for national liberation.

In April, 1978, a Southern African Labour Committee was formed at a conference in Lusaka organised by the Economic Commission : of Africa and the International Labour Organisation. The South African Congress of Trade Unions is a constituent member of this Committee. Amongst the participants at the original conference were the governments of Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Swaziland and Zambia. Others present were representatives of the African National Congress, SWAPO, the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe. The Conference dealt with the problem which migrant labour-dependence on South Africa created for the independent African states. The main resolution of the Conference besides establishing the Southern Africa Labour Committee reads: '

"The Conference unanimously agrees to strive for the abolition of the migratory labour system practised in South Africa and, pending its elimination, agreed to a Charter of Rights for migrant workers in Southern Africa."

The CHARTER OF RIGHTS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS is an historic document and merits its publication in full:

Chapter 1

RIGHTS OF ASSOCIATION, MOVEMENT AND RESIDENCE

1

All workers shall have the right to:

- (a) Form and join trade unions of their own choice;
- (b) Participate in collective bargaining on equal terms with all other workers regardless of race, sex, political affiliation or religion;
- (c) withhold their labour by strike action in support of their demands,

All workers shall have the right to freedom of movement and shall not be required to carry a pass or similar document.

Article 2

All workers shall have the right to be accommodated near their place of work with their families in suitable houses under home ownership schemes or to reside elsewhere if they choose so to do.



W

All workers shall have the right of occupation free from colour bar, job reservation and all other forms of discrimination.

Article 1:

Every worker regardless of race or sex, shall have the right to work, choose his occupation, and change from one employer to another without loss of accrued benefits and claims to promotion.

Article 6

All workers, without exception, shall have the right to equal pay for equal work.

13320311

All workers shall have equal right to vocational training and adult education for the purpose of acquiring skills and increasing their awareness.

CHAPTER 2

RIGHT TO A DECENT STANDARD OF LIVING

Article 8

Every worker is entitled to a minimum basic wage sufficient for the maintenance of the health and well being of his family.

Article 2

All workers shall have the right to adequate protection against occupational accidents and diseases by means of approved safeguards and close supervision by an independent industrial and farming inspectorate operating in conjunction with workers' representatives.

Article 10

All workers and their families shall have an equal and absolute right to adequate, immediate and effective compensation for death or disability arising out of occupational diseases and accidents.

Article 11

All workers shall have a right to:

Free medical services for themselves and their families;

Sick leave and, where applicable, maternity leave with

full pay;

(0) Annual paid holidays.

, b

Page 10

Article 12

All workers shall be entitled to retire on full pension or with a gratuity proportionate to their period of service.

Article 1

All workers shall have a right to determine their terms and conditions of employment through collective bargaining.

Article 14

All workers shall have a right to employment benefits.

Article 12

All women workers shall have the right to participate in all sectors of the economy without discrimination in respect of their wages, training, job allocation or pension benefits.

0

SACTU STATES POLICY ON MIGRANT WORKERS

In a paper to the conference on migratory labour, SACTU pointed out that migrant workers form a super-exploited section of the working class, forced to take the most menial and lowest-paid jobs. They are denied citizenship rights where they work; are always the first to be fired; and suffer the full force of the economic crisis. SACTU's paper stated: "Ever since its formation, SACTU has opposed the system of migrant labour on which the apartheid economy is based. But in fighting for the rights of South African workers, SACTU fights at the same time for the rights of all workers. In the same way as SACTU rejects the concept of "foreign workers" when applied to black South Africans, so too does it reject that concept when applied to other workers, regardless of their country of origin. "SACTU stands firmly by the Freedom Charter which says that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, and that the wealth of South Africa shall be restored to the people. To live is to work - every worker knows this. Accordingly, we say that those who have contributed to the wealth of South Africa, regardless of their country of origin, will be free to live and work in South Africa if they so choose. They and their families will enjoy the same citizenship rights enjoyed by their South African brothers and sisters, sharing in the wealth they have collectively created. -"SACTU fights for the rights of all workers, including those who at the end of their contracts are made to return to their country of origin, leaving behind the wealth they have produced. They too have put their lives into building South Africa's industrial might, and they have a just claim to the fruits of their labour."