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Author

Setai, Bethuel

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RECRUITING LABOR FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN MINES
AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

Bethuel Setai

At the turn of the twentieth century, South Africa was on the verge of developing a modern capitalist economy. Its main promise lay in rich gold deposits founded in the Witwatersrand. Its population stood at 4,059,018 Blacks in 1904, and 1,104,811 non-Blacks. By 1911, it had increased to 4,697,152 Blacks and 1,258,034 non-Blacks. The size of this population should have been sufficient to support the mining industry. Before 1900, it was considered to be so. But for the gold mines alone, there was a shortage of 117,193 African workers and for the coal mines 11,941. (See Table 1.) In general, all industries, agriculture, railways, etc., reported shortages. In summary, this crisis could be divided into four categories:

1. That the demand for African labor for agriculture in the Transvaal was largely in excess of the present supply, and as the development of the country proceeded, this demand would greatly increase;
2. That the demand for African labor for the Transvaal mining industry was in excess of the present supply by about 129,000 laborers, and while no complete data of the future requirements of the whole industry were obtainable, it was estimated that the mines of the Witwatersrand alone would require, within the next five years, an additional supply of 196,000 laborers;
3. That the demand for African labor for other industries, including railways, was greatly in excess of the present supply, and would increase concurrently with the advancement of mining and agriculture; and
4. That there was no adequate supply of labor in Central and Southern Africa to meet the shortages.¹

The shortages existed because Africans coming forward to work felt terribly disadvantaged because of the poor wages paid. In the earlier periods when there were no shortages, attempts had been made at reducing the wage rate; but they had failed. Chalmers and Hatch write:

*In the early days the rate of wages grew rapidly owing to the inadequacy of supplies, until in 1890. The average pay of natives was as high as sixty three shillings a month, exclusive of upkeep. In that year an endeavor was made to secure the concerted action of various mining companies in reducing the wages and a scale of monthly payments to natives was agreed to by 66 companies, with the result that in the course of three months, the average wage was reduced to forty one shillings and sixpence...the reduction was to a great extent temporary owing to the failure of many of the companies to maintain the scale agreed upon.*²

In the post war period these wages had been reduced by half and it was established as a policy to keep them exactly that way.³

The low wages were not the only reason why Africans were reluctant to work in the mines. One of the major retarding factors which most Africans had come to learn and to experience was the high rate of death due to phthisis disease--this was some kind of tuberculosis contracted due to working underground. For those stricken, the rate of death was forty-eight percent and the average age forty-three in 1912. In 1920, the rate was still high at forty-three percent and the average age of forty.⁴ And these were merely secondary cases. For primary cases, the incidence must have been much higher.

In addition, the economy of the Africans was considerably stronger and had been relatively undisturbed by the Boer War. They could still live off agricultural pursuits without having to enter the mining industry as laborers. In general they were so unresponsive to entering the mines that an official of the mining industry commented that:

*The demand for labor had increased wonderfully in many directions; the native had been very much sought after; an indifference had been developed in the native amounting almost to insolence,... though this was common not to the Transvaal only, but also to South Africa. However,... the native had been approached by civilized men, begging him and imploring him to come out and work for them, they could not altogether be surprised at the characteristics recently developed by natives, who had thus felt the force of his position and acted upon it.*⁵

It is important to realize then that because of the self-sufficiency of African economies and the reluctance of their men to brave the hazards of gold mining the mining industry could get them only by destroying their social fabric despite the fact that

such destruction would have consequences of the gravest and most far-reaching character on African lives.

To eliminate the shortage and to dampen competition among the mines for labor, the Chamber of Mines organized itself into a monopsony in the labor market. To effect this, the Witwatersrand Native Labor Association was formed in 1901 and was supplemented in 1912 by the Native Recruiting Corporation. The former organization was authorized to recruit in East and Central Africa while the latter recruited in South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Both organizations had recruiting officers who were assigned to defined areas. They, in turn, had under them licensed trader-recruiters who generally knew people and their problems better through trading relationships.

The recruiting system was organized under two categories. They were the Assisted Voluntary System (hereafter called A.V.S.) and the Contract System. The A.V.S. applied mainly to Africans in South Africa while others fell under the Contract System. Where the A.V.S. applied, it was presumed that a recruit had offered himself voluntarily for employment in the mines. The recruit would then be advanced rail-fare and provision for his journey to Johannesburg. And, according to contract, the advance would be deducted from the earnings of the recruit at the rate of ten shillings for every thirty shifts. According to the Report of the Witwatersrand Mine Natives Wages Commission, 32% of recruits from South Africa were A.V.S. in 1931, and this figure had increased to 49.2% by 1942.⁶

In practice the A.V.S. was not as popular as the above figures suggest, nor was it that voluntary. The recruiting was for the most part done under compulsion. Advances from traders were for the most part used as bait to hook Africans to credit. Terms were severe and Africans who could not pay ended up signing up for the mines in order to make good their debts. In some South African regions, some ninety per cent of the permanent mine workers had been given advances against wages ranging from small sums up to pounds.⁷

The above practice extended to government agents. An African speaker at the fourth African Labor Congress declared eloquently that:

After the reaping season, the Magistrates compel people to pay their taxes, knowing full well that they would be compelled to sell their mealies for eight shillings per bag or even less; and in many cases they were compelled by circumstances to exchange bags of mealies for worthless shop goods. At least four bags have been

*sold to pay the government tax. Shortly after the reaping season, the Native has no food and is forced to buy his own mealies back at one pound for a half-filled bag. He goes on buying his mealies back until he is hopelessly in debt. The trader who is also a recruiter, now steps in and demands his money. The position is obvious; the man has either to go to the mines or have his cattle sold. Of the two evils, most natives go to the mines.*⁸

The above paragraph points out that one of the forces used to get Africans to go to the mines was the tax. The poll tax amounted to two pounds and it was paid by all adult males above the age of sixteen. There was an additional tax of two pounds levied upon every additional wife. A hut tax of ten shillings was also imposed. Other push factors were incorporated in the Land Act of 1913. According to this Act, Africans lost all of their fertile lands. To supplement their consumption needs they had to go to the mines. Other factors included introducing Africans to new goods (such as forcing them to wear European clothing) so that they could ultimately have to go to the mines to work so as to afford them.

Recruiting of Labor in Mozambique: The Dynamics of Compulsion

The spread of recruiting areas to Mozambique was another desperate move on the part of Chamber of Mines to supplement its labor needs. Economically the major motivation was to keep wages low by having more sources of supply. Consequently, the shifting of recruiting to Mozambique was not based on an abundance of labor there, but on the desire for a perfectly elastic labor supply curve for the mines. In fact, the population of the so-called Portuguese possessions compared less favorably to that of South Africa around 1903. Table 2 gives a clear picture of the comparative populations at the time. Tables 3 and 4 show the comparative contributions to the mines to that date. We see that the East Coast alone contributes more than its share in terms of population.

It is important to point out how the Chamber of Mines assessed the availability of labor in each district where it intended to recruit. The procedure was to divide a given population by five to reduce it to adult men. To allow for old men, it could be reduced further. It could still be reduced further if the intention was to get men in their prime ages between eighteen and forty. Thus for the Transvaal in Table 2, with a population of 800,000

the procedure was to divide 800,000 by 10. This meant 80,000 men of prime age would be available to work in the mines. In some areas the available population would be divided by a number less than or greater than ten depending on the demand needs of the mines. Needless to say, this was a very arbitrary denominator which did not take into account the needs of the African economies.

The organization responsible for recruiting in Mozambique was called the Witwatersrant Native Labor Association (W.N.L.A. It had a district manager in Lourenço Marques and about seventy five stations in Mozambique alone around 1910. The stations employed about thirty whites who had under them about two hundred and fifty African recruiters, as well as two hundred runners who received commissions. The rest worked full time and received fixed salaries.

In order to organize effectively, the Chamber of Mines, the agency of the Transvaal government, entered into a formal agreement with the Portuguese government for permission to recruit in her territories. The most significant such agreement was the Mozambique Convention, dated April 1, 1909. Under this convention the W.N.L.A. could recruit freely in Mozambique. The only condition was that recruiting would not be permitted in those areas where Africans were deemed to be "subject to obligations under local laws at present in force or under legal contracts now existing with the government of the Province."¹⁰

It is interesting to note that while Africans were not going to the mines out of their own accord or desire, they were expected to pay all the costs involved in their transfer to the Transvaal. This does not preclude the fact that recruiters had to pay some nominal fees for recruiting licences. Nevertheless, Africans paid thirteen shillings to acquire travel documents to the Transvaal. They also paid for rail fares and other support. In addition their taxes were subtracted from their wages. The Portuguese government received a fee every three months for every African recruited under the terms of the Convention. The Africans returning from the mines were also subject to a payment of Customs to the Portuguese government. They were exempt for only one hundred and thirty-two pounds by weight of goods. In addition, the Portuguese invested in stores around the mine compounds from which Africans bought goods on termination of their contracts. Since these were monopolized outlets, the Portuguese stood to reap additional profits. Clearly the net wages of the recruits were lean after all the deductions were made.

Because of the potential profits that she stood to earn from the terms of the Convention, Portugal aided the W.N.L.A. by emb

upon one of the most cruel recruiting campaigns. Her strategy was based mainly on making Africans living in her so-called possessions uncomfortable. As a result, they would sign up for the mines as an alternative. After interviewing some Africans in Lourenço Marques who had worked in the mines, Professor E.A. Ross wrote:

After six months of service one may have three or four months at home but may then be taken again unless he hides out in the jungle and has his wife bring him food. Of those present, five have been required to render forced labor, the others have missed it by being on the Rand. Three out of the five have been beaten by foremen. All but six out of the thirty-one have seen laborers beaten. Thirteen out of thirty one have seen women at forced labor beaten. Three have had a female relative abused sexually by the white man; one a sister-in-law, one an aunt, one a betrothed. Five others know of women so treated in their village. Some here have altogether missed forced labor by hiding out, by being in constant employment.... Their main protection has been work on the Rand.¹¹

Furthermore the manner in which Africans were recruited was subject to abuse. The recruiter made extra money for himself. After he was given orders to recruit so many men from a district, it was up to him as to how many he would take from a particular village. Consequently, under the threat of being tied up, the villagers would compete in bribing him not to hit them too hard. He would demand men he even knew were off to work. In order to avoid being beaten, they had to pay him. They would pay him in money, corn, sheep, goats and chickens until sometimes not a domestic animal was left in the village.¹²

At times the recruiter would be an African from another tribe, preferably from a rival one. The Portuguese were known to be very skillful in playing off one tribe against another. Consequently, that is why they could use an African against his own people.

It is also important to note that in order to make Africans more vulnerable and agreeable to working in the mines, they would be called up for forced labor just when they needed to be home to look after their own agriculture and businesses. Professor Ross writes:

Some administrators on the other hand, in planting time call out the whole village on highway work with the express intention of making the native come to depend entirely on employment by the white man, of converting him into proletarian.¹³

In addition, the time of payment of taxes plays into the hands of the white trader. The tax is due just before the African crops are ripe; so that the greatest possible number are obliged to labor under extremely hard conditions. Some traders require six months labor to pay a man's tax. Professor Ross¹⁴ observed:

February last, a missionary met on the road a body of 400 natives going down to the coast to work for the planter who had paid their taxes and given each a "cloth." About the same time he met 700 men, tax delinquents, being conducted to Malange to work for these planters who had advanced the money for their taxes. Such work, does not in the least exempt them from the regular annual stint of unpaid work for the government.

While it is true that a system of compulsory labor did exist in the Portuguese territories prior to the signing of the Mozambique Convention. We only wish to point out that this agreement must have intensified the system of compulsion. We conclude that Africans who went to the mines did not do any better than those who stayed at home. In a sense, their position was even more tragic. They paid high duties on everything bought on the Rand; they were in addition taxed extra for earning money outside their homes;¹⁵ and on the train home they paid several times as much as other third class passengers. For example, from Chai Chai Chicomo, they paid one pound, whereas first class fare was ten twelve shillings.¹⁶ In addition, a W.N.L.A. agent commented that the women hanging about the compound where the men are cared for on their return, offer themselves to sexual appetites long famished their victims drunk and rob them.¹⁷

We see that there is a lot that separates an African from his hard-earned savings. He arrives home broke materially, but rich in experience. But more tragically, he has expanded his horizons and so he will enlist for labor in the mines again and again and again.

In contemporary times, the recruiting of labor both by the W.N.L.A. and N.C.R. does not call for stringent methods, either directly or indirectly. It does not have to. The African is cast the most part in a vicious circle. He lost his land, which caused him to lose his agricultural productivity, which in turn forced him to go to the mines. But, because the Chamber of Mines has monopsony in the labor market, people from the reserves East and Central Africa wishing to work have only one place to go and that is to the mines through the agency of the W.N.L.A. and N.C.R.

Conditions in the Mines

It is common practice that after arriving in the mines, the recruits are given a medical test before they are assigned to the mines. Assignments are according to the needs of the mines, but management usually makes sure not to assign people of the same ethnic group to the same mine. The idea is to prevent possible unity against the Company by people who already know and understand each other.

The living conditions were usually bad. Bad treatment usually started long before the recruits reached the mines. While enroute to the Rand, they were put in open railway carriages pressed together and were periodically whipped by railway officials. They were also cheated in the sense that they were recruited on the understanding that their rail fares would be paid for by the Chamber of Mines. When they got to the Rand, they found that they were required to pay and that payment would be deducted from their first month's wages. They also paid for their fares home.

On the mine grounds the Africans were housed in compounds. These are made of brick, they are long and covered with corrugated iron roofs. There were twenty men to a room which measured eighteen by twenty five feet. Each man had a concrete cubicle, and he used the slab floor as his bed. The rooms, in addition, were badly ventilated. In general the living conditions were scandalous. Ernest Cole, an eminent South African Black photo journalist wrote,

*The living conditions of the men who work the mines of South Africa are miserable beyond imagining--worse even than in the worst slums of Johannesburg.*¹⁷

Men who were sick complained that they were not tended to and that they were generally neglected. They complained of harsh treatment. Some of those who were sick were forced to work and were often beaten by Zulu policemen.¹⁸

When they got to the Rand, the most frustrating experience for the Africans was that they found that the wages they received were always less than those that the recruiters promised. For example, Bangiso Sangqui, an African Chief from the Cape Province after visiting the mines said:

*When the Labor Agents collect them to go up to the works, they tell them they will get a wage of from Four to Five pounds (£4 - £5) per month, and when they get there, they do not get it.*¹⁹

In addition, they were forced to work Sundays without pay. However, this was not the only time they worked for free. They complained often that at the expiration of their term of service or contract, they wanted to leave but their employers refused to release them. In order for them to be released, they needed a Special Pass which would free them from being charged as deserters. On insisting, some would be given false release papers which prevented them from being hired by other employers. Such Africans would eventually be arrested under the pass laws. At times, upon reaching Johannesburg, some would be given passes to seek work. They had to find work in six days. Failure meant they must ask for a new pass. The new pass usually would be valid for three days. Failure to get a job in this time period meant that the men would be confined at the Pass Office under the pretext of preventing their arrest.²⁰ At the end of six days they were sold to potential employers for six shillings.

We should also note that management tried Africans for trivial offenses. They would then be locked up and during that time pay would be deducted from their wages.²¹ In addition, some paid medical fees even though they were promised that these would be free. One African who worked in the mines wrote:

When we leave our homes to seek for fortune under the so-called Service Contract, we are promised many things by the local agents of the Native Recruiting Corporation. We are told that we will be treated well and that better wages will always be in consideration. But I am sorry to say that all these exaggerations come to nothing at the end. They end up with horrible wages and conditions.²²

Africans were also forced to buy what they needed from the compound retail outlets. The terms were often unfair. In 1932 the South African Institute of Race Relations reported that on certain mines a system of credit had grown based on tokens. In one instance, the storekeeper had a concession or monopoly of trading with the employees. He paid a fee of a shilling and a half per month per African employed to the management. Each day's wage by the African was noted on his ticket which also showed his rate of pay per day. On presentation of his ticket at the store he was considered good enough to be given credit for the amount shown. Upon asking for credit of say one pound, he would be given tokens and from time to time he would use them to pay for his purchases. The tokens once issued were not redeemable in money. About two thirds of the Africans at that mine, were reported to be under this credit system. At the end of each week, the company gave the storekeeper a list of Africans who were to be paid. And, at the time when they are being paid the storekeeper came to collect. The managers of the mines appeared to approve of the system because

as they spent more, Africans tended to remain longer at the mines. Thus it is not surprising that only a few men left the mines with any savings. Ernest Cole writes, "...it is a rare man who has set aside any cash in hand, and it gives him a chance to reach home with something in his pocket."²⁴ Despite all these grievances there existed no machinery for redress. The general plight of the Africans was summarized by an African Chief Sipendu who had gone to the mines to see for himself.²⁵ He said,

Some other means ought to be devised. Native laborers are being sjamboked and beaten, and illtreated in many other ways by their European overseers and indunas;...This brutal treatment, combined as it is, with very low wages, is enough to keep natives away from Johannesburg. Treat them fairly, pay them fairly, and laborers will flow to the centers.

This then is the rationale for recruiting African labor for the mines and the dynamics of such recruiting. Recruitment through deceit and compulsion seem to have been the order of the day. Clearly, Africans did not go to the mines because of greener pastures there but because they were forced to. After time, of course, the relationship between induced economic depravity and want caused many more Africans to present themselves at recruiting stations with little convincing. Secondly, it is also hoped that this review will serve as a background to the understanding of some of the problems facing management and worker in the mines. These problems are many as can be abstracted from this article. The most significant being that Africans are not unionized. It seems imperative that unionization of African labor should be viewed as a precondition to a solution of these problems. An extension of this paper will focus on this issue.

Footnotes

1. The Majority Report. Cd. 1895. p. 246.
2. Chalmers and Hatch, "The Gold Mines of the Rand" in Union Government, no. 21, 1944. p. 1895.
3. Cd. 1895. p. 251.
4. *Miner's Phthisis Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa, and of Basotoland, Bechvanaland, and Swaziland.* No. 6 1910-22. p. 343.

5. Cd. 1895. p. 288.
6. Union Government. No. 21, 1944. p. 4.
7. Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Native Pass Laws, 1920, Union Government. #41, 1922. p. 17.
8. Worker's Herald, May 15th, 1926.
9. Cd. 1895. p. 288.
10. Mozambique Convention, Cd. #1895, 1904. p. 2.
11. Ross, Edward Alsworth, Report on Employment of Native Labor in Portuguese Africa. New York: 25 Broad Street, 1925. p. 41.
12. *Ibid.* p. 23.
13. *Ibid.* p. 24.
14. *Ibid.* p. 24.
15. *Ibid.* p. 48.
16. *Ibid.* p. 48.
17. Cole, Ernest. *House of Bondage*. New York: Random House. 1967. p. 23.
18. Cd. 2025. p. 26. 1903.
19. *Ibid.* p. 25.
20. *Ibid.* p. 28.
21. *Ibid.* p. 39.
22. "The Adventure of a Mine Worker" Umvikely--Thebe--The Afr Defender No. 6. Johannesburg, July 1936.
23. South African Institute of Race Relation, Third Annual Report pp. 26-27.
24. Cole, Ernest. *Op. Cit.* p. 24.
25. Cd. 2025. p. 27.

TABLE 1

Table showing current and projected labor
shortages in Coal and Gold Mining Industries

Rand Requirements Alone

Number of stamp mills, and present and future requirements of native labor for the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, and coal mines, Transvaal, and for the town and suburbs of Johannesburg:--

Number stamp milles working, Witwatersrand, February, 1903, 2,975; ditto, outside districts, February, 1903, 145--3,120.

Number stamp mills working, Witwatersrand, 1899, 5,970; ditto, outside districts, 400--6,370.

Number stamp mills now erected, 6,560; ditto, in contemplation next five years, 5,300--11,860.

A stamp mill crushes about 4 tons per day; daily production with 11,860 stamps, 47,440 tons.

Supply to-day:--Natives now employed on gold mines, Witwatersrand, 53,375; ditto, coal mines, Witwatersrand, 6,796--60,171.

Supply required immediately:--Total requirements, gold mines, Witwatersrand, to-day, 141,250; ditto, coal mines ditto, 10,000--151,250.

Deficiency in supply to-day:--Present shortage of labor, gold mines, Witwatersrand, 87,880; ditto, coal mines, ditto, 3,204--91,084.

Supply required five years hence:--Native labor required five years hence, gold mines, Rand, 250,000; ditto, coal mines, ditto, 25,000--375,000.

Labor supply, towns and suburbs, Johannesburg:--Number of natives employed Johannesburg to-day, 35,000; estimated number of natives required five years hence, 60,000.

It is impossible to form an estimate of the requirements of agricultural and outside industries in the Transvaal; these are to-day fairly heavy, and likely to increase steadily.

Summary:--Deficiency of labor required to-day for coal and gold mines, 91,084; labor required five years hence for coal and gold mines, and Johannesburg and suburbs, 300,000.

Source: Command Papers, 1895. April 25th, 1925, page 11.

TABLE 2

Comparative Population Estimates of Southern Africa, 1903

	Total
Cape Colony	1,500,000
Lesotho	260,000
Natal	916,000
Orange Free State	140,000
Transvaal (estimated)	800,000
Botswana	130,000
Rhodesia	314,000
Swaziland	130,000
Portuguese Possessions (estimated)	<u>1,500,000</u>
Total (men, women, children)	5,890,000

Source: Command Papers, His Majesty's Government, no. 1895. 1

TABLE 3

The Composition of the African Labor Force of Members and Contractors
of the Witwatersrand Native Labor Association
December 31, 1970

(includes most of the gold mines and certain coal mines)

Area from which recruited	Number	Percentage
Cape	71,787	17.89
Natal	5,836	1.46
Free State	6,899	1.72
Transvaal	<u>12,334</u>	<u>3.07</u>
Sub-total	96,856	24.14
Lesotho	71,109	17.73
Botswana	16,109	4.06
Swaziland	<u>5,388</u>	<u>1.34</u>
Sub-total	92,794	23.13
East Coast	113,293	28.24
Tropical Territories	<u>98,228</u>	<u>24.49</u>
Total	<u>401,171</u>	<u>100.00</u>

Source: Mine Labor Organization Limited, Report for the year 1970 in Horrell, Muriel
A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa. Johannesburg: South Africa
Institute of Race Relations. January, 1972, p. 230.

TABLE 4

Territorial Analysis of Typical Native Labor Force
on Chamber of Mines, 1943

Union			
Cape Province		125,000	
Natal and Zuland		20,000	
O.F.S.		5,000	
T.V.L.		30,000	
			180,000
High Commissions Territories			
Basutoland		45,000	
Bechvanaland		10,000	
Swaziland		8,000	
			63,000
East Coast			
Mozambique (south of L 22 S)		87,000	
			87,000
Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia		30,000	
		-----	30,000

	Total		360,000