

MIGRATORY LABOUR...

The Canker in South African Society

Migratory labour is a system in which workers have to oscillate between their rural "homes" and their place of work. The phenomenon is not new to South Africa, but dates back to the turn of the century and even earlier.

It has now become an integral part of our social, political and economic system. It makes it possible to reconcile the twin policy objectives of meeting the White-controlled economy's demand for labour while at the same time keeping to a minimum the number of non-employed Africans in the "White" areas.

The policy was systematically expounded in the 1920's when the Government stated that Africans would be allowed into "White" areas only as long as they were required to "minister to the needs of the White man". Otherwise they are "redundant" and their families are "superfluous appendages" who will be "endorsed out" — i.e. removed from the cities and towns and sent to the reserves.

Although the system has been widely condemned, it is to be extended. The Government stated in 1968 that their intention was to build South Africa's economy on migratory labour. The Alexandra hostels are but one step in the process — the first of 24 planned for 60 000 men and women in that township.

There are probably some 1 500 000 migrant workers in South and South West Africa — a third of them from elsewhere on the sub-continent and two-thirds from the African reserves. When families are taken into account, the system probably affects about six million people.

Labour migration occurs in any process of industrialisation. Usually it means a final exodus from the land to the towns, but in South Africa this has been deliberately prevented. As is often pointed out, migratory labour is not unique to this country. To take one example, there are large numbers of migrant workers in Western Europe. But at least they can take their families with them if they wish to. The most inhuman aspect of the system — the breaking up of families — can thus be avoided. Migrants in Europe also

enjoy the same social benefits and trade union rights as natives of the country where they work. Over a period of time they can even acquire citizenship.

These rights are all denied to migrant workers in South Africa.

The main instrument for enforcing the migratory labour system is the pass laws. Nearly 1 800 people are prosecuted every day of the year for technical offences under the pass laws. Africans in the townships live in terror of police raids — at night and with dogs. Arrest can mean the loss of a job, prison, and ultimately deportation to some remote and poverty-stricken rural area where there may be no jobs and no houses.

The human costs of the system are enormous. Migrants usually have to live in barrack-like single-sex hostels or compounds. Wives cannot live with their husbands, nor parents with their children. The inevitable results are prostitution, both male and female, adultery, illegitimacy, venereal diseases, juvenile delinquency, drunkenness. Numerous studies have shown time and again that these social evils are rife in South Africa.

The system also helps to perpetuate poverty. Workers shuttling back and forth between town and country do not stay long enough in any job to acquire much more than rudimentary skills. Industry does not consider it worthwhile to train workers beyond a certain level if these workers have to leave the company to return to the rural areas before the increased productivity arising from their training has compensated the company for providing that training.

In other words, the migratory labour system discourages the economy from investing in its labour force. This lack of industrial training is a major cause of poverty — which brings misery and violence and crime in its wake.

Migratory labour involves a vicious circle. The work-force is unstable and ill-trained and wages are low. The reserves get poorer as the population increases. More Africans thus have to leave to find work in the towns. Because

they have to export their male manpower the reserves get poorer still. Meanwhile industries expand and the Whites get richer, but black wages remain low because of the large supply of cheap labour.

There is every indication that the economic position of Africans is deteriorating, and that the Black/White wage gap is widening. In 1946 the average White income was 12 times the average African income. In 1967 it was nearly 14 times as large.

Average White income, all persons, in South Africa is now about R95 a month, while the average African income is about R7 a month. In Soweto, the proportion of families living below a poverty datum line of about R70 per month for five people has remained constant, at 68%, throughout the 1960's.

Migratory labour is a major cause of this continuing poverty, which in turn is one of the major causes of the widespread malnutrition and the high Black infant mortality rate in this country. In short, there are few aspects of African life that are not adversely affected by the migratory labour system.

The strike of 13 000 migrant workers in Ovamboland at the beginning of the year shows that there is deep dissatisfaction with and even hatred of migratory labour.

The Government of course bears the largest part of the responsibility. But all too often individual employers take advantage of the powerless position of their workers to exploit them — through low wages, or through providing only the barest essentials in the compounds.

Accommodation in these may consist of no more than concrete bunks with thin mattresses, and half a dozen men are frequently cram-

med into a single room. Sometimes callous employers even dismiss workers who fall foul of the maze of pass and influx control laws, forgetting that loss of a job usually means deportation from the town to the reserves.

A South African sociologist has called the migratory labour system the most efficient form of labour exploitation yet devised. The disadvantage of pure slavery is that the slave is an economic asset and his owner must keep him healthy and alive. Migratory labour avoids this — for it is relatively easy to replace a lost worker simply by requisitioning another from the reserves.

The Dutch Reformed Church has described migratory labour as a cancer in the life of the nation which will not leave the White man unscathed.

The Spro-cas Economics Commission called migratory labour fundamentally evil. Its first recommendation was that "as a matter of urgency, all possible steps be taken immediately towards the abolition of the system, towards freedom of occupational and geographical mobility for all, and towards the removal of legislation that prevents black families from living together in towns."

An economics professor has written that migrant labourers are trapped in a system which is an "evil canker at the heart of our whole society: wasteful of labour, destructive of ambition, a wrecker of homes, and symptom of our failure to create a coherent and progressive society."

Chief Buthelezi has said simply: "The migratory labour system is destroying my people."

John Kane-Berman

A background paper prepared for Spro-cas.

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