

Francis Wilson: "Migrant Labour in South Africa." (f)  
(Spro-Cas, 1972.)

Dr. Wilson's book on migrant labour in South Africa provides a much-needed study on this crucial aspect of the South African labour market. The South African economy rests very heavily on an oscillating migrant labour system to the extent that at least one out of every two of the 2,5 million Africans working legally in the common (white) area is a migrant labourer. At the same time migrant labour is virtually universally condemned on moral grounds. As Professor J.J.F. Durand stated in a review of this book in Die Burger: "Anybody who still wants to make out a case for migrant labour other than that it is a necessary evil suffers from moral blindness". (Die Burger, 19/2/73)

Dr. Wilson wrote this 'report' at the request of the South African Council of Churches as part of the Spro-cas programme "to examine our national life in the light of Christian principles and to make recommendations for change towards an acceptable social order". It is, in fact, a full-blooded book ranging over a remarkably wide field with very much new and up-to-date material much of which was gleaned at first hand by on-the-spot surveys by the author. It becomes clear upon reading the book that Dr. Wilson did indeed travel 'the length and breadth of the country' in collecting information.

As if that is not sufficient it contains six appendices dealing with diverse topics such as the legislative framework, pass law contraventions, an interview with David Russell on Dimbaza and a contribution by John Kane-Berman on South West Africa.

What follows is an outline of the contents of the book stressing some of the important findings and conclusions. At the same time criticism and suggestions are levelled where they are felt to be necessary.

#### Historical Background.

A very brief historical background of migrant labour is sketched, which attributes the origins of migrant labour to the closed compound system adopted on the diamond mines which was subsequently extended to the gold mines. Such an account is, however, only half the story, namely the demand for labour side. The other half, namely the supply of labour, also requires to be covered. The basic question to ask here is why Africans were willing to become migrant labourers at such low wages? This question has become all the more important because it has recently been shown that african peasants responded very positively to market forces in the last third of the nineteenth century and sold enormous surpluses

f This review was published as "The Cancer of Migrant Labour" in "South African Outlook", April 1973.

of crops and wool to the mining areas. The indications are that various methods were used that forced Africans to provide their labour cheaply on a migratory basis. In all fairness to Dr. Wilson these methods are very briefly outlined in chapter 8, but a more comprehensive account in the historical chapter would have been appropriate.

In the mining industry Dr. Wilson points out that the system of oscillating migrant labour is firmly entrenched. With the sole exception of the Phalaborwa Mining Company which aimed at stabilising its african workers, enabling them to live with their families near the place of work, the mining industry (including gold, diamonds, quarries, manganese, iron, platinum, copper etc.) employs 560 000 Africans who are virtually all oscillating migrant labourers. No mention is made about the collusion in the employment of african labour by the gold mines but since Dr. Wilson's earlier book, 'Labour in the South African Gold Mines' deals extensively with this topic, this is an understandable omission.

The chapter on agriculture concentrates on the Western Cape and from it two major findings emerge. First, in spite of declared government policy that the number of Africans employed in this region should be reduced annually by 5%, the number of african migrant labourers have been increasing over the past 6 years. Indications are that this trend will continue in the future as well. Second, farmers in the Western Cape have started colluding in the recruitment of migrant labour and have already set up six recruitment agencies, the largest and best known being the Hex Rivier Boere Groep. The economic effect of such policies is to employ less labour at lower wage rates than would be the case if free market forces were to operate and to create an artificial scarcity of labour in the region.

#### Industrial Centres.

When considering industrial centres Dr. Wilson concentrates on two points; the type of accommodation available to Africans and the extent to which the labour force is migratory. Here, particularly, the reader benefits from Dr. Wilson's extensive travelling and on-the-spot surveys. Two major findings emerge from this chapter. The one is that, similar to agriculture in the Western Cape, the absolute number of migrant labourers in Pretoria is increasing against the expressed policy and desire of authorities. The other is the shocking conditions under which migrant labourers are housed so that they can reside in the urban area in order to meet the ever increasing demand for labour of the white owned industries. Although Dr. Wilson appears to be fair in describing both the good and bad accommodation available to Africans, the following indicates one of the worst places he visited in Johannesburg. "I walked into a room measuring approximately 30ft. by 45ft. housing 56 men packed like sardines in very narrow double-decker concrete bunks separated from each other by a low (6 inches to 9 inches) thin partition so that the only way to get onto one's

bed was to crawl in from the bottom". (p.38)

Other features on the industrial centres is the way in which single ('bachelor") quarters are being established at the cost of family housing and how rigidly men and women are kept separate because every child born in the urban area has a right to permanent residence in that prescribed area under present legislation. Some of the development in hostel accommodation in Alexandra has a distinct Orwellian sound; "Amongst the administrative offices outside the gates of the hostel are three rooms; a police charge office; a thickly walled cell; and a control room. Inside the latter is a switch-board. From this switch-board go wires to all corners of the hostel where they are connected to steel doors which are fitted in every corridor in such a way that they can roll down from the ceiling to seal off the corridor from the staircase that leads to the courtyard. Thus, at the touch of a button, any group of rooms in the building can be locked off and the men incarcerated. Strikes or riots will, it is believed, be more easily contained by such methods". (p.43)

Unfortunately Dr. Wilson's book does not provide us with any information on the industrial employment of migrant workers. There is a dearth of up-to-date information on a national scale on all aspects of the employment of migrant labourers. Questions which need to be answered are; what are the wage rates, fringe benefits and social services provided to migrant labourers, what pension schemes exist for them, is there any correlation between the wage rate on the one hand and the frequency and duration of migration, the length of time spent with one employer, and the level of skill and occupation of the migrant labourer on the other hand. Comparisons between settled and oscillating migrant labour of the above economic variables also need to be made in order to ascertain to what extent migrant labour per se is responsible for the plight of Africans at present. These questions await further re-research although Dr. Wilson assumes some of these relationships to exist when he weighs up the arguments for and against migrant labour.

#### Grim Picture.

The picture painted of the situation in the homelands is even more grim than the industrial scene. The most worrying fact to emerge from this chapter is the way in which separate development is being implemented and its direct tie-up with migrant labour. By all accounts the homelands without exception all have far greater populations than the areas can provide for. Yet, at the same time, one of the declared aims of separate development is the resettlement of 'redundant' Africans and Africans living on 'black spots' in the homelands. Dr. Wilson found ample evidence of such resettlement taking place regardless of whether job opportunities existed in or near the area. For instance, Nqutu in Kwazulu, had a population of 32 000 in 1959 and the Tomlinson Commission estimated it could only carry a population of 14 000 at a reasonable

standard of living. However by 1970 the population in this district had increased, as a result of natural increase and population movement, to 86 000.

Another alarming trend of separate development which directly causes migrant labour is the 'amputation' of townships from cities to a remote homeland township. Thus, for, instance, the township of Itsoseng in Bophusetutswana has been built not to serve local industries but to be the home of families of men working in such centres as Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom, 133 and 180 kilometres away respectively. Likewise, in Witsieshoek a new township is being developed to house the families at present living with their husbands and fathers who are working in Welkom and Kroonstad.

Dr. Wilson's conclusions on the homelands are worth noting. Many people live in appalling poverty which is increasing in many parts of the homelands. This acute poverty is alleviated to some extent by the movement of oscillating migrants who go to the cities. (p.104)

A most useful chapter of the book deals with international perspectives and briefly examines the migrant labour phenomenon in other countries including the U.S.A., Latin America, China and Western Europe. What emerges from this international comparison is that China and South Africa appear to have pursued similar policies and objectives with regard to migrant labour. The hsia fang movements were campaigns to reduce the size of the urban population by encouraging unemployed workers and non-productive persons to return to the countryside. What is more, 'draconian controls' over internal migration were imposed after 1958 and official labour bureaux existed to control the influx of labour to the cities.

#### International Comparisons.

An investigation of the 'gastarbeiters' in Germany reveals some interesting comparisons. Contrary to South Africa, migrant labourers to Germany are allowed to bring their wives with them (half of those who were married did so in 1968), 77% of the 2,2 million migrant labourers are living in normal flats, they are protected by labour legislation and can belong to trade unions. Finally, the German government is recognising the permanence of many of these workers and granting them social and political rights.

The reader would desperately like more information on these international comparisons, but in a book of 280 pages which was originally meant to be a report, more detail could hardly be expected.

The nerve centre of this book is the two chapters that deal with an economic analysis of oscillating migrant labour and a consideration of an alternative to migrant labour. The economic analysis is most powerful and appears to be irrefutable. It rests on the assumption that there are four economic forces which cause the oscillation of labour. Two of them drive labour from the rural sec-

tors (Bantustans and white-owned farms) to the urban areas. The one force constitutes a rural push due to rural poverty and the other an urban pull based on job and income opportunities. The other two forces drive labour back to the rural sectors. The one force is an urban push which results from cost-savings by employing temporary single migrant labourers and socio-political reasons. The other is a rural pull because the migrant labourer has to render services in order to provide for his present and future social security. The arguments are powerful and are based on careful economic analysis. The underlying causes for the existence, growth and decline over time of these four forces are also well-substantiated.

In addition to that, these two chapters also demolish the whole separate development policy. Not only does Dr. Wilson provide facts to show that, if anything, the policy is working in reverse gear, that is increased economic integration is taking place, but he also hits on a fundamental contradiction of government policy. It is pursuing two directly opposing policies at present; a high economic growth rate on the one hand and separate development on the other. The pursuance of a high rate of economic growth has, as a direct result, increased demand for labour which draws labour from the Bantustans into the common economy in ever increasing numbers. Yet the stated policy of separate development is aimed at reducing - ultimately to halt and then to reverse - the flow of african labour to the cities.

#### Alternative Policy.

The alternative which Dr. Wilson suggests to the separate development policy for ending migrant labour is the acceptance of workers of all races in the cities as permanent, coupled with the right of workers to have their families with them at their place of work. Once the government takes this step Dr. Wilson outlines briefly the requirements to implement this decision. It involves the setting of a target date by which pass laws will be eliminated and a crash programme for building family accommodation. Dr. Wilson considers this plan to be feasible and within the limits of the country's resources.

Somehow this is the weakest point in an excellent book because Dr. Wilson's alternative begs the question. The real question is how to move the government and the white electorate to accept the permanence of african workers in the cities. Once that major step is achieved the argument is then only a matter of how best to phase out migrant labour.

Unfortunately Dr. Wilson does not suggest how the change in basic attitudes is to come about. Yet it may be that a solution to this is contained in his book. The answer possibly lies in first of all being clear about the relationship between cause and effect because migrant labour is both the cause and effect of african poverty in South Africa. It is important to realise that there exists

a two way relationship; on the one hand migrant labour causes rural poverty, urban low wages, unskilled jobs and the absence of bargaining power. On the other hand it is just as true that these factors plus rural over-population and unemployment cause migrant labour. As Dr. Wilson himself declares; "there is a symbiotic relationship between the colour-bar and migrant labour; for the existence of the colour-bar .... reinforces the pattern of oscillating migration whose existence, in turn, reduces the cost of the colour-bar". (p.156)

#### New Strategy.

A strategy for the elimination of migrant labour could therefore be to remove the causes of migrant labour so that it is no longer economically advantageous to the whites to make use of oscillating migrant labour. The economic causes of migrant labour are clearly set out in the economic analysis of the system. The major causes are the over-population, low productivity and poverty of the homelands; the industrial colour-bar, the low wages and the virtual total absence of social services for african workers in the industrial sectors; the political aim of whites to maintain white rule and prosperity which imply the denial of civil rights to urban africans and keeping their numbers in the cities down to a minimum; and the lack of bargaining power of migrant labourers both at their place of recruitment and at their place of work.

Such a strategy would therefore involve different people and groups at different places, all of which are working towards the common goal of eliminating migrant labour. Employers can promote migrants to do skilled and managerial jobs, undertake their training and provide adequate fringe benefits and social services; housewives can pay living wages to domestic servants; 'watchdog organisations' like the church and students, can put pressure on the government, private and public employers, and make whites aware of the evils of the migrant labour system; trade unions (White, Coloured and Asian) can devise means of promoting the economic advancement of migrant workers; and homeland leaders can consider ways in which they can provide their migrant labourers with bargaining power at their places of recruitment and work.

In spite of the criticisms levelled above Dr. Wilson has provided a vitally necessary study of migrant labour and made a major contribution towards the elimination of migrant labour which Professor Hobart Houghton has described as "an evil cancer at the heart of our whole society." (f)

---

f D. Hobart Houghton; "The South African Economy", p.95.