

NOTES ON THE MIGRANT LABOUR SYSTEM IN LESOTHO.

The economy of the kingdom of Lesotho and the workings of its migrant labour system deserve close study by all who are concerned with the southern african labour movement and its organisation. There are at least four good reasons for focussing attention on Lesotho;

1) Lesotho is an example of the complete labour reserve economy. Five out of every six citizens holding jobs work in the Republic of South Africa. At any one time, 45% of the adult male labour force are absentees; are working in the R.S.A. Of a total population of about 1.1 million, an estimated 150 000 are migrant worker. In the course of his working life the Basotho mineworker spends an average 12½ years on the mines. (More precise figures are available on the 100 000 mineworkers because accurate records are kept by the recruiting organisation - the Chamber of Mines Mine Labour Organisation (NRC) which has a monopoly of all recruitment in Lesotho to the South African mining industry).

An interesting study by McDowall (f) of a sample of the records of the NRC indicates the relationship between poverty, landlessness and migrant labour. Some 49.7% of recruits in the sample were recorded as landless. Landlessness, (that is, not having the right to any field) is to be expected among young, unmarried recruits. However, the same sample indicates that 73.4% of recruits were married. The sample indicates that migration is highest among the landless and substantiates similar indications by Morojele in the 1960 agricultural survey.(ff)

Monthly recruitment figures of licensed recruiting organisations also give some understanding of the flow of migrant labour. These indicate that recruitment is highest in January (especially in the lowlands and foothills when ploughing for summer crops is usually completed). But there is no truth to the claim that migrant labour is a seasonal phenomenon - a useful supplement to the peasant families' income while crops are ripening. Monthly returns of the number of Basotho in employment in South African mines do not fluctuate significantly. If the supply of labour is insufficient, then the NRC offers smaller periods of initial contract, that is 4, 6, or 9 months. Regardless of the period of initial contract, the average length of stay is the same - about 13 months (under the pass laws, foreign Bantu cannot reside in the Republic for more than 24 months at a stretch). If there is no shortage of mine labour, then longer and fewer contracts are offered. These figures indicate how effectively the recruiting organisations control the flow of labour.

The migrant labour system has a long history in Lesotho and has dominated the economy since the 'disintegration' of the peasant

f M. McDowall: "Basotho Labour in South African Mines".

ff 1960 Agricultural Census: "Agricultural Holdings" - C.M.H. Morojele.

economy in the 1870s' and 1880s'. Lesotho is not an agricultural country. Despite high yields in maize and sorghum this year - and recent increases in wool and mohair prices to the farmer - Lesotho cannot hope to be a self-sufficient agricultural economy. The long-term trend is towards a decrease in output and yields per acre.^(f) The long and deep structural nature of Basotho migrant labour is indicated by historical records. The following table indicates the growth in migrant labour both in absolute terms and in % of the total population;

Year	Male	BASOTHO MIGRANTS: 1911 - 1966. ^(ff)		Migrants as % of total de jure population.
		Female	Total	
1911	21 658	2 972	24 630	5.8
1921	37 827	9 314	47 141	8.7
1936	78 604	22 669	101 273	15.3
1946	95 000	32 000	127 000	18.5
1956	112 000	41 992	154 782	19.5
1960	-	-	206 424	23.2
1964	-	-	164 000	-
1966	97 529	19 744	117 273	12.0

Historical records indicate substantial labour migration in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Clearly, the structure of the labour reserve has deep historical roots in the colonial penetration of Basutoland and has not altered substantially since then.

2) What are the prospects for the absorption of migrant workers in the domestic economy? Since independence in 1966 Lesotho has striven to industrialize to create more jobs at home and thus lessen its dependence on migrant labour. The Lesotho National Development Corporation has encouraged foreign private investment. Domestic 'border industries' have been set up on the Lesotho side of the border (Maseru and Ficksburg Bridge) for the manufacture of ceramics, candles, tapestry, weaving etc. But this industrialization has not succeeded in creating a large number of jobs. There are an estimated 25 000 jobs in the non-agricultural domestic economy. In the first 3 years of the current plan period, 1970/71-1974/75, an estimated 4 000 new jobs have been created. The largest single employer is the Holiday Inn. While this is a considerable achievement, it is insufficient to provide domestic employment to absorb the labour surplus. It is not even enough to

- f* L.B. Monyake: "Lesotho - Land, Population and Food: The Problem of Growth in Limited Space" (Paper delivered to National Population Symposium, 1974.)
- ff* J.C. Williams: "Lesotho: Economic Implications of Migrant Labour" (S.A. Journal of Economics, Vol 39, No. 2, 1971)

keep pace with the increase in the adult labour force. Without substantial protection from white South Africa and without positive inducement to labour-intensive industrialization, Lesotho's current economic development efforts will not be sufficient to absorb the migrant labour in the domestic economy.

Lesotho's experience of economic development also indicates some of the ways in which the 'independent' labour reserve operates to the economic advantage of the Republic of South Africa. As an independent state, Lesotho qualifies for foreign aid. As one of the poorest 12 states in the United Nations Lesotho qualifies for multilateral aid on a scale no bantustan receives. Hence independence relieves the R.S.A. and to some extent Britain of the aid burden of sustaining the labour reserve economy. A second benefit to South Africa is the training of its labour force. Artisans, carpenters, plumbers and a growing number and range of skilled workers are educated and trained at great cost to Lesotho's educational budget only to find work in the Republic, where wage rates are higher and the cost of living lower. (This 'brain drain' is checked only to a limited extent by the natural aversion of the Basotho to living under apartheid laws.)

3) There is a clear need for more 'hard' information about the performance and the potential of the labour reserve economy, both within the R.S.A. and within the whole catchment area of foreign migrant labour. It is remarkably easy for the research worker to carry out field research in Lesotho due to the fact that it is an independent state. Much more is known about Lesotho's economy than about any comparable labour reserve in southern Africa. Hence Lesotho can provide useful, comparable data about how the labour reserve economy functions and, *pari passu*, about economic prospects of the bantustans. However, there are very few resources available. Library services (except for the University at Roma) are very limited and the government archives have only a very rudimentary catalogue. This situation is in great contrast to the R.S.A. where much greater resources for research are available but where access to field research is very restricted.

4) The tight control over mine labour supply exercised by the Mine Labour Organisations (NRC) makes the task of unionization supremely difficult. Accurate recruitment records are kept, enabling 'troublemakers' to be weeded out. Control by management and police over the compounds is tight. In the villages, control by the chiefs and the youth league of the ruling Conservative Basotho National Party (BNP) over militants has been tightened even further since the coup of 1970 and the 'troubles' in January and February of this year. The vast array of controls - in the village, in the recruitment process, at work and in the compounds do not differ substantially from one 'foreign' migrant labour source to another. (The situation of the Nyasa mineworkers is fundamentally no different to that of the Basotho).

But these controls have tended to backfire in recent months. Riots (spontaneous strikes) and 'disturbances' at the mines have certainly worried management and disturbed production. The riots at Virginia and Loraine in the Orange Free State goldfields in June, indicated that management needs an effective workers' organisation to deal with. Management would naturally prefer a docile and subservient union but may be forced to settle for what they can get.

For information on the Lesotho economy see in particular the 1960 Agricultural Census Basutoland, the 1970 Agricultural Census Lesotho, the 1966 Population Census, Percy Selwyn: "The Dual Economy Transcending Natural Frontiers: the case of Industrial Development in Lesotho". M. McDowall: "Basotho Labour in South African Mines - an empirical study"; G.M.E. Leistrer: "Lesotho: Economic Structure and Growth"; Roger Leys: "Lesotho: Non-Development or Underdevelopment"; J.C. Williams: "Lesotho: Economic Implications of Migrant Labour" (S.A. Journal of Economics Vol 39 No. 2, 1971). J.C. Williams: "Problems and Prospects of the Economic Development of Agriculture in Lesotho" (doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Natal, 1970)
