Mozambican miners' reprieve

The sudden announcement in October last year to ban Mozambican workers, followed by a major reprieve in December after Chamber protests to the Department of Manpower, focuses attention on the dependence South African employers have on foreign workers. The debacle raises three issues - the government's primary concern over "security" rather than capitalist economic interests, South Africa's dependence (and political clout) upon migrant supplier countries, and the long term trends in the mine labour market and their implications for unions, particularly the NUM.

Security in command

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Mineral and Energy Affairs, Home Affairs and Manpower jointly announced in October that no Mozambican work permits would be renewed. The ban was in retaliation for a landmine explosion near the Mozambican border which had injured SA soldiers. It was claimed the ban would stop the infiltration of ANC guerillas. Many commentators noted that the decision had great potential for destabilising the Mozambican state.

The ban flouted a tacit agreement used to encourage Mozambique to sign the Nkomati Accord. In part exchange for signing Nkomati, Mozambique was promised that recruitment of its nationals would be stepped up from 45,000 to between 70 - 80,000 workers. A massive 118,000 Mozambicans worked on South African mines when the Chamber drastically cut recruitment shortly after Frelimo achieved independence.

The Chamber of Mines, highly resentful at not being consulted on the ban and concerned at the decline in gold production it would cause, vigorously lobbied the government. The effect of the ban varied from mine to mine. Hardest hit would have been ERPM with 43% of its workforce from Mozambique - ironically the state has given this mine subsidies amounting to millions of rands so as to earn foreign exchange and preserve jobs. Other mines that would have been disrupted include the highly profitable West Drie (13% Mozambicans), East Drie (9%), Kloof (11%), Randfontein (19%), Western Areas (31%) and Western Deeps (13%) and the less profitable Blyvoor (21%). State coffers would also have been affected since gold mine taxes are the state's largest source of revenue. The mines mentioned pay up to three quarters of their gross profits as tax.

By December a reprieve was granted. It permitted workers in group 4 and higher and workers with more than seven years experience to continue working - probably between 40 and 50% of all Mozambican miners. Mines where Mozambican workers comprise more than 20% of the workforce in grades 1, 2 and 3 will be able to phase these workers out over 3 years. The haste with which the government gave the reprieve is striking. It suggests that in the laager mentality of the state, major political decisions are being made with little regard for their economic consequences.

Dependence on foreign labour

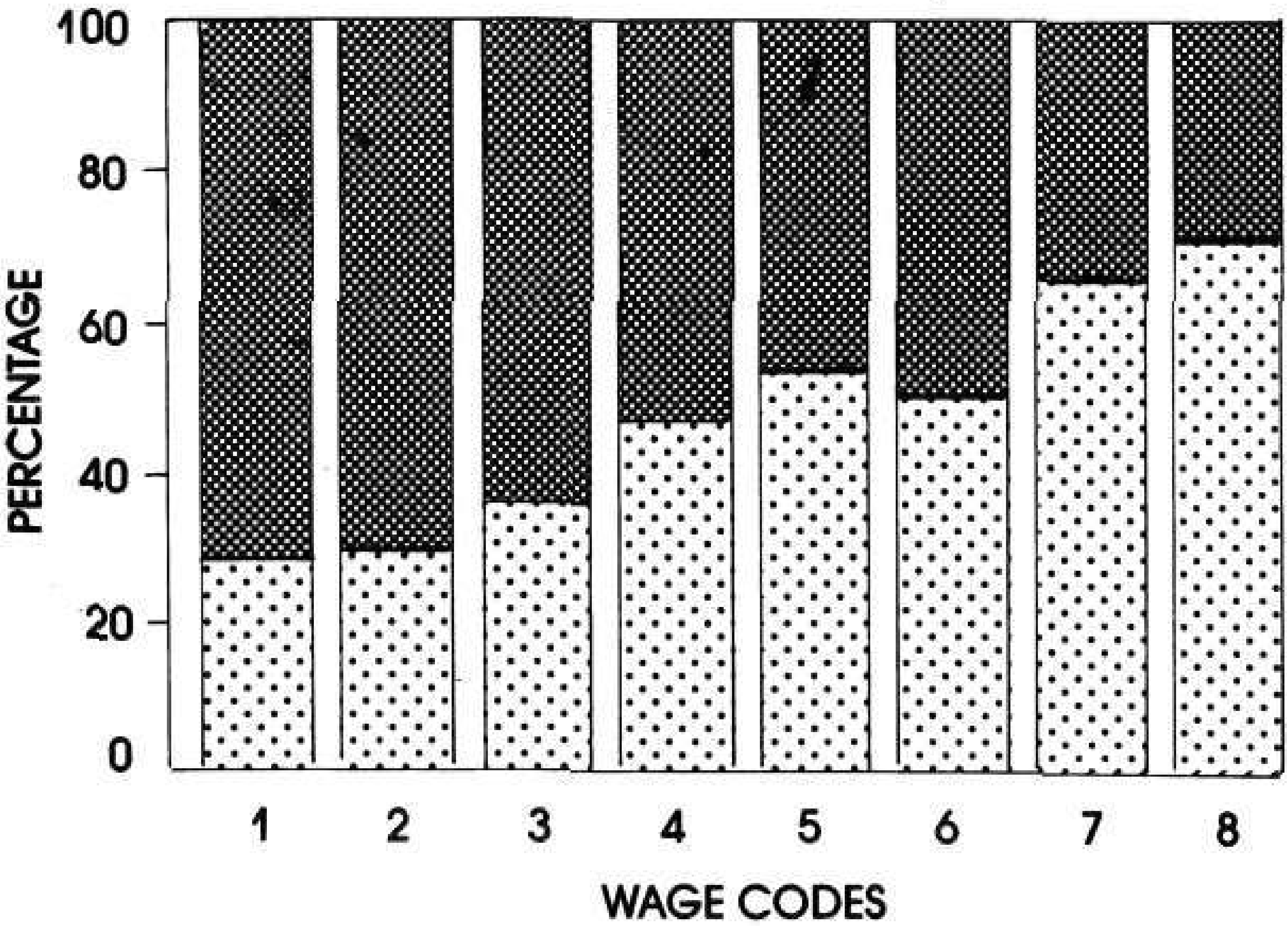
The ban was vigorously opposed by the Chamber not merely because of the large numbers of workers involved but because of their valuable skills - a feature of foreign miners in South Africa. The government's assumption that the Mozambican miners could easily be replaced from South Africa's pool of unemployed was simply wrong.

Miners make up the vast majority - 83% - of the 350,000 registered foreign black workers in South Africa. Most are employed on the gold mines. The mining industry's dependence on foreign migrants has declined dramatically in the last 15 years - from 80% in 1972 to 40% in 1986.

A report by ILO researcher Fion de Vletter shows that these foreign migrants possess crucial skills. Using 1986 data supplied by Anglo American - who employ about a third of the gold labour force, and whose foreign to local worker ratio is also 60 to 40 - de Vletter extrapolated a skills profile for foreign gold miners.
(F de Vletter, "A comparative analysis of skills and other characteristics of foreign mine workers on the South African gold mines", ILO SATEP, 1986.) Briefly, his findings are as follows:

* The breakdown of foreign gold miners in 1986 was Lesotho 97,000 (49%), Mozambique 50,000 (25%), Malawi 20,000 (10%), Botswana 18,000 (9%) and Swaziland 12,000 (6%).
* Foreign miners dominate in higher skilled jobs (see figure). While foreigners make up only 30% of group 1 jobs, they control 70% of group 8 jobs. Group 8 consists mostly of stope team leaders - crucial supervisors who have taken over the jobs white miners did in the past.

* *Foreign miners are older and are more experienced than the* South Africans. Most foreign migrants are between 30 and 39 years old and have worked on the mines for between 5 and 10 years. Local miners are generally between 20 and 29 years old with somewhat less experience.
* Very few novice workers have been recruited from foreign sources in recent years. Although novice workers accounted for 9% of all workers in 1983-5, only 1-2% of foreign miners were novices.
* Most miners leave after working for 10 years. This means the proportion of foreign workers will drop dramatically to perhaps less than 20% within five years unless the Chamber drastically alters its recruiting policies.



COMPOSITION OF WAGE CODES BY ORIGIN (%)

Long term trends

The Chamber has cut back on foreign recruiting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is much more expensive to recruit workers hundreds and even thousands of miles from the mines than from local homelands and Lesotho. Since the seventies the Chamber has been closing recruiting offices in remote and far-flung areas and concentrating on new areas such as the OFS, Qwa Qwa, Bophuthatswana and KwaZulu.

Secondly, there is a trend in gold mining - although comparatively slow - towards more highly mechanised production. Mechanisation requires a greater proportion of semi-skilled and skilled workers who cannot be easily replaced. Foreign workers, since they are beyond the Chamber's political clout, are a risk for the Chamber. Their sudden withdrawal by a foreign government or expulsion by the South African government for political reasons could jeopardise large amounts of gold production. Thirdly, the risk of AIDs from Malawi where an epidemic threatens, partly contributed to the Chamber's decision to stop all new recruitment there.

Ironically the trend towards reducing foreign labour is likely to strengthen the NUM's position. Although there have been some important exceptions such as the 1985 Marievale strike (when Mozambican miners "hijacked" busses shipping them back home and persisted until NUM won a court decision reinstating them) workers from Mozambique, Malawi and Botswana have been notoriously difficult to organise and are often bitterly remembered as strikebreakers.

(Jean Leger, February 1987)