

Chapter Eight

Labour Recruitment

This chapter continues the story of how the mines got their labour. We have already seen how black farmers were weakened by the loss of land, and how they had to work for wages to pay for taxes. Yet the labour shortage continued.

This chapter describes why and how the mine-owners organised a system of collecting labourers from all over southern Africa and made quite sure that these migrants reached the gold mines. This was the system of *labour recruiting*.

'At the Transvaal borders and for the succeeding hundred miles (there is) scarcity of food and shelter; from the borders to the Rand, on all the main foot paths, can be seen the evidences of this evil; skeletons of those who died are frequently seen, and at almost every store and dwelling near the road can be found those whom sickness or fatigue has compelled to give up the road and to either find a friend or perish.' (Extract from the Chamber of Mines Annual Report, 1894.)

'The black people are crying because of taxes.

The end will be that we will just die on the road.' (Chopi Song.)¹

In the early years, travelling to the Witwatersrand was dangerous, especially for blacks.

The distances were great, and most blacks travelled on foot. They had to walk many miles through cold winter winds or the heavy rains of summer. Hundreds of men arrived at the Witwatersrand tired, hungry and with bleeding feet. Many men were so ill that they had to be put into hospital for a few days.

OTHER DANGERS

But natural hardships were not the only reason for the suffering of these migrant workers. Many dangers were man-made.

Along the dangerous road to the Witwatersrand mines were crooks and highway robbers, both black and white, waiting to get as much as they could from innocent black travellers.

Migrants were often arrested



Dangers on the Road

*'At Viljoen's drif, trainloads of natives were given vaccinations at a fee of a shilling, passed over the river on their way to the fields and were again vaccinated on the Transvaal side at Vereeniging, this time for one shilling and sixpence (15 cents). Certificates which they had received at the drif were destroyed and new ones supplied, for a further shilling fee.'*² In this way, officials and policemen made extra money for themselves from black migrants on their way to the mines.

In 1894 a Chamber of Mines report complained:

'It is in many places the custom of the farmers forcibly to stop any native found resting or sleeping on their farms. If these natives are coming to the (mine) fields, and have no money in their possession, they are compelled to work without payment for a few days before being allowed to proceed.'

'Natives on their way home from the East Coast to the Witwatersrand mines are being turned back by the police and sent to work on the Transvaal section of the Delagoa railway.'

*'Many travel without a pass, not having the necessary shilling to buy one, and are forced to work for their greatest foes, the Boers and the railway construction contractors, who do not, we are told, scruple to use the sjambok freely, and often refuse to pay the natives even after three or four months' service.'*³

by Free State or Transvaal police and made to pay a fine before they could continue along their way. Often, these fines went into the policemen's pockets. Other whites would pretend to be government officials on the road. They would demand money for 'taxes', or they would pretend that the migrants had done something wrong and make them pay a 'fine'.

In those days migrant workers had to pay a shilling, (ten cents) for a travel pass. Sometimes these migrants were stopped by white employers who tore up their passes and forced them to work for new passes. They also had to buy goods from these crooks.

Some crooks pretended to be policemen and demanded two pounds (about four Rand) from each traveller for passing through a 'small pox area'. Others pretended to be doctors and gave 'vaccinations' costing a shilling each.

Many blacks knew that they were being crooked and robbed. But it seems that most of them felt that they would not be able to win against these crooks. They could never be sure whether they were being robbed by real government officials and policemen or not.

Some migrants never reached the mines at all. They were kidnapped on the way by Free State and Transvaal farmers who were looking for cheap labour.

When the traveller reached the mines at last, he still had the worry of the dangerous journey back home. Miners carried their wages and presents for the family. People were robbed and even killed by gangs who lived in the veld and the koppies of the Transvaal. These robbers lived on what they could steal from passers-by.

THE TOUT SYSTEM

The Chamber of Mines was very worried about these stories of what was happening to migrant workers. They realised that people were not willing to take

NOTICE To Strong Boys

I wish to make it publicly known that Sesioana of Maseru and myself have stopped flogging at Picaninny Kimberley Compound, Pretoria. Today it is your time to earn money. Wages are from 3/- to 12/- a day, according to your strength. I shall pay Hut-tax for you and shall also pay railway fares for you to Maseru to 'picanniny Kimberley'. I can also get good work at 'New Rietfontein' where you may receive wages from £3 to £6 a month. I shall also pay Hut-tax and railway fares for you from Maseru to 'New Rietfontein'. We have agreed together with the compound managers that if a person is sick he must be sent home with the Company's money and the railway fare to Maseru; they have thus bound themselves. Now my friends it is time for you to come to your friend in order to understand. The cattle have udders, come and milk them!⁴



On the way to the mines.

the dangerous road to the mines, and the shortage of labour would get worse.

In 1890 an article in the Chamber of Mines Annual Report advised: 'The supply of native labour would be much improved if the difficulties met with by the kaffirs in the course of their long overland journeys, could be done away with.'

From 1889 – 1899 the mine-owners tried out a system of paying agents to bring black workers to the mines. These agents were called 'touts' But the tout system was not a success.

Touts were paid R2 or R2,50 for every worker they sent to the mines. These touts were so eager to collect their pay that they often lied to the men in the villages. They made promises to the men to get them to leave home and work for the mines. They promised them high wages and good working conditions. (We shall see in a later chapter what these working conditions were really like.) To this day, in Lesotho, touts are called *dikalatsane*, or 'deceivers'.⁵

Many blacks complained about this trickery to the district commissioner when they got home again. For example, one district commissioner in the Cape reported:

*'Native Madave along with 28 other workers at the City and Suburban mine was promised three pounds and ten shillings a month. They received only one pound and fifteen shillings.'*⁶ In other words, they got half of what they were promised.

The Chamber of Mines began to realise that the gold mines were getting a bad name with many blacks.

*'The touts have only one object,' said one Chamber of Mines report, '(that is) to collect "boys" in order to deliver them to companies at the highest obtainable premium. Later, the native finds he has been deceived with regard to wages, which are often far below what the tout promised, and naturally becomes discontented; but for this he blames, not the tout, but the mines; and makes the fact speedily known in the district from which he came.'*⁷

* The Chamber of Mines also realised that touts were cheating the mine-owners as well.

'A few of the powerful companies spend thousands a year in paying touts who seize upon natives actually on their road here, and get paid ten shillings or one pound per (person) for escorting them to the mine. Touts do not bring a single boy here. There is an abundance of labour in this country and it is our duty to induce that extra labour to come, and not to

*fritter away thousands every year in escorting boys who were coming anyhow.*⁸

Mine-owners were paying the touts a lot of money to help ease the shortage of labour, yet the tout system seemed to be making things worse. The shortage of labour continued.

'SHORTAGE' OF CHEAP LABOUR

There was one main reason why the mines were always short of labour. The wages of mine labourers were lower than the wages of other labourers. The railways, the municipalities, factories and the diamond mines all paid higher wages than the gold mines. Migrants would often make their way to the mines, but find better paid jobs before they got there.

The Chamber of Mines realised this — but they insisted that they could not afford to raise the wages of unskilled workers. So the shortage of mine labour continued.

The shortage of labour brought two problems to the mine-owners.

* The first problem was that there were not enough workers to produce the gold that was in the mines as fast as the mine-owners required.

* The second problem was that unskilled workers were beginning to get higher wages. Some mines began to offer unskilled workers higher wages than other mines, to get them to come and work for them.

The tout system had failed to ease the shortage of labour on the mines. So the Chamber of Mines decided to organise its own system of collecting labour. The mine-owners realised that:



The long, and dangerous journey to Egoli. The Chamber of Mines set up their own recruiting system to make sure that workers arrived safely on the Rand and were directed to the gold mines.

* they could get more workers to the mines by making sure that they travelled safely;

* these workers would cost the mine-owners less because they would not have to pay commission to the touts;

* they would also be able to control the wages of these workers because they would all be recruited by one organisation. This would end competition amongst the mine-owners who had been forcing wages upwards.

* they would be able to direct workers to the mines where they were most needed;

* and, most important of all, the recruiting system would stop migrants from getting offers of higher pay from other employers outside the gold industry.

THE RECRUITING SYSTEM

Listen, they are off to their kraals as they are afraid they be signed on.

Chopi song about WNLA⁹

In 1901 the Chamber of Mines set up a recruiting organisation known as the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (or WNLA). The WNLA sent agents

to villages all over Southern Africa, as far north as Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi, along the east coast of Mozambique, and also to Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana. (In 1912, the Chamber of Mines also started the Native Recruiting Corporation. The NRC recruited blacks from within South Africa.)

Each WNLA agent would move into a little hut near the largest villages and send a 'native runner' to visit all the village men and try to get them to join the mines. Many of these runners had worked for touts before, so they were experienced in the ways of 'smooth talking'. (See the copy of a pamphlet handed out to Lesotho farmers in 1906 in the box on page 33.)

WNLA agents offered to pay the taxes of farmers to the government and also give them cash in advance. Then the farmers could work off the money they owed to WNLA by working in the mines.

WNLA also used the help of the chiefs to recruit workers. It was well known that WNLA spent some of their money on 'presents' for chiefs. The chiefs would then order the young men to join the mines. The queen of Swaziland, for example, was

A Dubious Doctor

A native Labour Commissioner reported this story in 1894 when he was visiting the reserves:

'The chief assured me that only a short time ago a gentleman put in an appearance styling himself "doctor", though having . . . no diploma whatever. He stated that he was authorised by the Government to vaccinate the tribe. As the bulk of the men had already been vaccinated, some (cheated) of the fee as many as three times, they declined, at the same time saying "We suppose you only want the shilling". They then proceeded to collect a number of shillings, which satisfied the visitor, and he left without vaccinating a single individual.'¹⁰

given thirty pounds a month as a regular 'present' for sending men to the WNLA agents.

So with the help of the government's taxes, the 'runners' and many of the chiefs, WNLA managed to set up a more efficient system of recruiting labour for the mines.

TRAVELLING TO THE MINES

When each WNLA office had collected enough men, they would all have to walk to the nearest station, which might be hundreds of miles away. WNLA officers would travel with the migrant workers, stopping at rest camps each night. Then trains would carry hundreds of workers to the WNLA centre in Germiston. The trains were often crowded and without proper toilets. Most of the journeys took a long time in those days. In 1905, for example, the train from the Mozambique border carried 2 000 men. The journey took 26 hours.

Workers from Tete, Malawi and Zambia walked to the nearest port from where they travelled by boat to Lourenco Marques (now Maputo). Others walked part of the way, passing round the borders of Zimbabwe, then travelling by train through Botswana. From Mafeking they walked to Krugersdorp, stopping at five rest camps on the way.

It was a long and tiring journey. When they reached Germiston, the mines' own doctors found that at least one out of every eight workers was in no condition to start working. But WNLA were satisfied: they had managed to get labourers to the mines. Policemen, white farmers and other employers could not stop them so easily because WNLA agents were with them.

RESULTS

The Chamber of Mines set up the recruiting system to try to stop the labour shortage on the mines and to control the wages of

The Role of the Chiefs in Recruiting



labourers. How far did the system succeed? The Chamber of Mines had good reason to be satisfied:

* The recruiting system did not stop the labour shortage completely, but it did manage to bring to the mines thousands of men from other countries. Recruited labour did a lot to lessen the mines' labour shortage.

* The Chamber of Mines also benefited another way from 'foreign' migrants. They came from so far away that they were prepared to stay on the mines for up to 12 months before they took the long journey back home again. This pleased the mine-owners because they saved on recruiting expenses if workers stayed on the mines for a long time.

* The recruiting system also stopped competition amongst the mines for labourers. Most of the mining companies joined WNLA and all agreed to pay the same low wage to their labourers. So the recruiting system kept the wages down.

On the other hand there was also criticism of the system.

* Other employers pointed out that the recruiting system prevented the workers from choosing where they wanted to work. WNLA sent the workers to the mines that needed them most. Usually it was the most

The chiefs had to play a double role in industrial times.

On the one hand, they were the traditional protector of their people. On the other hand, they were subjects of the state and could not afford to 'make trouble', otherwise they could be deposed. Many chiefs were also in the pay of WNLA as recruiting officers.

The chief's traditional influence over his people was very useful to the mines. For example, if a chief ordered a whole age group to go to the mines, it was very difficult for an individual to refuse.

On the other hand, some chiefs tried to protect the mine labourers. In 1930 one WNLA agent reported that: 'the Angoni chiefs (in Mozambique) say that they can readily send 35 000 men to work in the Transvaal only if: food is more plentifully supplied; "brothers" are not separated; they are under the supervision of someone they trust, who knows them, their language and their ways.'¹¹

unpopular mines, where the workers were badly treated, that needed workers most. Other employers resented the increasing control of the labour supply by the mine-owners.

* The wages of black South Africans were undercut by the influx of labourers from outside the country. Blacks complained that the system prevented mine-workers from bargaining for better wages. 'We say,' said a Transvaal Native Congress leader Mr S. Msimang, 'that the natives in the Union (of South Africa) are not in a position to ask for better pay, because the mines have an immense gang of cheaper labour elsewhere outside the Union.'¹²

The recruiting system, therefore, united the mine-owners and gave them more control over their workers. Black farmers were already weakened by the loss of their land and the heavy burden of taxation. The recruiting system of the Chamber of Mines made sure that many of these farmers went to the mines. They sent agents to the villages and lent farmers money to pay for their taxes and debts. Then they travelled with them all the way to the Rand to make quite sure that they would work for the mines, and not for other employers.