

Chapter Fourteen

The Chinese Workers

MIGRANT WORKERS FROM ACROSS THE WORLD

In May, 1904, the first 10 000 Chinese labourers arrived to work on the Witwatersrand gold mines. They continued to come for the next four years. By 1908 the Chamber of Mines had brought nearly 100 000 workers to the gold mines. Then they were sent back to China.

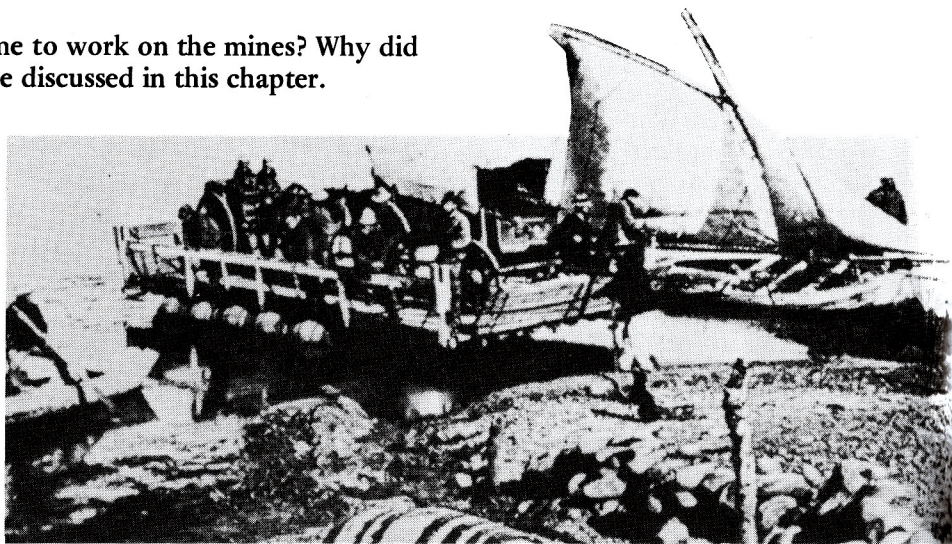
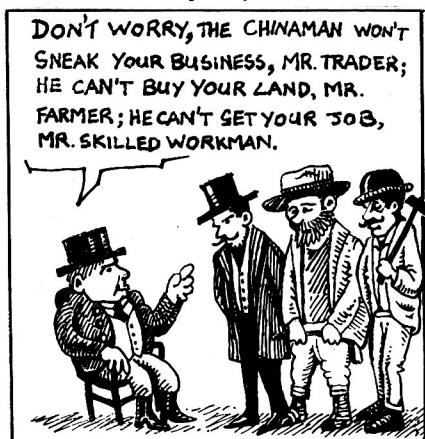
How and why did the Chinese come to work on the mines? Why did they not stay on? These questions are discussed in this chapter.

In their search for cheap labour, why did the mining companies look towards China?

At that time, there were thousands of unemployed in that country. During the 19th century, the great Chinese Empire had become weak and divided. The new industrial countries of Western Europe moved in and weakened the old empire even further. Europeans gradually took over control of the trade. China became poorer and poorer. Her riches were leaving the country in European ships and she was getting very little in return. To make things worse, there was a war between Russia and Japan over north China. Refugees streamed into the towns.

Millions were left without employment and became desperate – they would take any jobs they could get. The mine-owners in South Africa knew this and they knew that Britain had control over parts of China. So they

This copy of a 1907 British Tory Party election poster (below) defends the Chinese labour policy on the Rand.



British agents on a Chinese dhow, or boat, recruiting for the Rand gold mines.

began to organise a recruiting system to bring Chinese labourers to the gold mines. At last, they felt, they had found a solution to their problem – the shortage of cheap labour.

OPPOSITION TO CHINESE LABOUR

Many groups in Britain and South Africa were against the idea of bringing Chinese labour to the Witwatersrand. They opposed it for different reasons:

* The white miners were worried that the Chinese would take over their jobs at lower wages.

* The traders were worried that the Chinese would not spend their money in the stores, but send all of it back home to their families.

* Many whites did not want any more 'people of colour' to come into the country. White newspapers began to write about the

'Yellow Peril', warning that the Chinese would stay on, grow in numbers and 'take over the country'.

* Most of the Boers were angry too. The British had won the war and the British capitalists controlled the mines. Now they wanted to bring 'non-whites' into the country just because they needed their labour. The old Transvaal Republic, they reasoned, would never have allowed Chinese into their country. The coming of the Chinese was another rude reminder to the Boers that they had lost the war.

* The Liberal Party in Britain was also against the introduction of Chinese labour on the grounds that these workers would be badly treated and underpaid.

But the mining companies were strong enough to win the argument. They promised that everyone would benefit from Chinese labour. *'In agreeing to import the Chinaman here, we were really the best friends the*



A Chinese cartoon protests against the 'slave' labour and high death rate of indentured mine-workers on the Rand.

skilled artisans of this country ever had,' said the President of the Chamber of Mines to a meeting of white miners.¹

The mines would start producing more gold, they said, if the Chinese came. This would mean more jobs for whites, and more money. Traders would do well because people would have more money to spend. The mine-owners claimed that the whole Rand would prosper as a result of Chinese labour on the mines.

They promised to bring the Chinese to the Rand under strict conditions.

CONDITIONS OF CHINESE LABOUR ON THE MINES

The Transvaal government helped to ease the fears of the white miners by listing 44 jobs which were reserved for whites only. The Chinese were not allowed to do any skilled labour, buy land, trade, or pay rent for land.

The first Chinese arrived in 1904. They came under three to four-year contracts. Their con-

tracts stated that they would have to live in the mine compounds for as long as their contracts lasted. They also had to agree to work at special, low rates of pay for at least six months to pay back the costs of recruiting and transport all the way from China.

COMPOUNDS

How did the Chinese live during their stay on the gold mines?

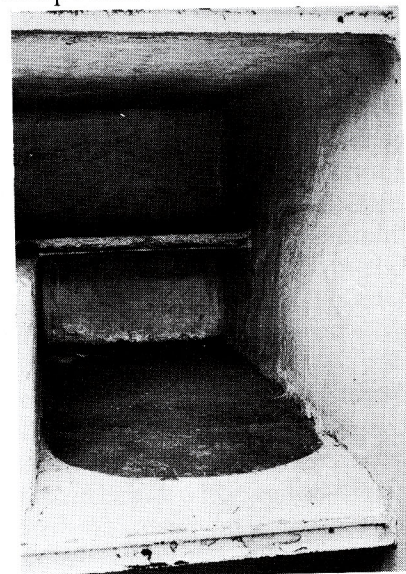
The British government made the mine-owners build special new compounds for them. These compounds were cleaner and less crowded than the old buildings where African workers lived. (In Chapter 11 we dealt with the compound system in more detail.)

But if the workers wanted to go further than the property of the mine, like African workers, they had to get a pass.

In the beginning, the compounds seemed to work well. Chinese cooks were specially employed to cook Chinese meals, and on the whole their food was better than the food given to

African workers.

Mine managers noted that more than 92 out of every 100 workers reported for work each day. (Before the war, only 70 out of every 100 African workers were reporting every day.) Within 12 months more than 50 000 Chinese were working on the gold mines, and they all lived in compounds.²



Compound bunks built for the Chinese workers were small and narrow. In later years, after they left, black miners had to squeeze into these tight spaces. Crown Mines Compound.



The Chinese compound police were very important to management. They could communicate with the workers – the managers could not speak Chinese – and kept control over them.

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The Chinese workers could not speak English, or any other language spoken in South Africa. Yet compound managers did not learn Chinese. They relied on the Chinese 'compound policemen' to control the teams of workers.

These compound policemen were usually hard men, mostly ex-soldiers. They often treated workers badly and tricked them into giving them money in return for favours. They were often drug-sellers and dealers in gambling, which gave them more power over the workers.

Underground, the problem of language was worse. The white miners could not explain the work properly to the labourers. Instead, they used to hit and kick the workers 'to make them understand.'

The Chinese understood one thing very well: they did not like being beaten. They began to hit back. Bad feeling grew underground and the white miners began to be frightened of the Chinese.

SPARE TIME

There was no family life in the compounds. The contracts of the Chinese workers were long and their families were thousands of miles away. They were far from home, lonely and in strange surroundings. They found little friendliness from any other group. They were kept separate from other skilled workers except for some sport and drill-

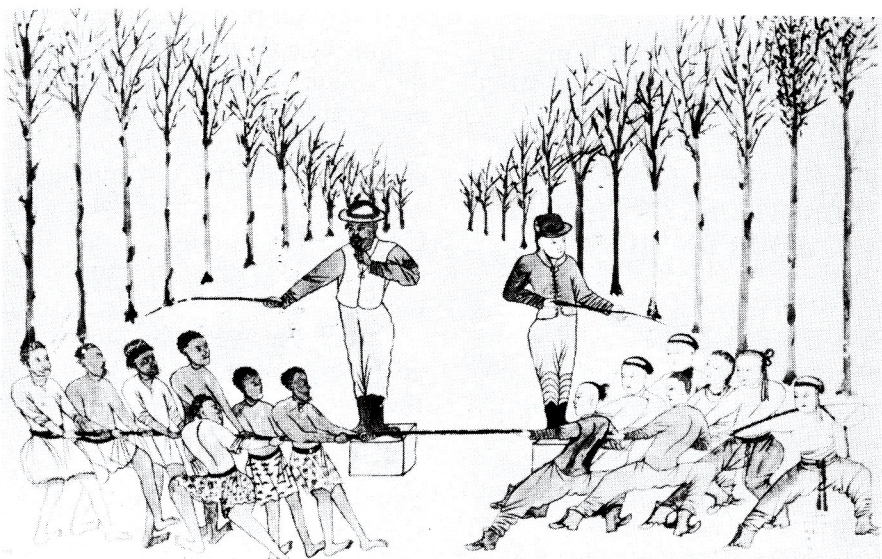
ing competitions against African workers.

The only women most of the Chinese workers ever saw were women of the streets. The compound hospitals had to treat most of the workers for syphilis, which they caught from prostitutes.

Gambling was another way to pass the time. It was popular because workers had a chance to increase their money. But of course, many of the men lost a lot of their money and had to stay on longer in the mines working to pay off their gambling debts.



Gambling between the dumps of a mine. In the enclosed world of the compound, recreation was limited.



A Chinese worker's sketch of a tug-of-war contest between black and Chinese miners.

The Chinese Workers' Resistance

DESERTION

During their first year on the Rand, more than half the Chinese workers left the mines and compounds. Some left for a few days. Others never returned.

Chinese workers deserted for the same reasons as African workers — because they were unhappy with their wages and with their working conditions. There seemed to be no other way that they could protest against working conditions. The government had banned all forms of protest by Chinese workers in 1905. Even peaceful meetings were not allowed.

However, deserting was a much more serious step for Chinese workers to take than it was for African workers. The Chinese had nowhere to go. Home was out of reach, thousands of miles across the sea. A Chinese worker had only two alternatives: either he could go back to the mines and accept the punishment for breaking his contract, or he could join a gang of other deserters and live in the veld, stealing chickens from farms or attacking white houses or stores for food.

These gangs led hard and desperate lives. Much of the time they were half starved. Sometimes they were driven to violence. In August 1905, A Bronkhorst farmer was murdered, and two months later a man was murdered near Boksburg. The white population on the Rand and some of the newspapers began to call for the Chinese to go.

But the Chinese were too useful to the mine-owners. They refused to stop employing Chinese mineworkers.

They pointed out that the Chinese did not commit more crimes than other population groups on the Rand. Nevertheless, the mine-owners promised that they would try harder to catch all deserters, and the government gave permission to



Numbered and finger-printed, Chinese labourers pose with compound policemen and supervisors.

all whites to arrest any Chinese they saw outside the Rand.

WORKER UNREST

It was obvious that many of the Chinese workers were not happy on the mines.

About six months after the Chinese arrived, unrest began. There was trouble in a number of mines. In one mine there was a riot and a white miner was killed. In another mine, 50 leaders were arrested for refusing to obey orders. By early 1905, the managers of 77 different mines had called in the police to make the workers go back to their work.

In most cases, the workers said they were dissatisfied with their wages. They claimed that the manager had cheated them of their wages.

Before the Chinese started to work on the mines, they agreed to a contract with the management. The contract stated that for the first six months the workers would be paid a shilling a day for every ten-hour shift. Wages were so low partly because the mine-owners had spent a lot of money to import them all the way from China. The Chinese had to accept this.

The contract said that after six months, if most of the workers were earning 50 shillings for every 30 shifts, (through overtime and extra drilling) the mines would raise everybody's wages to 50 shillings. But in many mines, this did not happen. Here is one story of how the Chinese protested against the way their employers broke the contract.

A STORY OF RESISTANCE: THE NORTH RANDFONTEIN STRIKE

There were about 1 300 Chinese workers in the North Randfontein Mine. When their wages did not go up after six months, the workers chose 53 leaders to speak to the manager about their contract. These leaders politely asked for a meeting with the mine manager.

They told the manager that all the workers were expecting to be paid one shilling and sixpence a day. They had been working at the mine for more than six months, and the contract stated that their wage should be increased. The manager explained that the contract said that *most* of the workers should be earning one shilling and sixpence a day

after six months. He said that *most* of the workers did not mean *all* of the workers. Nevertheless, the manager promised to talk to the government about the contract and let them know his decision later.

A week later, the manager called a meeting of all the headmen — or 'boss boys' as they were called. He offered them special bonuses if their teams worked well. This meant that the headmen would get more money, but the ordinary workers would not.

The Chinese headmen refused this offer because they did not want to be divided from the other workers. They resigned as headmen and asked to be employed as ordinary hammer men.

But the manager refused to allow the headmen to resign. He threatened them with arrest for breaking their contracts. The workers then decided to try a different method of protest — one that would not break the contract.

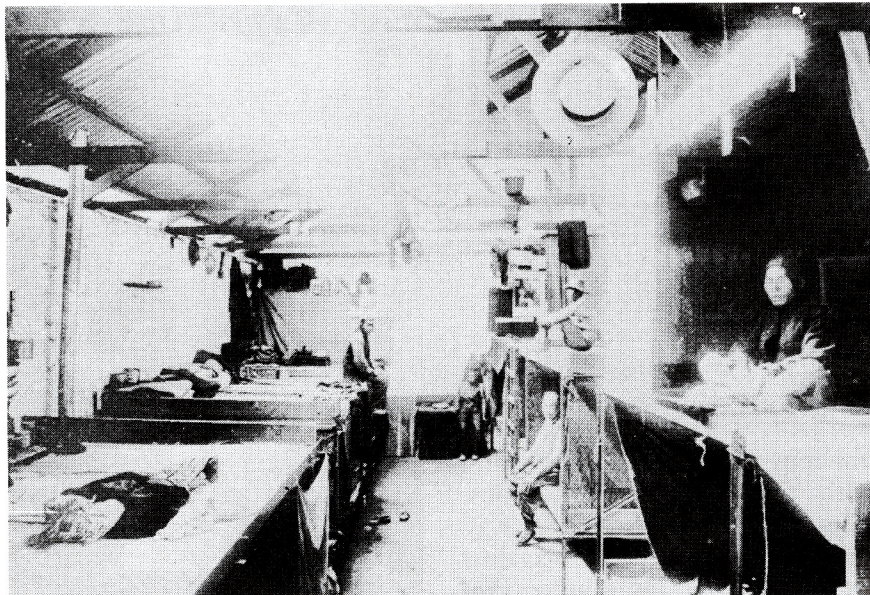
GO-SLOW STRIKE

According to the contract, hammer-men had to drill at least 12 inches of underground rock a day. Usually, hammer-men drilled 24 to 36 inches a day. (If they drilled more than 27 inches they would get a bonus.)

But on 29 March 1905, no Chinese hammer man at North Randfontein Mines drilled more than 13 inches of rock. They were not breaking their contract, but the mine had to stop working because there was so little ore to be crushed at the end of the shift.

This 'go slow' strike lasted for three days. Although the workers were not breaking the law, the manager called the police to arrest the leaders. The workers resisted the arrests. They sat on a mine dump, throwing bottles and sticks at the police when they tried to get up to them.

After two hours, the workers started moving towards Lancaster mine to get the workers there to join them. But the



An early photograph showing the interior of a Chinese compound.

police had called more troops from Krugersdorp, and arrested the 53 leaders on their way to Lancaster mine.

The leaders were taken to court. They had not broken their contracts so they could not be charged for doing so. But they were found guilty of 'public violence', and sentenced to nine months' hard labour in jail.

RESULTS OF THE PROTEST

The Chinese workers of North Randfontein Mine lost their leaders. But the protest was not a failure. The workers had shown the managers that they were united. They had been able to co-operate in the go-slow strike without breaking any rules. They had refused to be divided — no workers had accepted the higher wages which were offered to the few. They said they wanted a 'fair wage' for everybody.

The managers had been surprised at the way the Chinese workers were united and organised during the strike. They realised that the Chinese had the power to stop the mines, and they did not want it to happen again. They therefore offered the Chinese workers these wages:

* All surface workers were to get one shilling and sixpence a day.

* Hammer-men were offered piece work — they were to get

one shilling for every 24 inches of rock that they drilled, with a bonus for drilling more than 36 inches.

The hammer-men were satisfied with this offer. They were not afraid of hard work, but they felt strongly that they should be paid for their work.

The mine-owners and managers were also pleased. Production increased in the mines, because the hammer-men worked harder for piece rates. But the mines were not paying higher wages than before, because the slower drillers were now paid less. Piece work actually gave the managers greater control over the workers.

The North Randfontein Mine protest therefore had results for all the Chinese mine workers. Piece work for hammer-men spread to other mines on the Rand, at the same wage rates, and most of the Chinese workers became hammer-men.

Chinese mine-workers surprised their employers by showing remarkable solidarity in the North Randfontein strike.



THE CHINESE GO HOME

In 1907 the British government changed and the leader of the Liberal Party became the new Prime Minister of Britain. The Liberal Party had always been against the Chinese labour system for the Rand. Some Liberal Party supporters reported on the 'slave conditions' of the compounds, attacking the low wages the Chinese were paid and the large profits that the mine-owners were making.

After 1907, the new British government began to urge the Transvaal government to send the Chinese workers home.

Also, many whites in the Transvaal continued to oppose Chinese labour. White miners were afraid of the Chinese underground and afraid that they would take over their jobs. The public were afraid of the Chinese deserters who roamed the veld, even though there were very few of them. The Boers especially wanted them out of South Africa.

The Transvaal government wanted to please their white voters — after all, the voters could change the government in the next elections if they were not satisfied. So the government decided that the Chinese must go.

By this time, the mine-owners were prepared to send the Chinese workers home. The labour shortage was easing because more and more Africans were being brought to the mines by the WNLA recruiting system. What is more, African workers were getting lower wages than they had been getting five years earlier.

So the mine-owners started to send Chinese workers home when their contracts expired. By 1910, the last of them had left.

Altogether, about 80 000 Chinese workers came to work on the gold mines of the Rand. Three thousand men had died in accidents, suicides or from diseases. Of those who survived, only 20 men did not get home. Nobody knows how they disappeared. Some deserters may have died in caves, or in the veld. It is impossible to say.



At the end of the long contract, the Chinese workers go home. By the time they left, in 1910, the black boycott of the mines had been broken.

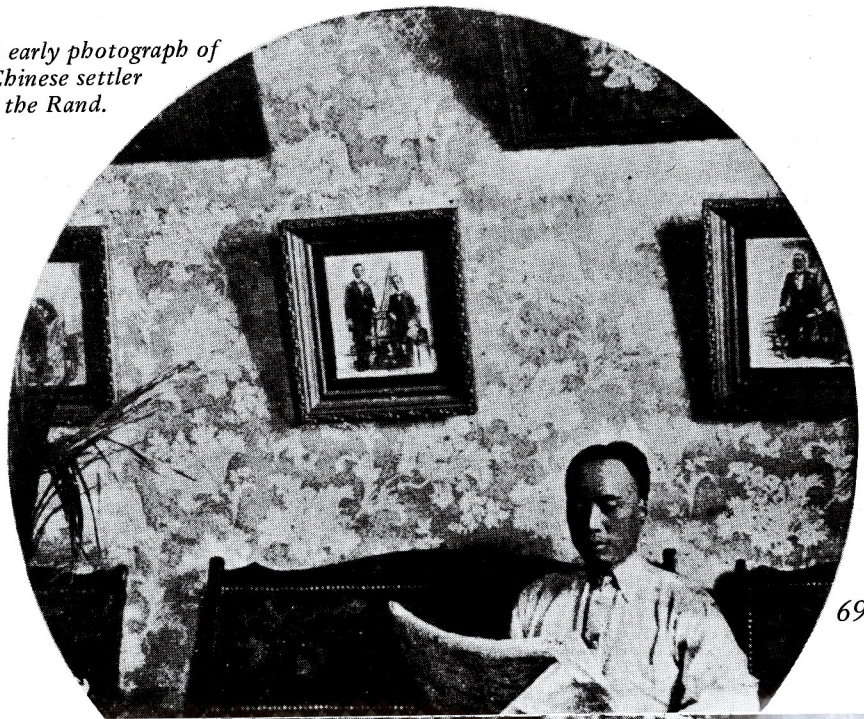
The South African Chinese Today

The Chinese migrant labourers came and went. They were not connected with the Chinese traders and fortune seekers who came to South Africa earlier and later, at their own expense. Chinese immigrants came mostly from the south of China, and they settled in the eastern Cape as well as in the Transvaal. As years went by, more and more South African Chinese became educated and middle-class.

They were a different class of people from the mine-workers of the Rand. Nevertheless, many whites had the same feelings about them too. They still thought of the Chinese as the 'Yellow Peril'. In fact, most whites did not like *any* non-Europeans to come to South Africa. They tried to stop any more Chinese from coming. In many ways, the government treated the Chinese like other blacks. They were not allowed to vote. They were not allowed to live with whites. But because their numbers were too small to bother the government, the Chinese were not separated completely from whites. The government allowed their children to go to private church schools for example, with white children; and as the years went by, some of the richer Chinese moved into white suburbs.

Today, the Chinese live in a sort of 'no-man's land'. In some ways the Chinese can live as whites — as long as they live quietly, without complaining too much. At the same time, they are treated as if they do not really belong to South Africa. They are neither 'black' nor 'white'.

An early photograph of a Chinese settler on the Rand.



WORKERS WITHOUT RIGHTS

'It is difficult to see how the Asiatic can ever become a menace . . . for he becomes merely a labourer without opportunity to exercise any personal preference, or being in any manner able to change his condition. The length of his stay is predetermined. His occupation is fixed. He has no rights except to return to his native land.'

— Editorial, S.A. Mines, January 1904.³

The longer the Chinese stayed, the more the mine-owners were able to bring down African wages. As more and more Chinese came to work on the mines, the mines were able to turn away Africans who came to look for work on the mines.

So the mine-owners were able to use the Chinese to break the shortage of cheap labour. When there was no longer a shortage, the mine-owners were able to pay lower wages to black, unskilled workers.

* *Job reservation for whites.*

White workers had been very worried that Chinese labourers might take over skilled jobs at lower wages. But the mine-owners promised that the Chinese would work as cheap labourers only. The Transvaal government helped by passing a law reserving 44 skilled jobs for whites only. This law, the *Transvaal Ordinance of 1904* was the first to reserve so many jobs for whites. After the Chinese left, the Ordinance stayed, to guard against black competition for skilled jobs. (Chapter 15 deals more fully with job reservation in the early years.) The coming of the Chinese labourers therefore established the South African system of job reservation on the mines.

Table showing average monthly wage for African and Chinese workers

	Chinese	Africans
1905 – 6	39s 9d	51s 11d
1906 – 7	41s 6d	52s 3d
1907 – 8	44s 3d	49s 1d

(The average wage of African workers declined over a period of three years.)⁴



Chinese workers 'lashing and tramping'. The exploitation of Chinese labour enabled mine-owners to weaken black resistance to lower wages.

The Chinese came and went. Yet their short stay as mineworkers on the Rand was very important. After they left, things were not the same again on the gold mines.

What was the importance of their stay on the gold mines?

* *Firstly, Chinese labour saved the mines from a shortage of cheap labour.*

The mine-owners got cheap labour from China when many African workers did not return to the mines after the Anglo-Boer War. The longer contracts of the Chinese saved money for the mine-owners — the longer the Chinese workers stayed, the better they got to know their jobs. Their work produced more gold more quickly. Within a year or two after the Chinese arrived, many mines were producing more gold than before and their profits grew rapidly.

* *The low wages of the Chinese brought down the wages of all unskilled miners.*

By the time the Chinese started to leave in 1907 – 1908, black wages were the lowest they had been since before the war. The table on this page shows how black wages went down as more and more Chinese came to work on the mines. It also shows how Chinese wages began to increase after they were given piece-work rates as hammermen.

White miners were anxious that Chinese workers would take over their jobs at lower wages. To appease them, the Transvaal government in 1904 reserved 44 skilled jobs for whites only. After the Chinese left, job reservation remained.

