THE GOLD OF MIGRANT LABOUR

RUTH FIRST

Editor of 'Fighting Talk' and Johannesburg Editor of 'New Age'
One of the 91 still standing trial for High Treason.

THE days when each country in Africa was an island are over, and few know this better than South Africa's vast and wealthy gold mining industry.

Migrant labour for the Union's mines—long the fly-wheel of Union 'Native policy'—is today being drawn not only from the Union, but from nine countries in Southern and Central Africa, reaching as far north as Tanganyika.

The Witwatersrand has become the capital of an economic empire which is influenced by events and policy not only in Cape Town, Pretoria and Windhoek, but also in Maseru and Lobatsi, Luanda and Lisbon, Salisbury, Blantyre and Lusaka.

Of a labour force of 432,234 African workers *recruited* in 1959 by the Chamber of Mines, only 182,561 came from the Union. 58 per cent. (a total of 249,673 men) came from territories over which the Union has no direct political control.

Of the Africans *employed* during 1959 only 35.2 per cent., or roughly one in three, came from the Union; and 64.8 per cent. of the African labour force came from other countries in Africa.

In 1958, 19 per cent., or *one man in five* working on the gold mines, came from Africa's tropical areas (Angola, Northern Bechuanaland, Nyasaland, Tanganyika); and it is of key significance that the proportion of miners drawn from the heart of Central Africa has risen sharply year by year.

In 1941, the first year that the annual reports of the Chamber of Mines list 'TROPICAL AREAS' as a separate source of labour, only 26,067 workers came from these areas. By 1959 the figure was near 70,000, and it probably rose another 10,000 in 1960. By agreement between the Chamber of Mines and the Nyasaland Government, from Nyasaland alone there was a target of 20,000 to be recruited for the mines last year.

The preoccupation of South African politicians with the white man's 'civilising mission' in Africa is thus really the need for a common 'Native policy' as far north as possible, and arises from the ever closer identity of interest in matters of labour supply and control between the Union, Portuguese colonies in Africa, and the Central African Federation. The future of Federation; an African majority in the Nyasaland Legislative Council; Nyerere leadership of a Tanganyika approaching self-rule: these are all matters of vital interest to the mining houses dominating Hollard Street and the lower ends of Commissioner and Main Streets in Johannesburg.

Ominous indeed to the mining empire are the giant strides towards independence and African self-rule being taken by East and Central African countries; and the powerful moves towards Pan-African unity and solidarity with the non-white people of South Africa. For the mines are about to see gains, earnestly striven for since the end of World War II, snatched from their grasp by events in Africa during the next handful of years.

Even before the Boer War at the turn of the century, the mines tried to extend their labour recruiting areas to West Africa, to India, Italy and Armenia, even to the West Indies, and the chronic labour shortage of this period resulted in the ill-fated scheme for the importation of Chinese labour.

Successive governments and commissions grappled with the ever-present shortage of cheap labour. A 1929 Inter-Departmental report said there was "insufficient native labour in the Union", and the 1931 Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (W.N.L.A.) report hoped that the government would "move in permitting native labour for the mines to be drawn from fields further afield than the present limit".

In 1951 the mines estimated they were short of 70,000 workers, and in 1953 were 15 per cent. below their labour capacity. The shortage began almost immediately after the Second World War, but was aggravated by the development of the new Free State mines, the fillip given to existing mines by uranium development and the expansion of secondary industry in the Union.

As recently as 1953 the Chairman of Anglo-American, the late Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, issued a warning for the future of the producing mines if the African labour shortage was not overcome.

Only during the middle 'fifties has the labour supply at last been found to be adequate. In 1955 the Colonial Secretary of Mauritius enquired whether W.N.L.A. was still interested in a supply of Native labour from the island. That official was advised that "as the Native labour position of the mines had changed, no further action was intended by the Association for the time being".

It was with the establishment—its headquarters in Salisbury—of the Tropical Areas Administration of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, the labour organisation of the Chamber of Mines, that the picture started to change.

Over the last 21 years the mines have been on an extensive, and, on the whole, unpublicised, venture into the interior of Southern and Central Africa. Africa has been opened up anew by 200 labour engagement stations. Top security labour treaties with other States have been concluded. International Labour Organisation Covenants on migratory and forced labour have been carefully studied and recruiting practices adapted to skirt round international labour control provisions.

By 1952 the General Manager of the W.N.L.A. Tropical Areas Administration could write that there was an ever-growing reservoir of African labour for the mines and that:

> "the total population of the countries north of latitude 22 degrees south, excluding territories north of Angola and Tanganyika, is now more than 20 million, *of whom about one-fifth are male adults physically fit for work.*"[1]

An inviting picture—for the labour recruiter—of the new Africa; but even in this article on the triumphant outcome of the scramble for labour in Africa, the note of panic sounds:

> "As the Natives become more conscious of the advantages of wage-earning there must be far more than enough surplus labour to supply the needs of the gold mines, provided—*and this is an essential provision* (my italics)—that no government or administrative restrictions are placed on the free choice by the Native of the employment he desires, in other words, provided he be allowed the elementary right of selling his labour in the best market available to him".

For, even as the labour appetite of the mines at last seems sated, three continent-wide pressures are starting to undo the years of careful negotiation and planning by the labour recruiting organisations of the Chamber of Mines. Colonial governments are giving place to African governments by no means willing to inherit the labour agreements concluded with other countries and agencies under the old order. African independence must at last get to grips with the problem of poverty and economic under-development; and, inevitably, the system of migrant labour must come under fire. Thirdly, the continent-wide

[1] W. Gemmill on "The Growing Reservoir of Native Labour for the Mines" in 'OPTIMA', publication of Anglo-American Corporation.

antagonism to South Africa's apartheid rule is speeding up the boycott movement against the Union, and already items on the boycott list in East and Central Africa will include not only canned goods and mining equipment, hoes, sherries and shark fins, but African labour.

Johannesburg's Hollard Street Stock Exchange could not have liked the sound of the 1st All-African Peoples Conference resolution which, in December 1958, called on the Rhodesias and Nyasaland to withhold their labour from the South African mines and to divert such labour to the development of their own countries, both as part of the economic boycott of South Africa and as an essential measure to put a stop to the disruption of family life in Central Africa. If the mines hoped that the resolution would remain pious, they must have reacted sharply to the Tanganyika government announcement in October 1960 that it would end the agreement signed in 1959 by the British colonial government and W.N.L.A., under which government facilities are used for the recruitment of African labour for the South African mines. The agreement ended this March, just when the Tanganyika labour quota was due to reach the record figure of 12,000.

For too long in South Africa, 'Native policy' has been based on the maxim that what is good for the gold mines must be good for South Africa. The Chamber of Mines will have a great deal more difficulty in trying to persuade the continent of the 1960's that what is good for the Union's thriving gold mines must be good for Africa as a whole.

The glossy publications that specialise in idyllic pictures of the mining industry boast that employment on the Witwatersrand gold mines is "one of the greatest civilising factors" in the whole field of African labour. The gold mines have established themselves as a magnet that attracts for employment Africans from Central Africa "because the system of migratory labour is particularly suitable for them". Here they learn the habits of regular work, of cleanliness, first aid and hygiene—to glean a few phrases from the Chamber of Mines glossies. Here "mining employment cushions the impact of Western industrial society upon the tribesmen brought into contact with the white man's way of life".[2]

The mines have always possessed the marvellous facility for

[2]GOLD—Chamber of Mines P.R.D. Services No. 66.

believing that their own self-interest coincides with the general good. For 74 years they have posed as South Africa's fairy godmothers. Men were to be recruited for the mines so that the 'civilising habit of labour' could be inculcated in them. (Profits were a factor too, of course, but not advertised as such in public.)

It has been said that the wealth of the Reef gold mines lies not in the richness of the strike but in the lost costs of production, kept down by the abundance of cheap labour. The Transvaal mines have been the world's richest source of gold (61.9 per cent. of the world's supply); but to make the mines pay, enormous quantities of ore have had to be processed. There have been few limits to the amount of gold mined from even low grade ore, as long as a continuous stream of cheap labour could be kept flowing. So, from the start, the mines have had to find not only abundant supplies of labour, but labour that was cheap. These two rather incompatible aims were achieved in two main ways. The first was to use only contracted migrant labour at cut-throat wages, on the assumption that African mineworkers—brought from their rural homes to the Reef for stipulated contract periods—were really peasants, able to subsidize mine wages from the land. The second was to achieve a labour recruiting monopoly and to reduce costs of wages, food and quarters by setting up a highly centralised system for controlling wages. These methods have been preserved intact to this day.

In 1889, only three years after the discovery of uniform banket deposits with cheap coal nearby, the Witwatersrand—later the Transvaal—Chamber of Mines was formed. By 1896 the Chamber had got the mines to conclude an agreement on minimum and maximum pay, hours and rations, and to secure labour recruiting privileges in Portuguese East Africa. A Native Labour Supply Association was early at work trying to recruit and propagandise the mines among the Chiefs. The labour supply rose from 14,000 in 1866 to 97,800 in 1899, workers coming from the Union, but large numbers also from Portuguese East Africa. Yet the demand for labour was never satisfied, due chiefly to the bad conditions, wage reductions (from 1890 to 1898), and recruiting abuses. The 1890's saw attempts to induce Transvaal Africans to work for wages—increased taxes, among them a special labour tax, laws against squatting, and persistent approaches by the Chamber of Mines to the Transvaal Volksraad for the tightening up of the pass laws.

The Boer War in 1899 brought a stop to most Reef mining, and 96,000 Africans on the mines dispersed to their homes. From 1901 mining slowly restarted; but labour returned very slowly, and by 1904 only some 70,000 men were back at work. The Transvaal Labour Commission estimated the labour shortage at over 300,000 and concluded that not only South Africa but even *Africa* did not contain enough labour!

Except for those from the Transvaal, Union Africans were comparative late-comers to the mines, and only after Union in 1910 was an African labour force on any appreciable scale recruited from the Cape, the Free State and Natal. Year by year, as land congestion in the Reserves got worse and soil deteriorated, Africans were forced to go into 'white' labour areas to make up the deficit between their needs and crop production.

Throughout the years of the greatest labour shortage the mines continued to take steps to get labour as quickly and cheaply as possible, but without altering their system. Vast dividends were being paid in those early years, in some cases at 100 per cent.; but though the W.N.L.A. came under fire from some quarters for its recruiting abuses, its labour monopoly, its wage policy and compound conditions, rather than put its own house in order and raise wages to attract a more established force, it started even then to cast its eyes beyond the Union's borders, convinced—like Rhodes—that its labour hinterland lay northwards.

Despite Lord Milner's efforts, the British government refused the W.N.L.A. permission to recruit in Kenya and Uganda. An experiment in 1903—to bring 1,000 Nyasas to the Reef after a drought—failed. Some Damara labour was brought in from German South West Africa. It was even suggested that American or West Indian labour be imported; but when it was pointed out that the former would demand better conditions and might even "play some political part in holding that the Blacks are the equal of the Whites"[3], this plan was hastily dropped. Feelers were thrown out to Madagascar, Somaliland and the Congo, but no labour was forthcoming. The years 1904 to 1910 were those of the Chinese experiment that misfired.

Only Portuguese East Africa saved these early years for the mines. The earliest W.N.L.A. records show that in January

[3]John Reeves: 'Chinese Labour in South Africa 1901-1910'—Thesis.

1903, 88.9 per cent. of the African miners were East Coasters. By 1922 the East Coasters had dropped to 40 per cent., and by 1958 to 26 per cent. of the labour force; but—though the percentage of East Coasters has dropped as the mines have found other steady sources of labour—year after year since the last century the Portuguese recruits have flowed underground to reap the gold of the Reef.

A close brotherhood between the Union and Mozambique governments has been sealed by generations of migrant labour, who have supplied the backbone of the mining industry. Early Chamber attempts to centralise recruiting of workers and obtain a labour monopoly were not as successful in the Union as over the border in Mozambique where—Professor Duffy records in his '*Portuguese Africa*'—"according to the report of the Rand Native Labour Association, the services of every Labour Agent in Portuguese territory whose opposition was of any moment was secured at a cost which did not materially affect the price of natives landed in these fields". From 1904 the mines drew anything from 60,000 to 115,000 Africans from Mozambique annually, with the peak being reached in 1928-9.

1928 was the year of the Mozambique Convention which followed on the pre- and post-Boer War labour arrangements and the 1909 Convention between the Transvaal Republican and Portuguese East Africa governments. The 1928 Convention has been revised and ratified in 1934, 1936, 1940 and 1952. It records the sordid deal between the two governments of the Union and Mozambique by which—in exchange for the sole right of the Chamber of Mines to recruit an annual contingent of contract workers—the South African government guarantees that 47.5 per cent. of seaborne import traffic to the Reef will go through Lourenço Marques harbour.

Part One of the Convention fixes the maximum number of Mozambique Africans to be recruited, and the guaranteed minimum. It lays down recruiting and working conditions, provides for the payment to the Portuguese government of registration, engagement and monthly fees for each recruit, and regularises the deferred pay system and the compulsory repatriation of recruits at the end of their contract periods.

Part Two of the Convention deals with railway traffic and rates, and Part Three with customs matters.

In 1940, in an extention of this barter of humans for port traffic, the South African government agreed to export 340,000 cases of citrus each year through Lourenço Marques, while the maximum number of recruits was raised from 90,000 to 100,000. The present maximum quota is still 100,000 recruits.

From Portuguese East Africa the mines get a contingent of labour that could not be bettered for regularity, that can be shunted to the worst and most unpopular mines, that remains on the mines for longer contract periods than any other group of workers. In return, Lourenço Marques has found a place on the map as an important port. Mozambique itself gets steady revenue from contract, passport and recruiting fees (44s. p.a. for each African recruited); operates tax collecting posts on the mines; and has benefitted from wages earned on the mines but spent as deferred pay in the territory.

The East Coaster signs on for a minimum work period of 12 months or 313 shifts. At the end of this contract, he may renew it for a further six months. After that he must be repatriated, but may sign on again as a recruit after six months have elapsed. On the average the East Coaster signs on for five to six contracts. After 10 or 12 years his working life as a miner is over.

The Chamber of Mines and the Union government deny with horror any suggestion that there is compulsion in labour recruiting for the mines. Workers are not recruits, but volunteers, they insist.

Marvin Harris[4] describes how, caught in the vice of the Mozambique labour code which permits no African to be 'idle', the African escapes to the mine recruiter in order to evade conscription as a *shibalo* or forced worker. When the hunt for *shibalos* is on in a particular district, the W.N.L.A. recruiting post is deluged by Africans anxious to sign on for the mines.

It is said that the days are now over when labour agents beat the bush for recruits, and chiefs were coerced or bribed to deliver a quota of young men to the mines. Lord Hailey, however, quoted by the 1953 International Labour Organisation Report on Forced Labour, says cautiously:

> "Though of course the Union cannot be held directly responsible for the fact, it is generally believed that recruitment in Portuguese areas has involved some element of compulsion, though its exact degree is not easy to determine."

The Portuguese Authorities net the fish, while the mines just take delivery.

[4]Marvin Harris: 'A First Hand report on Labour and Education in Mozambique', published by the American Committee on Africa.

Apart from the annual labour quota from southern Mozambique, more and more Africans from the north of the territory, or Portuguese Niassa, have been coming to work on the mines since the opening of the rich Free State gold fields. Mozambique between latitude 22° south and the Zambesi River is outside the recruiting sphere of the W.N.L.A., and officially the Portuguese Authorities do not encourage a labour exodus from this area. Yet it is estimated that 12,000 men make their way to the mines from Portuguese Niassa each year. If the W.N.L.A. has no offices in this territory, other recruiting organisations manifestly have. Or the recruit crosses over the border into Nyasaland and signs on at an engagement station there.

A Portuguese worker not signed on by the W.N.L.A. under the Mozambique Convention is a prohibited immigrant in the Union and liable to criminal prosecution and deportation. But once he travels south—whether he makes his own way, or his transport is arranged by a labour recruiting organisation—he will be issued with a Portuguese passport at the Ressano Garcia depot of the W.N.L.A., and will fall under the authority of the Portuguese Labour Curator stationed in the Union.

The Protectorates

Whatever their formal constitutional status—and in recent years Basutoland in particular has been striding towards independence—the three British Protectorates in Southern Africa, by virtue of their heavy labour exports each year, remain in large measure economic dependencies of the Union.

The 1953 Report on Basutoland, issued by the Commonwealth Relations Office, confesses that:

> "apart from employment in the government service, or at trading stores, printing works of the Paris Evangelical Mission and Roman Catholic Church, there is little work to be found in the territory. It is therefore necessary for the Basuto to leave the territory to work in the Union of South Africa".

It is estimated that about 43 per cent. of the adult male population is temporarily absent from Basutoland at any one time. This is labour not only on the gold mines, but recruited for work on coal, diamond and manganese mines and on farms. Recruited Basuto mine labour has jumped from the figure of 55,066 in 1957 to 65,249 in 1958 and 71,694 in 1959. (The Native Recruiting Corporation of the Chamber of Mines has head offices in Maseru and branch offices throughout the territory which have labour contracts attested by government officials. The Agent of the High Commission Territories who deals with Protectorate labour now has offices in the new Free State goldfields.)

In deferred pay and remittances, the labour agencies paid out £685,000 in Basutoland during 1958. In the same year the recruiting agencies paid £60,000 to the government for tax due by recruits and recoverable from them in instalments, as well as some £20,000 in attestation fees.

From Bechuanaland the Native Recruiting Corporation and the W.N.L.A. recruited 19,306 men to work on the mines in 1959. In 1948 the figure was only 9,821. On departure from Bechuanaland, the labourer is debited by the recruiting agency with a sum of £2 for Native Tax and £1 a year for Graded Tax. The total of £3 is paid to the government forthwith and recovered later in instalments from the labourer's earnings. In this way the government is assured of an annual tax revenue from mine labour of some £55,000.

Swaziland is the smallest but also the wealthiest of the three Protectorates. This country's peak figure for mine labour was 9,175 in 1959.

Like the recruits from Mozambique, Protectorate labour has been flowing steadily into the mines for most of this century. Together these three Protectorates, on which successive South African governments have cast such greedy eyes, provide one in five of the men who dig out South Africa's gold.

South West Africa

In 1943 the W.N.L.A. had discussions with the South West African authorities "for the engagement of surplus natives in S.W.A." Two years later an agreement had been signed for the recruitment of men, labour rest camps had been built at Runtu and Mohembo, and a new road cut from Grootfontein to the Bechuanaland border. By 1947 the annual S.W.A. recruiting quota had been fixed at 3,000, and no more recent figures are available. The W.N.L.A. does not publish separate figures for S.W.A. labour recruited (here following in the footsteps of the Union government, which has illegally annexed South West into the Union, treating it as a fifth province.) Today's figure is no doubt higher than the 1947 quota; while, in addition, Africans from the north are making their way through the Okavango Native Territory and are being recruited at Mohembo in Bechuanaland.

During the 1960 South African parliamentary session, the Minister of Mines was asked how many Africans from S.W.A. were employed on the gold mines. He blandly replied: "No organised recruiting is being undertaken in South West Africa, and the information is therefore not available". Even the reports of the W.N.L.A., scanty and secretive as they are, do not bear out this statement.

Tropical Africa

The careful statistics of the gold mining industry conceal as much as they tell. The W.N.L.A.'s 1959 territorial analysis of Africans employed on the mines shows that 19.76 per cent. were drawn from the tropical areas of Central Africa, and the figure probably reached the all-time record of 80,000 during 1960. Nowhere, however, do the W.N.L.A. reports stipulate which these tropical areas are. Even when asked, the Chamber of Mines was not prepared to supply a breakdown of the figures.

The number of Tropical Africans recruited is regulated by the W.N.L.A. and the governments concerned; but again the W.N.L.A. will not release details of the labour agreements or the quotas fixed for Nyasaland, Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Northern Bechuanaland. The agreements are confidential, a Chamber official told the writer, "because they involve foreign governments".

It does emerge, however, that it was after a 1938 conference with the Governors of Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland that the W.N.L.A. was given recruiting facilities in these territories. In that year the number of Tropical Africans brought to the gold mines was only 15,405.

Once the W.N.L.A. could promote its own recruiting bodies within these countries there was no limit to its scale of expansion.

1300 miles of special W.N.L.A. roads have been cut into Bechuanaland; motor barges ply the Zambesi and the rivers of Barotseland. The Eastern Caprivi strip—running from South West Africa to Northern Rhodesia and dividing Bechuanaland from Angola—is preserved as a game reserve, but the W.N.L.A. obtained permission from the Union government to cut a private W.N.L.A. road through the strip, on which no transport is allowed other than W.N.L.A. vehicles on W.N.L.A. permits.

In Nyasaland a network of labour recruiting stations and sub-stations has been established at Dowa, Mlangeni, Dedza,

Salima, Fort Manning and Mzimba. Extensive airlifting of recruits is now undertaken, and W.N.L.A. operates its own fleet of planes.

Nyasaland has for many years contributed substantially to the labour force of the Union and the Rhodesias, but the W.N.L.A. is the only Union agency permitted to recruit men for work in South Africa. Unless they are contract workers on the mines—or the farms to which 'illegal' immigrants are sent—Nyasas and, indeed, all non-Union Africans are prohibited entrants to the Union and if arrested are liable to imprisonment and deportation.

During 1957 W.N.L.A. was allowed a quota of 16,000 Nyasa recruits (more than double the quota of 3 years earlier); by 1959, it had recruited 19,985 men and had had the 1960 quota fixed at 20,000.

In Northern Rhodesia, Barotseland is the most fertile labour recruiting region for the mines. During 1958 the W.N.L.A. recruited 5,125 Africans from Northern Rhodesia.

Some labour also comes from Angola, but no figures are available.

Whereas the earliest Rand experiments with Tropical workers had to be discontinued because of the disastrously high mortality rate, W.N.L.A. was able by July 1953—a year of happy coincidence, for from this time the Free State developed rapidly and needed to suck in great quantities of labour—to reduce the acclimitisation period for Tropical new recruits from 26 days to 8.

An analysis of labour supply trends over several decades shows that from 1930 to the present day the Transvaal recruiting figures have remained remarkably constant in the 20,000 to 30,000 region; the Cape Reserves—at 133,359 men recruited in 1959—is back to the good years of 1936 and 1939, but not yet at the peak years of 1940 and 1941; the Mozambique quota, controlled by Convention, is the most constant of all; and the increased flow of labour needed since the opening of the Free State mines has come from the Protectorates and the Tropical Areas.

The opening up of Africa by the Chamber of Mines has not been without its problems. Evidence by the Gold Producers' Committee to the 1947 Native Laws Commission of Enquiry recorded the plaint of the Chamber of Mines that: "In the four most important areas—Angola, Tanganyika, Southern Rhodesia and Portuguese East Africa north of latitude 22° south—the W.N.L.A. is not permitted to open stations or do anything to encourage the Natives to come out for engagement''.

Somehow or another, between 1947 and 1957, the W.N.L.A. managed to circumvent these difficulties. Some labour, like that from Portuguese Niassa mentioned earlier, filters south to be signed on at recognised engagement stations. Angola is a closed book—unless one has access to the Chamber's working records.

Even in Tanganyika, where labour legislation is based on International Labour Organisation Conventions and Recommendations, and not only recruitment but even defined wages are illegal, the Chamber managed to conclude an agreement with the Tanganyika government for the opening of the Tukuya depot on April 1, 1959. The labour quota for this country was fixed at 11,000 for 1960 and raised to 12,000 for 1961, but the flow is to be abruptly cut off by Nyerere's Tanganyika African National Union, in response to the Accra Conference call to stop the supply of labour to South Africa.

Explaining the opening of the Tukuyu depot, the W.N.L.A. claimed that here "Africans offer themselves for work and are not recruited". In Tanganyika particularly, but also in general, the W.N.L.A. is these days making great play of this distinction between "*recruiting*" and "*engagement*". This is because the mines—and the South African government—are acutely aware of the international conventions on recruiting migrant labour. Though South Africa has for years flouted international labour standards with no discernible conscience, it is important to make a pretence of falling in line.

South Africa's labour record is in reality one of the worst in the world.

Of 111 International Labour Conventions passed since 1917 (and South Africa is one of the oldest members of the I.L.O.) South Africa has ratified only 11. These relate principally to night work and underground work by women, accident compensation and wage fixing machinery. South Africa has NOT ratified Convention 29 of 1930 on forced labour; its successor, Convention 50 of 1937; the Convention (No. 97) of 1949; and the Recommendations of 1949 and 1955 for the Protection of Migrant Workers.

Ironically, even South Africa's partner in labour crimes in Africa, Portugal, no longer finds it politic to fly in the face of the Labour Conventions. In 1959 Luanda, chief town of Angola, played host to a meeting of the I.L.O. Advisory Committee which was attended by nine African States, and Portugal chose this conference publicly to ratify the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention—though this formal recognition of its principles has made little difference to Angola's ugly labour practices. South Africa boycotted the conference altogether.

The Conventions and Recommendations on forced and migrant labour should be read together. The first attempt to stop forced labour was in 1930. South Africa can clearly not go on record against the use of forced and compulsory labour because—migrant labour apart—both the pass law system and the use of convict labour by railways, mines, farms and other private employers, are blatant contraventions of the Forced Labour Convention, and condemned as such by the 1953 I.L.O. Report on Forced Labour.

The definition of recruiting in Convention 50 of 1936 covers "all operations undertaken with the object of obtaining or supplying the labour of persons *who do not spontaneously offer their services* at the place of employment, or at a public emigration or employment office, or at an office conducted by the employers' organisation . . ." Article 10 specifically prohibits chiefs from acting as recruiting agents. Labour from Portuguese East Africa clearly flouts this provision as, in all probability, does labour from areas like South West Africa.

It must remain a fine point whether men "spontaneously offer" their services or are recruited in many areas traditionally reservoirs for mine labour.

Bush-beating by labour recruiters is the most compulsive form of recruiting; but what of the more negative pressures on Africans to stimulate recruiting?

The migrant worker unable to make a minimum living from the land is not a free agent in the sense that he can move into an industrial labour market and offer his labour to the highest bidder. He may not leave a Union Reserve until he gets a pass from the government authorities; and, with exceptions, he gets no pass unless he signs a contract to work on mine—or farm.

Other employment avenues are simply not open to him. Further, only by signing a contract with a labour recruiting agency will the African get a cash advance to pay his fare to the labour market. Incidentally, the mine pays the inward journey of the recruit only if he completes a minimum number of shifts underground.

Once the recruit has signed the contract, he is prosecuted as a deserter if he leaves the mine before completing the contract term. Criminal penalties for leaving work have their counterpart in no civilised labour code.

The Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organisation following the Second World War begin to get to grips with the peculiar labour problems of Africa. Convention 97 on "Migration for Employment" and Recommendation 100 for the protection of migrant workers in underdeveloped countries and territories compose a detailed 'magna carta' for migrant workers like those on whom South Africa's gold mining industry is based.

The general approach of the I.L.O. is that as far as possible the economic and social organisation of the population should not be endangered by demands for the withdrawal of adult male labour. This consideration must be borne in mind by governments before they approve any labour recruiting scheme. An expert investigation done some years ago in the Congo reported that a maximum of 10 per cent. of the adult males could be absent without detriment to village life and agriculture.

Investigations over the years in Basutoland, Bechuanaland and the Union tell of the havoc wrought by the migrant labour system. In some areas 50 per cent. of the men are absent at any one time. This throws the burden of agriculture on to the young, the women and the aged, and—apart from stultifying progress in the Reserves even further and making them even more dependent upon the migrant labour system for cash with which to pay taxes and supplement the grain harvest—has disastrous social effects, shattering homes and depriving children of adequate parental control, among much else.

Article 6 of the Migrant Labour Convention (97) lays down that migrants should receive treatment no less favourable than that given the country's own nationals, including the right to belong to trade unions, social security provisions, and overture arrangements. Recommendation 100 says firmly that "any discrimination against migrant workers should be eliminated".

Migrant labour should receive wages enabling workers to meet minimum requirements and take into account normal family needs. Minimum wage rates should be fixed by collective agreements freely negotiated between the trade union and employers' organisation.

Clause 37 lays down the principle of equal opportunity for all sections of the population, including migrant workers. Clause 41 states: "The right of association and freedom for all lawful trade union activities should be granted to migrant workers".

The employer should pay the journey of the migrant to his place of work and also the costs of his repatriation when his period of service has expired. The Chamber of Mines does not even do this. Every contract sheet has printed in it the repatriation fee of the worker, which is subtracted from his wages, together with other deductions. Clause 13 even says that migrant workers should be free to waive their right to repatriation, or to postpone their repatriation.

International standards and practice in South Africa are poles apart.

The I.L.O. clearly discourages the whole system of migrant labour, maintaining: "The governments of the countries of origin and destination of migrant workers should endeavour to bring about a progressive reduction of migrant movements."

South Africa took part in the discussions leading up to the drafting of the Recommendations on Migrant Labour, though she did not endorse these Recommendations any more than their earlier cousins. Her written comment on the migrant labour control proposals smoothly claims that she supports provisions for migrant workers, but that such protection can not be given by "measures designed for universal application". "The problems associated with migrant workers vary greatly, and their solution is essentially a matter to be determined between the governments concerned or, in the case of internal migration, in accordance with national laws." The Union government "considers it should be left to national authorities to determine the extent to which any recommendation can be applied to various categories of migrant workers".

Union policy, it was claimed, is against social uprooting: "The movement of workers within the Union is between country and town rather than between territories, and it is considered inadvisable to settle them and their families near their places of employment as they would suffer from the change to crowded urban living conditions. Mining industries are 'vanishing industries', albeit long term (sic!), and it is therefore undesirable to create a large working population entirely dependant on these industries.

"It is also advisable from the social and health point of view that Natives employed on mines should return to their rural homes at more or less regular intervals. Natives on the mines are almost unanimous in favour of maintaining the present system of migrant labour''.

The only time African miners have ever been able to say what they do or do not want was during the 'forties—in the days of the African Mineworkers' Union, which the Chamber of Mines stamped out after the epic African miners strike of 1946. The A.M.U. offered in 1941 to engage a group of architects to design township schemes on mining property if the mining companies would make available information on the space available. It wanted the total abolition of the compound system, and the establishment of townships on mining property as in Northern Rhodesia.

The clauses relating to trade union rights must have been particularly hard for the South African government to examine, let alone consider endorsing. She neatly hurdled over them by commenting: ''The (trade union) matters affect all workers and cannot appropriately be included in a measure dealing only with migrant workers''.

Governments and the Chamber of Mines have from time immemorial based wage policy on the assumption that the African mineworker is a peasant, able to subsidise his mine wages from the land. This is a fundamental assumption, but a faulty one. Land shortage in the Reserves and the shattering of the African subsistence economy have turned the peasant into a labourer, and wages from the mines are the sole support of increasing numbers of African families in the Reserves, where the majority live perpetually below the mealie-line.

The 1943 Lansdowne Commission into African mine wages examined the assumptions upon which the wage policy of the Chamber of Mines is based. One witness compared the African migrant miner with a white worker who had a private income in addition to his earnings. Would his wages, asked the witness, not be assessed by the rate for the job, without reference to his private income? The Chamber of Mines spokesman replied:

> ''this ignores the fact that the ability of the Native to earn a Reserve income is largely due to the fact that he is granted by the Union government land to cultivate, and pasturage, with practically free occupation of both. In effect he receives a substantial subsidy from the government which enables him to come out to work in the intermittent fashion which suits him.''

Two chief devices keep African mine wages low. The first is the recruiting monopoly of the W.N.L.A. and the Native Recruiting Corporation of the Chamber of Mines, which eliminates competition between mines in the purchase of labour and keeps wages and working conditions static. The Chamber lays down a maximum average daily wage for African miners which no mine may exceed. This system limits the number of men any mine may employ at a higher rate of pay, and so prevents any mine competing for labour with another. Even the most unpopular mine is ensured a regular labour supply under the centralised system of recruiting and wage control. Contracted migrant labour keeps the African worker in a permanently weak bargaining position. He has no option but to accept the terms of the prescribed contract form; and there is no way in which the African worker can use a period of labour shortage to ask for higher wages.

The second device is the recruiting of labour from outside the Union, and this tactic is used increasingly to keep Union wage standards depressed.

When South African labour for the mines is scarce, the policy of the W.N.L.A. is to cast about in other African countries for labour that can be bought at the current low wage rates. The Union shortage of labour at a particular wage rate might not exist at a higher wage rate, but the mines have taken good care not to test this.

The mines get the best of both worlds. When there is a shortage of labour in the Union, the mines do not raise wages to compete for labour with other fields of employment, but recruit further and further afield. When any shrinking of the economy in the Union forces more African workers into low paid jobs on the mines, less labour is drawn from the extra-Union pool.

More than this, the gold mines and their labour system have over the years set standards for prevailing wages in other industries. There is the notorious reply of the Victoria Falls Power Company to the African Gas and Power Workers' Union about to go on strike—no increased wages, since these would create disorganisation in the mining industry.[5]

The Lansdowne Commission noted that there had been a conscious effort by certain collieries to assimilate the rates of

[5]Johannesburg 'Star'—June 9, 1943.

pay and service conditions for African workers to those on the gold mines. If gold mine wages went up, the Commission found, this would have a deterrent effect on recruited labour for the coal mines, so that ultimately the minimum rates of pay would have to be increased.

Every poor farming season in the Union Reserves triggers off an accelerated flow of labour to the mines, because signing a mine contract is the only open door to the Reef labour market. The Chamber of Mines watches the tide of economic and industrial development closely, ready at any time there are signs of economic recession to place an embargo on the outside labour supply from certain territories, or to negotiate for a reduction of the labour quota for the mines from countries to the north.

During 1959 and 1960 the mines anticipated a growing "over-supply of labour" due to recession conditions in some industries and the fact that more and more Africans were leaving their lands for longer and more frequent periods of their working lives. Hard times in the Union are boom times for the mines' labour supplies and help to keep wage rates static.

There is no industry of the size and prosperity of this that has managed its cheap labour policy so successfully. Migrant labour is wasteful, inefficient and far less productive than stable labour; but as long as it is abundant, it can be kept dirt-cheap. The gold mining industry of South Africa has prospered as no other, thanks not only to the opening of the new Free State mines but also to uranium production; profits have reached new heights (a record figure for gold and uranium of £114,908,538 in 1959). African labour productivity has increased, yet African miners' wages, in terms of real wages, are lower than they were a half-century ago.

Chasing down figures of African mine wages is like pursuing dandelions through thick mist. The Chamber of Mines prefers to shelter behind generalities and averages, and treats detailed queries about wages with barely concealed suspicion. The figures of average wages paid are low enough, but they none-theless manage with great success to conceal the plight of the great majority of African miners working for the scandalously low starting basic wage.

Early records show that in 1890 the average pay of African miners was £3 3s. a month exclusive of keep.[6] From that year

[6]Hatch and Chalmers: 'The Gold Mines of the Rand', published in 1895.

onwards the various mining companies attempted to arrive at a concerted policy to reduce wages; and in 1897, in the first effective wage agreement drafted by the miners, African miners took a wage reduction, to a minimum of 1s. a day and a maximum of 2s. 6d. By 1900 the wage cuts resulted in an average monthly wage of £1 17s. In 1903, when the mines had to reassemble a labour force dispersed by the Boer War, they reverted to an earlier schedule—an average monthly wage of £2 7s. and a maximum of £3. By 1903 the average wage was £2 14s. a month.

The price of gold rose by 97 per cent. between 1931 and 1940. According to the Gold Producer's Committee of the Chamber of Mines, African wages increased by 8 per cent. during this period.

The most searching investigation into African wages and conditions was in 1943, when the government-appointed Lansdowne Commission sat to investigate the wages and other conditions of employment of Witwatersrand African miners.

Evidence submitted on wages showed that African pay rates had not risen over periods of 20 years. At the time of the Commission, the cash wage of the African miner was 2s. per underground shift (£2 19s. 6d. a month) and 1s. 9d. (£2 14s. 2d. a month) for the surface worker. The value of food and accommodation provided by the mines was reckoned to be £2 16s. 4d. a month.

The Commission recommended an increase of 5d. a shift to bring the underground minimum rate to 2s. 5d., and the surface rate to 2s. 2d. It recommended also a cost of living allowance for all African miners of 3d. per shift. These increases, small as they were, were not given in full. Underground workers got the additional 5d. recommended, but surface workers only an extra 4d., while the 3d. cost of living allowance recommendation was ignored. To help the mines meet the extra labour cost, the government for one year refunded the gold realisation charges of £2,054,000. Subsequently the price paid for gold by the S.A. Reserve Bank was raised to include the amount previously deducted as a 'realisation charge'. In effect the government remitted this particular form of taxation to assist the mines meet the increased cost of African labour.

After the Lansdowne Commission, the average pay for underground miners was £3 8s. a month (in addition, payments in kind amounted to £1 10s.). This should be compared with the figure of £3 3s. a month paid in 1890, before the mines combined to slash African wages.

Between 1943 and 1952 the minimum underground wage rate rose by 3d. a shift, and in 1953 by a further 4d. to 3s. Now, seven years later, 3s. remains the basic wage for the underground miner, and the surface worker earns 2s. 3d. a shift. While there has been an increase of 16 per cent. on the *average* wage of the African miner, made up by small bonus and long-service increases and some improvements in the wages of the minority of higher paid 'boss boys' and clerks, the basic wages have remained static.

When mine wages are criticised as being too low, the mines resort to the well-worn argument that the miner is really supplementing his agricultural income by his stints on the mines, and also trot out the figure of services given the miner in addition to his cash wage. In 1957, for example, it cost the mines 3s. 1d. per African labourer per shift to feed, house and keep him in health. This calculation turns out to be a most revealing one. In 1943 the mines estimated the cost of food and services as 1s. 1d., but the figure had risen to 3s. 1d. by 1957. This represents an increase of 185 per cent. over the 14 years 1943-57. Over the same period, however, African underground wages increased by only 24 per cent. The cost of buying essentials has soared for the mines, which buy in bulk, but not for the African miner!

Even more revealing is the Chamber of Mines method of calculating costs of services per African miner per shift. Figures produced for the Lansdowne Commission show that remuneration in kind was made up of costs of rations, quarters and medical treatment. The total cost of services was 13.4d. in 1943. Food per shift amounted to 5.28d., and hospital costs to 1.15d. The remaining amount of 6.97d. (more than half the costs) was made up by expenditure on the following items: salaries of compound staff; preparation of food, including wages; fees paid to the N.R.C. and W.N.L.A., the Chamber's labour recruiting organisations; passport and registration fees paid to governments; fees to local authorities for sanitation; assessment rates; maintenance of hospital and compound buildings; Miners' Phthisis Compensation and accident premiums; fuel, water and light; fire insurance; clothing and boots; entertainment, education and religion.

The most costly items are fees paid to the Union and Portuguese governments and the various governments of Tropical Africa, and recruiting fees paid the N.R.C. and W.N.L.A. The Chamber of Mines thus charges its labour recruiting costs against the figure of services in kind spent on the African miner. The Chamber's statistician admitted, when questioned by the Lansdowne Commission, that "while all these items represent costs to the mines of native labour, they are not all chargeable as benefits to the natives." There is no evidence that the Chamber has altered its methods of accounting for services in kind; and the figure has made a spectacular rise to an average of £3 a month for each African.

African miners get no overtime rates of pay for Sunday, holiday or night work; they receive no sick pay and, even while convalescing, can be put to work to earn their keep at surface work at surface rates of pay; and they have only two paid holidays a year (Christmas Day and Good Friday). To this day the mines are exempt from paying cost of living allowances to African miners.

The meagre cash wage paid the African miner is even lower than the figures produced on paper, for every migrant worker must pay not only the costs of his repatriation, but also has deducted from his pay the cost to the mine of equipping him with two blankets, a singlet and pair of trousers, and a protective tunic. The standard contract form of the W.N.L.A. for a Nyasa recruit, for instance, deducts a repatriation fee of £4 10s. and £2 5s. towards the cost of the protective tunic and other clothing. The repatriation fee covers the cost of the return journey and food provided on that journey to the recruiting depot nearest the recruit's home. If this is some distance from his village, he must pay further travelling costs himself.

Also deducted from the miner's earnings during the period of contract is the annual tax, which is collected by the mines through arrangement with the government concerned, as well as the initial outlay of £2 or £3 remitted to the recruit when he signed on at the engagement station. A Nyasa recruit on the mines for his first work contract will earn a maximum of £46 in twelve months, one tenth of which will be deducted as repatriation fee. After all costs have been deducted, the recruit will be left with something like £39 9s. 6d. for one year's work underground. A second term worker who receives a slightly higher basic wage will earn about £45 in a year of 312 work shifts.

The gold mines ignore the cold facts of exploitation which such figures lay bare and advertise only the "benefits" which the men of 55 tribes from seven countries get in deferred pay to miners and their families (carefully omitting any figures of wages and profits). The mines claim that they generate economic growth; that "the economic distress of the (Union) Reserves is in part relieved by the gold mining industry"; that "they stimulate and stabilise the economy of tribal territories." But then the mining industry always has been a past master at turning economic arguments on their head.

The truth is that migrant labour, the basis for the prosperity of the gold mining industry, has ruined the Reserves and African agriculture and has been responsible for the most blatant exploitation of the largest single labour force in South Africa. Migrant labour impedes agricultural development, keeps wages to rock-bottom levels, and is an excuse for not training a stable force of skilled labour. The evils that migrant labour has brought to the Union's Africans and her economy, it will bring to the African countries whose labour reserves are being milked dry by this system.

Even the mines have had to face that the increasing flow of labour from countries adjacent to South Africa and to her north will depend on the tempo of industrial development in those areas.

'*Tsopano*,' a monthly publication which supports the Nyasaland Malawi Congress Party, maintains that the recruitment of 20,000 Nyasas for the Rand gold mines each year is stripping the country of its most valuable asset—labour. "The reason why the W.N.L.A. is able so easily to fill the quota each year is that there are thousands of Nyasas who are unable to find jobs in their own country. Until Nyasaland has built its economy to the point where there is full employment for all, there will continue to be a section of the population prepared to suffer the indignity and hardship of working in South Africa. . . . The first task of the new Malawi government must be to set in movement economic planning. . . . Until that time measures will have to be taken by the government to protect the interests of those who work abroad. . . . This can best be done by organising a labour exchange and by bargaining with the employers abroad who wish to employ men from Nyasaland."

The prosperity of the gold mining industry has been based on the poverty of Africa and her people; but Africa is changing fast and can help to make the mines change their labour policy too. While two in every three African miners on the Witwatersrand come from countries other than the Union, and one in five from a Central and East Africa rapidly advancing towards independence, low wages, debased compound life, the suppression of all trade union activity, contraventions of international labour conventions—all these are the concern not only of South Africa, but of the peoples of half a dozen African countries, indeed, of all the continent.

In the next issue we shall publish, as a further contribution to a study of the much neglected subject of South African mining conditions, 'Death in the South African Mines' by Doctor H. J. Simons, an analysis of the reasons for the high accident rate in South African mining.