

MIGRANT LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION OF THE WORKERS

Most of Cape Town's workers who read this month's ABASEBENZI will probably just have returned from the Transkei or Ciskei, where they visited their families, their wives and children. This trip, to be with the worker's own family, is called a "holiday". How is it that for about only one month of the year a worker is considered human enough to live with his family? When he is on contract, working in the cities, he is no longer considered a man. The worker in the cities, away from his wife and family, is considered by employers to be just a factory worker, a ditch digger, a sweeper or a nightwatchman. To the employers, he is like a machine.

Machines do not need families. They do not go hungry or need place to sleep. But let us talk not of machines, but of people. In Cape Town, over 48 000 (85%) of the men live in single quarters. There are far more men than women. The migrant workers get the worst jobs and are paid poor wages that cannot keep pace with rising prices. Sometimes in one room there are 30 men, sometimes as many as 40 or 50. Sleeping quarters are cold in winter; often there is no hot water and inadequate electric lighting. There are very few facilities for recreation. For children in the townships there are not enough schools.

WHY ARE MACHINES BETTER OFF THAN PEOPLE?

Why are conditions like this? Why are machines better off than people? Why is it that the workers continue to be treated like this?

When a person is faced by problems like the workers face, it is often difficult to see how many other people face the same problems. It sometime seems as if the problems are the fault of each worker, because he is lazy or stupid or does not really wish to solve his problems. Yet, when so many people suffer in the same way, how can this be true? Surely the problems are caused by some outside cause that is not the fault of the workers?

While it is true that there is an outside cause, it is often difficult not to blame someone close to you - say, your foreman, or a Bantu Affairs Commissioner. The foreman may be the person who tells you to do the bad jobs or accuses you of being lazy. The Commissioner may be the person who endorses you out of the township. People like the foreman or a Bantu Affairs Commissioner do cause some of the immediate problems. But the foreman does not own the factory and the Commissioner did not make the pass laws. Usually we say that these people are part of a certain way of organising society.

In South Africa, and many parts of the world, this method of organisation is one that wishes to make money for a few people (the employers) out of the work of the many. The many are the working masses. The few who get rich wish to keep this method of organisation - so they find ways to keep on making their money and to ensure that the workers do not threaten their position. Some of these ways include keeping people uneducated and suppressing political organisations. Another of these ways is by using migrant labour.

MIGRANT WORKERS IN CAPE TOWN

If it seems hard to understand that migrant labour is one of the ways used by the employers, let us look at Cape Town. In Cape Town, there are nearly 56 000 legal migrant workers and probably at least the same number of illegal migrants. Thus, more than 2/3 of the workers who read ABASEBENZI are migrant workers. They get the worst jobs and the poorest pay. In South Africa, over half of the African workers are migrant workers. It is obvious that migrant labour has a lot to do with the poor conditions of the workers in Cape Town and elsewhere.

But let us not just make statements - let us examine how it is that migrant labour is one of the ways that keep the workers poor in order to make a few people rich. We shall see how migrant labour forces the workers to keep working in conditions they dislike - in this case, not by using guns, but by keeping the workers poor and disunited.

HOW WORKERS ARE EXPLOITED BY MEANS OF MIGRANT LABOUR

How is migrant labour used to keep the workers poor? Let us see why migrant labour enables the employers to use cheap labour, to pay poor wages to the workers.

Migrant labour began with white settlers gaining control over all South Africa by means of military conquest. The white settlers took land away from people like Cetewayo, Makana and Krelie. They took land away from the Africans for two reasons. First it provided land for farms for the white settlers. Secondly, the Africans would be forced to work for the settlers because they did not have enough land. So we see that Africans did not come to work on the farms (and, later on, in the mines and factories) because they wanted to. They came because they did not have enough land to feed themselves and their families. And just to make sure that the Africans did not somehow survive with their little bit of land, the settlers imposed taxes. These had to be paid in cash. The only way to get cash was to work for money for the employers. Thus, the Africans were forced to work because of land shortages and taxation. Some of the money they earned even went back to the bosses in the form of these taxes!

But do you think the employers were prepared to pay the workers the true value of the work they were doing? Not at all. They wanted the workers only to create profits for themselves. Therefore, they found ways to pay their workers poor wages, and excuses to justify this. They said the migrant labourer's family had a farm in the reserve to produce food so that the migrant did not need money to support his family. (But we know they they had already taken away much land!) They said that the migrant labourer's real home was in the reserve, that employers did not therefore have to give the workers decent housing in the city. Instead, the bosses put the workers in cheap compounds. They said that the worker's "home" was in the reserves, so he could not have his family with him. The employers did not have to provide pensions, or recreation facilities or anything that cost money. They just said that all these things should be provided by the migrant labourer's "home" in the reserve! But who could afford to pay for these things in the poor reserves, made poor by the very people who expected the reserves to support the migrant labourer's family?

The workers knew that their "home" was where they spent their lives working. They wanted better wages and the right to live permanently in the cities with their families. Surely the workers would not accept this unjust situation? Well, they did not. There is a long history of workers' struggle in South Africa. Nevertheless, the employers use migrant labour in another way - to keep the workers weak and disorganised. In this way they try to prevent the workers waging an effective struggle. Let us see how migrant labour makes it more difficult for workers to organise to oppose the employers.

HOW EMPLOYERS TRY TO USE MIGRANT LABOUR TO KEEP THE WORKERS WEAK AND DISORGANISED

The compounds and the townships make it much easier to control workers. Police can easily surround them, and prevent workers "causing trouble." It is difficult for "outsiders" to come into the compounds and townships to talk with the workers about their problems. This makes it hard to organise unions. If the employers think the workers are complaining too much, they can just send the leaders back to the reserves. This gets rid of some of the most advanced workers. It also makes some other workers afraid to speak out, because there are few jobs

in the reserves.

Also, the workers are employed on a contract basis. Just when they are starting to get organisations going, their contracts expire and they have to return "on holiday" to the reserves. When they return to the cities, they sometimes work in different factories. New people are there, who may not know of the workers struggle. So the workers have to start organising all over again. In other cases the contracts of migrant workers are simply not renewed, and the worker finds it very difficult to obtain a new contract.

Another problem is disunity. Some workers manage to get rights to stay in the cities. Unfortunately these workers sometimes look down on the migrants, for various reasons. They refuse to understand how migrants are victims of the society that even harms them! They do not realise that disunity harms all the workers, migrant and non-migrant. How is organisation possible with some workers despising other workers, when their real opponent is the employers who do not treat them justly?

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So that is how the employers (the minority) use migrant labour to keep the workers (the majority) poor. Workers are forced to come to the cities as their land has been taken away and taxes imposed. The employers use migrant labour as an excuse to pretend the workers' real home is in the tiny reserves. This gives an excuse to keep the workers' families out of the cities. The employers say the low wages are because the workers do not really live in the cities. They say the families get food from farms in the reserves. And migrant labour is also used to prevent the workers taking action to change society's organisation. Migrant labour makes it difficult for the workers to organise and creates disunity among the workers. All this benefits employers, who make big profits.

WORKERS MUST BE TREATED LIKE HUMAN BEINGS

We have seen how migrant labour is used in this country. We know that in many other countries - in Africa, even in Europe - employers use migrant labour. In these countries, too, migrants get the worst jobs and the poorest pay. Migrant workers there, too, are learning about society. There too, the workers are finding ways to better their position.

The workers have realised, first, how the employers benefit from this method of organisation. The employers do not wish to change it: in South Africa the head of the Chamber of Mines (the organisation of the mine employers) said that he did not see an end to the use of migrant labour, even in the next ten years. "How else do you run the industries that require migrant labour?" he asked.

It is all very well for the employers to ask questions like that. They do not suffer by being migrant labourers. They do not have to worry about not being treated like men. It is the workers who are treated like machines. It is also the workers who must demand that they are recognised as people.

The workers want the right to live in the places where they work. The reserves are too small and too poor to support them - the employers must stop pretending otherwise. The workers want their families to live with them. But not in the townships as they are now - your children cannot live with you if there are not schools for them. There must be facilities for recreation. The workers need decent housing for themselves and their families. The workers create wealth for the employer by the work. Is it not their right to demand a fair return for their work? The workers must be treated like people.

We have seen that migrant labour is used by the employers to treat the workers like machines. But with one voice the workers, both migrant and non-migrant, must demand that this end;