

REVIEW OF :

A.H. Jeeves (1985) - *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: the struggle for the gold mines' labour supply* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press)

Rob Turrell

In the early twentieth century many African mineworkers on the Rand decided to work at another mine after their initial contract had expired. It was a common enough decision, but one fraught with unpleasant and picaresque consequences. The Mozambicans 'Fokkies' and 'Forage', whose decision to switch mines we know about because they made a statement to the Union Government Native Labour Bureau, left their first mine in mid-1915 and set off for the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) compound. They had to go through central Johannesburg where they were stopped by a black man who claimed to be a detective and who demanded their passes. An 'irregularity' was discovered, and (this was their first trip to the gold mines) they were taken to the office of a man who was said to be the Portuguese 'curator' of labour. In fact, the detective turned out to be a 'runner' and the office that of one A Kantor, an agent of a large independent labour recruiter called James Hadley. Kantor was only able to sort out their 'irregularity' if they signed on for six months at the Simer Deep or Knight's Central. Bewildered they said they wanted to go elsewhere, but Kantor sent them to Simer Deep anyway in the charge of a labour tout on the organisation's payroll.

Once back in the street they were fair game to all the contractors' and government's men. As luck would have it they were spotted by a WNLA 'police boy', who knew Hadley's touts. Under the 1911 Native Labour Regulation Act recruiting on the Rand had been banned, and the 'police boy' gave chase and took 'Fokkies' and 'Forage' into his custody. They were delivered to the WNLA compound which was where they had wanted to go when they had first set out. Hadley's agent, A Kantor, already well known to officials, was prosecuted for interfering in the labour market, but his successful defense was that he had been misled into believing, through an interpreting error, that he was dealing with voluntary applicants for work.

Alan Jeeves tells us this story because it was typical of a period of severe competition for African labour. Despite the existence of official labour agencies, both private and governmental, competitive recruiting with its internecine warfare of raiding and counter-raiding of African mine-

workers remained endemic on the Rand between 1890 and 1920. In fact, and this is Jeeves' main argument, the recruiting monopsony was not, as he believes both liberal and radical historians have argued, easily achieved as the result of the hegemonic position of the Randlords. The thirty years or so it took to centralize control of recruiting demonstrated not the strength but the weakness of capital before 1920. Mining capitalists might have been the dominant economic force in the Transvaal but they 'could not even drive from their own backyard the illicit recruiters and labour touts who routinely plundered the mines of their labour supply' (p 13).

Yet, at the same time Jeeves also argues that before 1912 competition for black labour was functional to the expansion of the mining industry, because the higher costs of recruitment entailed the numerous inducements to Africans to come to the mines (such as the cattle advance system in the Cape) created recruitment pools in the countryside. Moreover, monopoly capitalists did not get rid of competition in the labour market, both because they were unable to and because the independent labour recruiters were actually successful in delivering workers to the mines.

If this seems contradictory, it is only because of the way in which Jeeves sets up his argument in opposition to radical historians and social scientists like Johnstone, Davies and Levy. He asks the question: 'If the mining groups were as powerful as most historians think they were, if they had *de facto* control of the state as the radicals argue, if their economic welfare and even survival required monopoly controls as they have suggested, why did the industry require so long to secure its interests?' (p 253) I think Jeeves imagines that monopoly capitalism means the abolition of competition over capital, labour and professional services, rather than simply the raising of competition within and between groups to a different level. I would be surprised if radicals had anything to quibble with in the details of competition over labour in the first thirty years of gold mining although they might disagree with Jeeves over their theoretical significance. His achievement lies precisely in bringing alive a period of labour competition between mining houses and independent contractors, recruiters and touts that everybody else has ignored in honing in on the fact that wages were progressively reduced - a point which Jeeves marginalises from the thrust of his main argument - before a monopsony was eventually created.

Jeeves shows that there were four periods in which the Chamber of Mines attempted to create a recruiting monopsony before 1919: in 1890-93; 1896-97; 1900-1919. The first period, which ended with the establishment of a Native Labour Department by the Chamber of Mines, was a failure for the simple reason that central control was coupled with wage reductions. Where

wages were reduced, Africans deserted to other companies which paid more; expensive labour was preferable for some mines to no labour at all. In 1897 the Rand Native Labour Association was formed but wage reductions again led to a dwindling supply of labour. Labour touts flourished as did a network of labour recruiters. Where mines had to keep up output, managers thought little of stealing labour from neighbouring companies. In 1900 the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association was formed but, like earlier attempts, was unsuccessful in delivering labour and reducing wages. Over the following decade independent recruiters reached the height of their power; by 1906-08 large labour contracting firms had emerged with specialist networks in particular regions of South Africa. In fact, they were instrumental in driving WNLA from the South African colonies, although WNLA remained the dominant force in Mozambique. Once the Chinese mine-workers had been repatriated in 1907, all of the mining groups established their own labour departments or accepted contracts from one of the independent recruiters.

These independents were largely responsible for the rapid increase in the supply of labour from the Cape. It was a seller's market for labour and both Africans and recruiters benefited at the expense of the mining capitalists. However, by 1912 when the Native Recruiting Corporation was formed, the balance of power had shifted back to the capitalists. The major reason for this, argues Jeeves, was that the number of voluntary workers, who made their way to the mines without the mediation of recruitment, increased dramatically in the second decade of the century. Volunteers were usually experienced mineworkers who knew the ropes on the Rand and had the freedom to work in the mine of their choice; they were also not locked into the recruited African's lot of a six or nine month contract. Moreover, further centralization of ownership in the so-called super mines reduced competition over labour. By 1919 the Chamber of Mines had managed to establish an effective recruiting monopsony.

Prior to hostilities, mine contractors, rather than companies, recruited, compounded, fed and paid the wages of the men they employed in the mines. Apparently few contractors made a living exclusively from recruiting labour, but this changed in the early 1890s as many perceived they could do better out of supplying labour, particularly after the decision to repatriate Chinese workers.

Even if the extent of competitive labour recruiting has been underestimated by historians, it would have come as little surprise to those Randlords who had experience of mining in Kimberley. They had seen it all before. While the scale of the problem and the political conditions were certainly different in the two mining areas, the curtain-raiser in Kimber-

ley contained all the elements of the main act on the Rand. The history of labour contracting in Kimberley has still to be written, but Jeeves would have found it instructive to check what we do know of forms of contracting and phases of labour competition. There, touts and labour contractors supplied, farmed or shared labourers for much of the first twenty years of mining. Companies thought nothing of stealing labour from their neighbours and pass laws, labour depots, and open compounds did little to secure labour on terms preferred by mining capitalists. It was only with the concentration of capital, the growth of volunteers, known as 'old hands' in Kimberley, and the introduction of closed compounds in the second decade of diamond mining that the balance of power swung into the hands of the mineowners.

However, even with a production monopoly rather than a recruiting monopoly from the early 1890s, and the majority of Africans compounded by one company, De Beers, capital was not all powerful. Recruiters from Johannesburg scoured the streets and besieged the compounds to lure away labour; managers periodically fired contracting firms, which loaded trucks or drilled the rock in the stopes, when they paid below the standard wage agreed by the company. Still, the company relied on a pool of experienced mineworkers for the majority of its labour, always employing contractors to recruit a small number, and the wages of workers progressively declined between 1890 and 1914.

Labour competition by itself does not indicate the weakness of capital in general and although the value of Jeeves' work lies precisely in the spotlight he shines on labour recruitment, I do not think this is enough to prove his broader argument. Few people disputed the influence of De Beers in Kimberley and in the Cape at large, though they may have protested, on occasion with 'engines of destruction', against its pervasiveness. Besides I suspect that he exaggerates the importance of independent labour contractors, who at the height of their power in 1911-1912 only supplied 20 per cent of the mines' South African labour supply.

Jeeves has compromised over the relationship between the colour bar on the mines and the migrant labour system. He claims that both liberals and radicals have approached the origins of the colour bar in a reductionist and one-dimensional way; the liberals blame white workers and allied politicians and radicals blame the pursuit of profit by mining capitalists. Jeeves believes he has the answer by taking the middle passage: both labour and capital contributed to the colour bar. And why? Because before 1920 the colour bar and the migrant labour system had not been 'perfected'; a monopsony had not been created; and some mine and compound managers preferred to stabilize the African work force rather than to persevere

with a cheaper migrant labour system. Thus, 'the colour bar and the migrant labour system evolved together' (p 31).

This is classic fudge. What does 'evolved together' mean? For one thing the migrant labour system started half a century before the introduction of a statutory colour bar in any of the South African colonies or Republics. The origins of the statutory colour bar go back to the rules and regulations relating to blasting, promulgated in 1885 in Kimberley, and not simply to Kruger's measures in the 1890s as Jeeves claims; once again the legal and social practices of gold mining were not constructed in a vacuum. Then, in Kimberley 'wage colour bars' were inherited from the pre-industrial colonial economy, and even where new trades developed associated with mining machinery, the customary order was entrenched, although not without a struggle, in the new racial division of labour. The struggle over migrant versus stabilized labour, and white versus black manual and semi-skilled labour, was fought in Kimberley and, of course, it was re-fought on a different terrain and with different actors in Johannesburg. But the issue of migrancy on the Diamond Fields was settled in the late 1880s with the concentration of capital, the growth of 'old hands' and the introduction of the closed compound system; in fact, the closed compound with its reinforcement of the dignity and authority of white labour through their exclusion from compounds was the effective form in which the mine-owners came to terms with migrant labour.

So, the argument of Rob Davies for the Rand that, in Jeeves' words, 'the entrenchment of migrancy on the mines by the capitalist forced the white trade unionists to espouse the colour bar as their only defense against cheap black labour' (p 31) is spot on for Kimberley. In contrast, Jeeves wants us to believe that the pattern of race relations on the gold mines was in flux until a monopsony was created. But migrancy certainly was not. It was the terms and conditions of exploitation in the labour process which were in flux - it is the wonder of class struggle that they always are - and as that was disputed, notably in 1907 and in 1922, so it became a battle over the racial division of labour.

Finally, the balance Jeeves has struck between migrancy as a form of proletarianization and the inducements offered by recruiters to Africans to go to the mines is a poor one. He states categorically that specific policies, such as the wage advance system and higher recruiting fees, by themselves explain the making of the Transkei labour pool. 'If, as Colin Bundy and others have argued,' writes Jeeves, 'most Africans in the eastern Cape had been totally impoverished and without alternative means of livelihood than migrancy, none of these incentives would have been necessary' (p 258). There is little doubt that the cattle advance system enabled many

Africans from the eastern Cape to migrate to the Rand - and different inducements pertained in other recruiting areas - but Jeeves needs to be far more sensitive to the dynamics of African societies. Much of the thrust of Beinart, Harries and Delius' recent work has placed the analysis of migrant labour firmly on the structural complexities of African societies rather than in the demands of mineowners. Despite Jeeves' recognition of the involvement of chiefs and headmen in recruiting, his emphasis on the importance of specific recruitment policies, without an attempt to understand the different forms of African incorporation into wage labour, flaws what must rank as one of the most illuminating studies in South African mining history.

Jeeves' prose is of the highest quality and his vivid and evocative history brings forth the history of state support for mine recruitment and its limits as well as the recreation of the working environment miners of the time entered. He provokes further consideration of the relation between labour recruitment and labour conditions in South Africa.

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