



A.H. JEEVES. *Migrant labour in South Africa's mining economy: the struggle for the gold mine's labour supply, 1890-1920*. Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg, 1985. 323 pp. R20,00 (exclusive). ISBN 0 8549 484 73.

This book, which examines the origins and development of the migrant labour system on the gold mines, convincingly questions the stress on monopoly of power in the gold mining industry which has hitherto pervaded the historiography of mine labour, whatever the ideological perspective of the historian. While it is true that a highly centralized recruiting system did emerge under Chamber of Mines control, historians before Jeeves have either failed to explain, or even to recognize the persistence of competition and disunity in the first three decades of the gold mining industry. The time taken to secure the interests of the industry suggests that the view of mining groups as being all-powerful, needs considerable modification.

Before 1912 the Chamber of Mines made several attempts at setting up a monopoly to expand the mine labour force as much as possible, while at the same time keeping wages down. In this way the Chamber hoped to exploit the huge reserves of low-grade ore to the maximum extent. The success of these attempts depended crucially on state restriction of access to land by Africans, and by imposing taxes to force them to work for cash wages. The Chamber simultaneously sought to centralize recruiting under the control of industry, which should reduce labour costs by stabilizing wages at a low level and ending wasteful competition among the mines.

As early as 1893 these policies were in place, but successive attempts failed at setting up a monopoly (1880-1893, 1896-1897 and 1900-1906), because the Chamber seriously underestimated the difficulties of implementation. The Chamber had an exaggerated view of the capacity of the state to deliver labour through taxes and coercive legislation, and also underestimated the ability of black cultivators to retain a significant degree of independence. Each failure saw the rampant revival of independent recruiting, and even attempts by some companies to experiment on company property with alternative systems such as stabilized labour and the acquisition of 'labour farms', which would reduce dependence on uncertain migrant labour in a highly competitive context.

Only through vigorous, competitive recruiting after 1906 were the mines able to increase labour supplies dramatically to compensate for the loss of indentured Chinese labour, to maintain production levels and pursue development policies. Between 1908 and 1912, the bid for labour monopsony was shelved. In a sellers' market for labour workers were not merely victims, but were also able to extract considerable benefits in the form of cash advances from the industry. Private recruiters waxed rich, but their success contained the seeds of defeat.

By 1912, voluntary labour was expanding as workers, with greater familiarity of mine work, made their own way to the Reef without the intervention of recruiters. For many, the flexibility of short-term contracts associated with voluntary labour, in contrast with the longer-term contracts of recruited labour, outweighed the attraction of cash advances and other inducements offered by recruiters.

The greater availability of voluntary labour reduced the dependence of the mines on private recruiters and contractors, and by 1910 enabled the state to achieve a statutory limit on wage advances, which recruiters had long resisted because these advances were an essential element in their success.

In 1912 the Chamber initiated a fourth bid for monopsony based on the Native Recruiting Corporation. Monopsony was finally achieved by 1918, thanks to changing conditions in the countryside and on the mines, which favoured the mining industry, notwithstanding a vigorous rearguard action by independent recruiters, recorded in fascinating detail by Jeeves.

The contending forces which ultimately created the migrant labour system were also responsible for the creation of the colour bar attendant to it. Thus the origins and development of the colour bar were complex and cannot be explained simply in terms of the racial prejudice of white labour unions, or the pursuit of profit by mining capital.

This meticulously researched and fascinating book is an important addition to the historiography of mine labour because it brings an institutional complement to the literature emerging on the socio-economic basis of migrancy. It is essential reading not only for mining historians, but also for anyone interested in the complex forces shaping modern South Africa.

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