

The golden opportunity: Recruitment of “foreigners” into the Witwatersrand by mining corporations, 1913-1933¹

Amanda T Mangena
University of Johannesburg
216026805@student.uj.ac.za

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Abstract

In this article the strategies used by mining corporations to facilitate the illegal entry of mine-workers into South Africa between 1913 and 1933 are discussed. In 1913 the government banned the outsourcing of mine-workers from areas that were located north of the 22 degrees line of latitude, but despite this, mining corporations devised ways of sourcing cheap labour to maximise their profits. These workers were referred to as “tropical migrants” and were brought in from neighbouring British colonies and the Portuguese East Colony. Through the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA)’s efforts to provide stable workforce and maximise its profits, the prevalence of illegal recruiters bringing in tropical migrants was discouraged. In this article I discuss how the mining corporations facilitated the illegal entry of workers into the country and investigate the role played by WNLA, which benefited immensely from the cheap labour provided by foreign mine-workers.

Keywords: Migrant labour; Mine-workers; Mine-owners; Migrants; Illegal immigrants; Witwatersrand; Union of South Africa.

Introduction

The discussion to follow brings to light the role that mine-owners played in facilitating the entry and recruitment of mineworkers from neighbouring countries through both legal and illegal channels as a means of providing labour services to the gold mines on the Rand.² It demonstrates that while the ban was implemented in 1913, by 1917 the legal restrictions had become a distant memory. Letters and telegrams that were sent between the Union of South Africa and the affected countries in southern Africa by mine-owners indicate that there were areas which were used as hubs to provide the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) with workers.³

1 This paper was made possible by the generous funding of the National Research Fund (NRF).

2 The Recruiting Corporation, “Native supply unsatisfactory, boys and their earning capacity”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 November 1913.

3 University of Johannesburg (UJ), Doornfontein Campus, The Witwatersrand Native Labour Association Archive (WNLA), Lourenco Marques, File 135/9, Minutes of Meeting, 23 February 1916.

In 1913 the South African government banned the outsourcing of mine-workers from areas that were located north of the 22 degrees line of latitude. The reason was that the mortality rate among workers at the Transvaal mines was very high.⁴ The government believed this was caused by the foreign workers at the mines and farms on the Witwatersrand who were suspected not only of bringing diseases into the country, but also of perpetuating their spread. This article shows that this rationale for implementing the ban was unfounded. After the implementation of the ban, the mining corporations on the Rand hired a medical doctor, Dr Lister, to investigate the high mortality rate of workers. Dr Lister concluded that it was the spread of pulmonary diseases which in turn were a product of the unhygienic living and working conditions on the mines.

In his article titled “The ban on ‘Tropical Natives’ and the promotion of illegal migration in pre-apartheid South Africa” (2013), Francis Musoni writes that the borders of South Africa have always been porous but does not mention the reasons that led to the porosity of the borders. In this article, I maintain that in facilitating workers’ entry into the country illegally, the mine-owners and the WNLA, which benefited substantially from the cheap labour of foreign mineworkers, were a major factor. The ban in place meant that employers were not allowed to source workers from the regions where they had previously obtained the bulk of their workers, such as the British colonies of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (now Malawi), and the northern part of what was then Portuguese East Africa.⁵

The wealthy British imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes, had a dream of constructing a railway line northwards from the Cape Colony to the city of Cairo. He hoped that this would expand the African continent not only in terms of infrastructure, but would prove to capitalists in western Europe, the sophistication that the continent held. Although this dream was never achieved, he planted the seed of a successful west to east route between Pretoria and Lourenco Marques.⁶

The idea of constructing the Eastern Main Line (the railway line between South Africa and Delagoa Bay in Portuguese East Africa) in 1895 was to transport commodities such as coal, timber and perishable goods between these two areas. However, the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 saw the railway transporting large numbers of human beings en route to the mines.⁷ The Portuguese East African colony would later provide South Africa with an estimated 9 million males in the form of labour, and this figure includes the duration that the ban on the recruitment of farm and mine-workers from areas that lie north of the 22° line

4 “Mortality on the mines”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 June 1912.

5 F Musoni, “The ban on ‘Tropical Natives’ and the promotion of illegal migration in pre-apartheid South Africa”, *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, pp. 156-177.

6 C van Onselen, *The night trains: Moving Mozambican miners to and from the Witwatersrand Mines, circa 1902–1955* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019), Chapter 1, p. 23.

7 C van Onselen, *The night trains: ...*, p. 35.

of latitude, was in place.⁸

Although, for the workers, the journey from their homes to the mine was dangerous and sometimes even life threatening due to the conditions on the trains, Van Onselen demonstrates that African men took part in the process willingly in search of a better life. Train accidents that took the lives of many men were common, however this did not deter the prospective workers from signing up for recruitment by the WNLA agents. So much so that between 1910 and 1960 an estimated 5million males were transported between the Komatipoort or Ressano Garcia station at the Mozambique-South Africa border, to Booysens in Johannesburg.⁹

Various researchers have investigated the many factors that promoted the increased influx of foreign mine-workers to South Africa, highlighting that mines in South Africa were appealing for the employment they provided. However, little has been written on the role played by labour recruiting companies such as the WNLA and the mining corporations, in facilitating the employment of migrant miners during periods when bringing workers from outside South Africa was in fact prohibited. Migrant labour refers to the movement of people from their places of origin to other places in search of employment usually on a contract or temporary basis.¹⁰

Recruitment of workers was and remains prevalent for the most part in rural areas where levels of unemployment are high, making it difficult for people to survive without earning a wage. Southern Africa has experienced its share of migrancy and continues to do so. The first indications that there were gold deposits on the Witwatersrand in 1884 brought about one of the most vigorous gold rushes to ever occur in Africa. But it was not until 1886 that the massive wealth of the Witwatersrand would be uncovered. It became evident that the richest gold deposits lay deep below the surface and would require massive injections of capital and a vast, cheap labour force if profits were to be maximised. This triggered the importation of about 64 000 Chinese labourers to supplement the local labour force. Some of the Dutch settlers came to work on the Witwatersrand from the period of 1904 to 1910, but their contribution at the time was primarily one of agriculture – to feed the growing population.¹¹

The earlier discovery of diamonds in 1867 and later gold in the 1880s increased the rate of incorporation and domination of South Africans and other Africans by the colonial powers as discussed by Beinart. The mining industry, which was driven by huge investment from Europe transformed the lives of both settlers and African economies in the country. In his book *Twentieth Century South Africa*, Beinart, states

8 F Musoni, "The ban on 'Tropical Natives'...", *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, p. 159.

9 C van Onselen, *The night trains: ...*, p. 44.

10 S Stichter, *Migrant labourers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 28.

11 P Harries, "Slavery, indenture and migrant labour: Maritime immigration from Mozambique to the Cape, c.1780–1880", *Journal of African Studies*, 73(3), 2014, pp. 323-340.

that African men became an integral part of the colonial world not only through conflict and trade, but also through paying rates and taxes and seeking employment on settler farms and the mines.¹²

At the height of the early peaks of migrant labour in South Africa, by about 1911, the WNLA recruited some 200 000 African men throughout the southern African region. The majority were from the Pedi Kingdom in the Northern Transvaal, while others came from Lesotho and southern Mozambique.¹³ This was however not the beginning of the migrant labour movement since migrant labour in South Africa is evident as far back as the arrival of Europeans at the Cape of Good Hope in around 1770, when the Dutch (who sailed to the Portuguese colony of Mozambique) brought Africans in to work for the Europeans, initially as slaves and later as labourers.¹⁴ Mozambique then became one of the major suppliers of migrant workers to South Africa between 1770 and 1970.¹⁵

Migrancy among African men also occurred in South Africa during the political unrest of the Mfecane wars (1815-1840) which saw many African people, such as the Tlokoa (a tribe in Botswana), fleeing their Highveld homes to seek places of safety in the southern African interior. During the early colonial era, Pedi chiefs would send out young men on long distance migrant work to Kimberley where commodities such as guns and ammunition were available for purchase with their meagre wages. These were important assets which helped them to protecting their communities.¹⁶ In other cases young men migrated to seek paid work while women (who were the backbone of rural agricultural societies) undertook to produce sustenance for their families. At the time, men were primarily responsible for taking care of the cattle. Tending the cattle (which was considered the main form of wealth) was in most cases a responsibility passed down to the youngest boys in the family.¹⁷

Stichter states that most African men were forced into migrancy due to the tax system introduced by the Europeans.¹⁸ However, Beinart claims that young men who were of marriageable age sought work in the mines and farms so that they could afford to pay the *ilobola* (bride-price) for their future wives. Beinart also suggests that this is linked to the division of labour and gender roles which arguably cemented the patriarchal societies that already existed.¹⁹ Even though the institution of marriage can be viewed as a factor that was used to oppress women who lived in rural areas, it

12 W Beinart, *Twentieth-century South Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 91.

13 A MacKinnon, "Africans and the myth of rural retirement in South Africa, ca. 1900-1950", *Cross Cultural Gerontology Journal*, 23, 2007, pp. 161-179.

14 P Harries, "Slavery, indenture and migrant labour", *Journal of African Studies*, 73(3), 2014, p. 328.

15 A MacKinnon, "Africans and the myth of rural retirement...", *Cross Cultural Gerontology Journal*, 2007, p. 163.

16 W Beinart, *Twentieth-century South Africa*, p. 102.

17 A MacKinnon, "Africans and the myth of rural retirement...", *Cross Cultural Gerontology Journal*, 2007, p. 164.

18 S Stichter, *Migrant labourers*, p. 56.

19 W Beinart, *Twentieth-century South Africa*, p. 36.

was also utilised as a method to reinforce and preserve the hierarchical systems that predominated in rural areas – a system that placed older men at the top, young men in the middle and women at the bottom.²⁰ In other parts of Africa, similar factors forced men to travel to South Africa to find work. Despite the link between the factors Stichter mentions and the rate of migrancy, the strong presence of recruiting agents in the rural areas of Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Mozambique cannot be overlooked. These agents were working on behalf of the WNLA and played an important role in facilitating and enabling the frequent movements of African men into migrant labour.

According to Alan Jeeves and Owen Kalinga, South Africa was more developed and thus more secure politically than many of the countries from which the foreign migrants came. The idea of earning a wage seemed tempting. Surely, they argued, it was more lucrative to accept employment than toiling away on the farms with crop yields that failed from time to time.²¹ However, there is also a relationship between the land dispossession of Africans – which undoubtedly affected their agricultural output and migration – and the agrarian crisis and labour migration which occurred during the 1950s when the great famine of 1949 in Nyasaland forced many young men to leave their homes. This was particularly the case when labour recruiters presented the opportunity for employment in South Africa.²² They promised transport fares, food and accommodation to all those whom they recruited, which made people more likely to avail themselves of the offer.

Anusa Daimon states that Malawian men opted to work on the South African mines for reasons quite different to the most commonly-known interpretations of unemployment and political instability. Daimon explains that Malawian men migrated to escape the low-wage system they were subjected to in their country of origin, which did not match the level of education that the men had acquired. It is likely that most of them were employed in the formal sector by the government in positions such as clerks and postmen, however when they arrived in South Africa they soon realised that they were not going to receive the salaries and the jobs they envisioned.²³

In his article titled "Aliens and Aids in southern Africa: The Malawi-South Africa debate", prominent and acclaimed academic writer Wiseman Chirwa (1998) discusses a ban imposed by the South African government in the 1980s – that on Malawian migrant labourers. He deems it highly discriminatory against men from

20 SA Bassey and NG Bubu, "Gender inequality in Africa: A re-examination of cultural values", *COGITO Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(3), 2019, pp. 21-36.

21 AH Jeeves and OJM Kalinga, *Communities at the margin: Studies in rural society and migration in southern Africa, 1890-1980* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2002), pp. 18-20.

22 S Stichter, *Migrant labourers*, p. 60.

23 A Daimon, "'Ringleaders and troublemakers': Malawian (Nyasa) migrants and transnational labour movements in southern Africa, c. 1910-1960", *Labour History*, 58(5), 2017, pp. 656-675.

that country. Chirwa informs us that the reason given for the ban was that Malawian men were the “carriers and spreaders” of Hiv/Aids similar to the one provided in 1913 when the South African government imposed a discriminatory ban against the recruitment of workers from the tropical regions.²⁴

Even though the ban was supposedly to reduce the number of foreign workers in South Africa, instead it led to large numbers of illegal African workers entering the country – so much so that when the ban was lifted in 1933, the number of illegal immigrants from Portuguese East Africa, Nyasaland and Northern and Southern Rhodesia was twice as high as it was prior to the ban.²⁵ Jeeves states that although there were bans imposed on the use of migrant labour from the tropics during the twentieth century, many migrants from the north managed to enter the country either on their own or via the illegal recruiters who stationed themselves on and beyond the northern Transvaal border of South Africa.²⁶

Undeterred, most migrants continued to travel to the mines illicitly because the authorities could not differentiate between South African and non-South African mine-workers.²⁷ This was because of the inconsistencies and contradictions among government officials, particularly since it was unclear when the ban was implemented, whether these migrants were banned from the mines on the Rand, or whether the prohibition was effective across the entire country. Illegal migrants soon came up with new ways and strategies to evade the system, making full use of the assistance of licensed and unlicensed labour recruiters alike, all of whom were working on behalf of South African mining corporations and local farmers.

The recruiting companies such as the WNLA and the Transvaal Chamber of Mines (TCM) were conducting continuous research and submitting papers to the government in the period between the announcement of the ban in 1913 and 1925, detailing the ways in which they would curb the spread of disease among their employees so they could be granted permission to recruit openly.²⁸ In 1947, the South African government proposed that the state should be the only entity to oversee recruiting foreign migrant workers. Private recruiting agencies were accused of recruiting workers without ensuring that the migrants were indeed in possession of all the required documentation.²⁹

24 WC Chirwa, “1998 Aliens and aids in southern Africa: The Malawi-South Africa debate”, *Journal of the African Affairs*, 97, 1998, pp. 53-79.

25 F Musoni, “The ban on ‘Tropical Natives’ ...”, *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, p. 162.

26 AH Jeeves, *Migrant labour in South Africa's mining economy: The struggle for the Gold Mines' labour supply, 1890-1920* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1985), p. 18.

27 F Musoni, “The ban on ‘Tropical Natives’ ...”, *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, pp. 160-163.

28 AH Jeeves, *Migrant labour...*, p. 20.

29 “State may take over ‘foreign’ native labour recruiting”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 July 1947, p. 7.

Although many authors have written about the causes and the reasons why migrancy to the mines was perpetuated, none of them provide details on how mine-owners became agents who facilitated the clandestine migration of African men into South Africa. The mine-owners became the means by which many Africans travelled out of their countries into South Africa in search of better living conditions and employment opportunities.

The 1913 ban

On 10 April 1913, a confidential meeting was held to discuss the possibility of halting all mine-worker recruitment operations from countries in the tropical regions of southern Africa. The meeting, attended by individuals who called themselves the Tropical Committee included government officials, medical personnel, researchers and legal representatives of the mining corporations. They engaged in lengthy conversations about the concerns expressed by the minister of Native Affairs and other members of parliament about the high mortality rate among mine-workers on the Witwatersrand mines. A month later, the minister of Native Affairs announced that all mining companies had to stop bringing workers into South Africa from areas north of the 22 degrees line of latitude,³⁰ for the reasons that will be explored in detail later in this article.

The ban, which was first mooted in 1910 after the formation of the Union of South Africa was not supported by all members of parliament, making it a politically motivated rather than a public concern to those who opposed the idea. Furthermore, there was no discussion at all on how the effectiveness of the ban would be ensured, although the then minister of Native Affairs, the Union's first prime minister, General Louis Botha, promised to provide the members of parliament with more detail on the ban, such as which regions were not permitted to employ migrants and how the government would be able to differentiate between foreign workers and South Africans. This undertaking was never realised. As a result, mining corporations as well as farm owners, who displayed significant discontent from the very beginning, did not take the announcement seriously.³¹

The countries that were affected by this ban included Mozambique, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. These were the countries where the mine-owners recruited the large bulk of their employees. The rising number of deaths of mine workers on the Witwatersrand mines from 1910 to 1912, was explained away by saying these migrants had arrived "recently" on the mines and were not yet accustomed to the living conditions in the mine compounds. Nor were they acclimatised to the weather conditions in South Africa. These were the stated reasons

30 F Musoni, "The ban on 'Tropical Natives'...", *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, p. 163.

31 F Musoni, "The ban on 'Tropical Natives' ...", *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, p. 164.

for the implementation of the ban. The exact number of individuals who died on the mines is unknown because mining corporations concealed such information from the government so that the statistics would not be the “reason” for the ban. Another explanation for the lack of clarity on the number of deaths is that most tropical mine-workers were undocumented and the mining corporations would not even have entered them in their records.³²

In contrast, the widely presumed assumption by the South African government was that the major cause of death of migrant workers was the high rate of pulmonary disease infections. The minutes of the meeting of the Tropical Committee make it evident that the officials responsible for ensuring the health and wellbeing of workers – whether foreign or local – were worried about the causes of ill-health and deaths and were keen to identify the causes.³³ Health officials who worked for the WNLA and stakeholders such as the mining corporations who were against the implementation of the ban, advocated the inoculation of all mine-workers, including prospective recruits. They were keen to prevent the spread of pulmonary disease infections.

Medical reports provided by the Medical Council in 1916 state that the major causes of death among mine-workers were pneumonia and pulmonary tuberculosis and that the number of such deaths began declining after a prophylactic was discovered by Lister in 1914.³⁴ However tropical migrants were more susceptible to becoming infected than black South African workers who had been in the country for longer periods. The compound system made use of a residential structural model for miners’ living quarters and most were squalid and unhygienic. Conditions in the compounds was the largest contributing factor to the rapid spread of disease, primarily because of severe overcrowding.³⁵

Although justification for the ban on foreign migrants by the South African government was supposedly the rising number of deaths among mine-workers, political motivations were also very influential. Political disputes between members of parliament arose over such issues as racially discriminatory labour practices and in turn led to many inconsistencies and disagreement on how the ban’s effectiveness could be achieved. Essentially, the ban aimed to curb the spread of disease on the mines but it was not only a dismal failure, it also served to perpetuate the entry of migrants in ever higher numbers.

32 “Native labour shortage. Importation of ‘tropicals’”, Statement from Prime Minister, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 March 1918.

33 UJ, WNLA, Employment Bureau of Africa, File 140/6, Minutes of meeting, 16 November 1917.

34 UJ, WNLA, Employment Bureau of Africa, File 140/13, Letter to the South African Medical Institute, 7 February 1914.

35 J Pelders and G Nelson, “Living conditions of mine workers from eight mines in South Africa”, *Journal of Development of Southern Africa*, 36(3), 2018, pp. 265-282.

In 1911, the Witwatersrand mines displayed high mortality rates with a total of 1 033 tropical migrant fatalities, which was about 96.5% for every 1 000 mine-workers. The following year 763 deaths were recorded on the Witwatersrand mines which brought the mortality rate to 79.42% for every 1 000 workers. The year 1913 saw the deaths dropping even lower than in preceding years with the number down to 641 and a mortality of 73.3% for every 1 000 mineworkers. The records indicate that the deaths were caused by various factors with tuberculosis cited as the most common cause. Individuals from the tropical areas were most susceptible to the disease.³⁶

While both health officials and mining corporations agreed on the need for vaccination to curb the spread of disease, the mining corporations also suggested that they resort to what they called the "old mine boy system". This meant that they would extend the contracts of the tropical mine-workers who were already employed on the mines. The reasoning – conveniently – was that they should not be repatriated to their home countries as this would cause the spread of disease. Instead, they should remain on the mines and thereby – again conveniently – ensure that the labour supply to the mining industry was not placed at undue risk.³⁷

The ban had a negative impact on many recruiting companies who worked with the WNLA such as Messrs Breyner & Wirth Recruiting Company because in instances where the WNLA had paid a recruiting company upfront, the agency had to pay back funds for services that they were unable to fulfil because of the ban.³⁸ One such instance is apparent in a letter written from the WNLA paymaster office (the financial office responsible for all payments that can be equated to today's Human Resources Office) in Pretoria, requesting a settlement of payment for the officers who were engaged with the military labour recruiting operations in some parts of Portuguese East Africa.³⁹ While some companies adhered to the announcement of the ban, others did not. Indeed, they continued with business as usual.

Those who continued recruiting mineworkers, such as the Lourenco Marques Agency (LMA) based in Lourenco Marques (present day Maputo) did so because in some cases they had agreements with the chiefs who had been in contact with the recruiters prior to the ban and who wished to maintain the supply of young men to the LMA. Chiefs were prominent and respected members of villages and their decisions and views were respected highly by their subjects. In the Moebaze district in Mozambique, chiefs used their status and position in society to provide a constant stream of labour to the recruiting agencies. The ties were difficult to break because some chiefs had been paid up front and they had no means to repay the funds in the

36 UJ, WNLA, File 140/6, Information File, 21 January 1915.

37 "The labour problem", *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 April 1914.

38 UJ, WNLA, File 140/6, Information File, 21 January 1915.

39 UJ, WNLA, The Employment Bureau of Africa, File 140/4, Letter, 11 November 1919.

case of non-delivery.⁴⁰

In villages such as Maganja in Mozambique and parts of Nyasaland, “runners” or young men who operated as gangs employed by illegal recruiters to enrol workers on their behalf, threatened chiefs with violence if they failed to carry out recruiting operations. These recruitment gangs even used intimidation and fear to control “sole recruiting” benefits without the interference of the chiefs. The ability to wield sole control over the recruitment enterprise was very profitable, and was the reason why the WNLA tried to gain the monopoly control over labour recruitment for the mines.⁴¹

The most immediate impact of the introduction of the ban was the shortage of labour experienced by the mining corporations. This was because black South African men were being recruited to participate in World War I (1914-1918).⁴² The scarcity of African workers and the likelihood that foreign mine-workers were less likely to organise protests made mining corporations more inclined to turn to foreigners for employment on the mines. In addition, foreign workers were not too vocal in expressing dissatisfaction about poor working conditions and low salaries. As a result, many companies sought out foreign workers and provided opportunities of work for foreigners.

There were also certain inconsistencies in the reactions of mining corporations to the ban. Sometimes they complied. A letter written from the LMA to the WNLA shows that migrant workers from some mines were repatriated to their home countries. For example, the WNLA's district manager at the time ordered foreign mine-workers to be paid on their arrival at Port Amelia in Mozambique. They were paid their salaries on arrival in their respective home countries because some of them escaped on the way from the mines to avoid repatriation. Hence the system of paying them upon arrival limited the number of people who escaped. The information gathered also displays certain traces of inconsistency among the mining corporations – while some of them obeyed the law, others did not. This also provides information on the porosity of the borders with South Africa at the time.

The illegal entry of the migrants

The migrant workers devised ways of defying the official immigration process, such as using stolen identities or lying to the officials. Identity theft through impersonating other workers was common among migrant workers who were due for repatriation after the end of their contracts and were not keen to return to their

40 UJ, WNLA, File 140/6, Information File, 21 January 1915.

41 “The Recruiting Corporation. Native supply unsatisfactory, boys and their earning capacity”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 November 1913.

42 F Musoni, “The ban on ‘Tropical Natives’ ...”, *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 2018, p. 160.

home countries. An example is that of a mine-worker from Nyasaland who was arrested for impersonating a fellow Nyasaland worker whose whereabouts were unknown. Similar incidents became more prevalent in the years preceding the lifting of the ban in 1933.⁴³

Mine-owners preferred areas such as the Maganja District in Mozambique as a place to source labour, because recruits from this region were regarded as being immune to the prevalent diseases compared to other tropical recruits. Further justification presented by the recruiting companies to encourage the participation of migrants was that all "mine boys" recruited would be vaccinated before they departed from their home villages as a precautionary health measure. An example is the Maganja Costa District in Mozambique where the recruiting company for the area received a telegram from the WNLA on 4 October 1917 about the process the recruiting company was required to follow when recruiting workers. A similar communiqué was sent from the area of Pebane in Mozambique where the recruiting company called Quilimane on 8 October 1917, in communication with the Military Labour Bureau in Johannesburg.⁴⁴

The contents of the telegram indicated that an abandoned site in Mozambique which was once used by the WNLA and recruiters to South Africa was to be revamped and utilised once more. The writer of the telegram went on to indicate that they would need offices for the WNLA to be established quickly so that the men who had already been recruited could be processed and transported without delay to Johannesburg. This indicates that at this time, the companies involved were engaging actively in the process of recruiting mine-workers and bringing them into the country illegally.⁴⁵

All mine-worker recruiters were required to hold licences to recruit. Furthermore, recruiting contracts were not only assigned to major companies. In some instances, individuals were contracted to serve as "runners" by the WNLA. An example is the successful application lodged by a certain Sancho da Silva, a recruiting agent from present-day Mozambique who was given a letter signed by the then acting secretary of the Department of Native Affairs, a Mr C Bennet.⁴⁶ This enabled the WNLA to trace and monitor the workers who were coming to work on their mines because Sancho da Silva was re-issued the licence on the basis that he had always shown good behaviour and acted in a way that reflected positively on the association. The applications were not always successful and some were rejected while others had

43 UJ, WNLA, Nyasaland Government Representative and Northern Rhodesia Labour Office, File 50, Letter received from Transvaal Chamber of Mines re mine-worker who was an impersonator, 31 December 1947.

44 UJ, WNLA, Employment Bureau of Africa, File 140/4, Letter dated 11 November 1919.

45 "The Recruiting Corporation: Native supply unsatisfactory, boys and their earning capacity", *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 November 1913.

46 UJ, WNLA, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, File 89, Letter approving a licence application submitted by Sancho da Silva, 16 August 1917.

their licences removed due to their unethical behaviour. An example is one recruiting agent who recruited workers without being given permission to do so by the South African government or the WNLA, and he was subsequently arrested.⁴⁷

Although the recruiting processes were stringent and were monitored closely in the period between 1913 and the early 1920s, migrant workers found ways of crossing the borders into South Africa for job opportunities. During this period the number of workers recruited was significantly lower due to the ban, leaving behind many men who wanted to work on the mines and were left wondering how they were going find their way to the Witwatersrand by other means. Most migrants from Mozambique and those from Malawi made their way through the British colony of Rhodesia because it was easier for them to enter the country through the Messina border post into the northern Transvaal. Some found employment on the farms and the mines in what is now the Limpopo Province, but most would only engage in farm work on a temporary basis. Their long-term goal was to reach the mines on the Rand.

In addition to the licences which recruiting agents were required to have, the WNLA also required mine workers to carry passes that would prevent their movement from one mine to another without its knowledge. These identification passes were not issued to the mine workers by the WNLA, and they needed to have them before they could enter the country.⁴⁸ This process enabled the WNLA to keep track of the workers who were brought into the country and were proof that they were correctly vaccinated and were not predisposed to contacting diseases when they commenced their work contracts on the Witwatersrand mines. However, some mine-workers still managed to enter the country under false pretences and provided false information about their identity so that they could be employed.

Although for most workers the common way of entering South Africa was through the recruiting agents in their home countries, some found their way on their own and made use instead of the many illegal recruiting agents who usually stationed themselves at the northern border of the Transvaal.⁴⁹ These agents were more often than not illegal. They had either had their licences revoked or may not even have qualified to apply for legal licences. Some of the migrant workers even made use of corrupt police officers who assisted the prospective mine-workers to find new identities. This can be seen in the case of Rhodesian individuals who were encouraged by an officer to present themselves to the mine officials as people from Portuguese East Africa rather than from their actual country of origin.⁵⁰ However, these individuals were identified easily when they refused to pay the taxes that were

47 UJ, WNLA, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, File 135, Minutes of meeting, 17 December 1914.

48 UJ, WNLA, Messrs Breyner & Wirth Recruiting Company, File 135/5, Letter on importance of ID pass for mine worker to be recruited, 3 June 1919.

49 AH Jeeves, *Migrant labour in South Africa's mining economy...*, p. 22.

50 UJ, WNLA, Native Recruiting Corporation Ltd, File 135/6, Minutes of meeting, 20 July 1920.

required from by the Portuguese colonial government. If they were identified as imposters, they were deported.

Although illegal recruiters had a market for these workers because they were able to secure jobs on the mines in the Rand, the WNLA did not support their actions. The reality that mine-workers were able to enter the employ of the mines without being recruited was acceptable to the WNLA because it claimed that the action affected the quality of workers they wanted on the mines. The WNLA sought to have total control of all mine-workers brought into the country to maximise its profits.⁵¹

The mine-workers who came to the country on their own did not receive the vaccinations that were offered to those who were recruited by the WNLA agents. This meant that their presence in the Union of South Africa placed them at higher risk of becoming infected with pulmonary and other infectious diseases than their vaccinated counterparts. It also impacted negatively on the association because of the losses they incurred when they did not have the sole control of the recruiting process.

Various issues forced some immigrant workers to find their way into the country without the help of the recruiting agents. Such factors ranged from the age requirements that the WNLA enforced (based on the level of susceptibility to the diseases that were common on the mines) which susceptibility they found to be a hindrance to employment prospects. However, in such cases the act of defying the law worked to their advantage because on 23 February 1916 a series of meetings between the government and mine owners commenced and some of the requirements needed for an individual to be recruited were amended.⁵² The minimum age requirement for mine-workers was raised from 16 to 19 years while that of retirement from service was also increased by the WNLA.⁵³

The illegal entry of mine-workers into the country as detailed above was not only perpetuated by the inefficiency of the government of the Union of South Africa but was also facilitated by the then thriving mining industry, which was willing to go the extra mile to acquire cheap labour. Mine-workers were active participants in the process by engaging in clandestine immigration activities to the extent of concealing their true identities in some cases so that they could be employed. These actions show that the banning of the recruiting process outside South Africa was unsuccessful. However, the available evidence also sheds light on the relationships that were formed among the ordinary people of the areas where recruitment continued unabated and the WNLA, by means of their illegal "runners" continued recruiting mine-workers.

51 UJ, WNLA, Native Recruiting Corporation Ltd, File 135/9: Letter on dissatisfaction of WNLA re workers entering country on own accord, 1 March 1916.

52 UJ, WNLA, Lourenco Marques, File 135/9, Minutes of meeting, 23 February 1916.

53 UJ, WNLA, Native Recruiting Corporation Ltd, File 135/9: Letter on dissatisfaction of WNLA re workers entering country on own accord, 1 March 1916.

The role of the mine-owners

If the recruiting companies across the tropical areas of Africa and those in South Africa chose to adhere to the regulations laid down in 1913, their adherence was merely temporary. A few months after the announcement of the ban by the then prime minister and minister of Native Affairs in the Union of South Africa, General Louis Botha, recruiting companies within and outside the country continued to have meaningful and lengthy conversations about how they could continue to ensure the enlistment and safe transportation of recruits into the country.⁵⁴ This process persisted unabated leading to questions of whether or not the mining companies and their wealthy owners actually obeyed the laws that regulated the flow of migrants.

A few months after the implementation of the ban, the WNLA, together with the LMRA, started conducting its own research on whether pneumonia was a disease known to the people of Nyasaland or those of the Zambezi Valley (modern day Zambia and Zimbabwe).⁵⁵ This research was done so that the mining corporations could assist the doctors tasked with finding the causes of pneumonia and pulmonary tuberculosis. The hope was that they would be able to appeal the ban as soon as possible. The mining corporations hoped to discover effective vaccinations and thereby be permitted to bring ‘foreign’ workers into the country. However, in the months preceding the ban and the years thereafter, the mine owners brought migrant workers in on their own terms and under their own regulations. These companies prioritised the health of their recruits: all of them had to undergo a series of health tests in their home countries before they could board the train to their new places of work.⁵⁶

A study of government correspondence and documents shows that the stipulations laid down by the government to curb recruitment of so-called “foreigners” to work on the mines were unclear. A partnership appears to have been in place between Rand Mines and the Transvaal Consolidated Land & Exploration Company in Potgieter’s Rust. Another company in the same fold was Groenfontein Tin Mines (GTM). GTM was in the business of extracting tin in the Northern Transvaal (modern-day Limpopo Province).

In June 1918, W Gemmill, the then manager and secretary of WNLA, sent a letter notifying the chief compound mine manager of GTM of the tropical “natives” who were on their way to the mine.⁵⁷ The mine-workers were provided with two loaves of bread each and a rail ticket for the journey and those were going to be debited against the relevant mine. The reasons why the tropical mine workers were sent to

54 UJ, WNLA, File 141/2, Report of Tropical Health Committee, 19 March 1914.

55 UJ, WNLA, File 141/2, Letter from WNLA to Lourenco Marques, 14 November 1913.

56 UJ, WNLA, File 141/2, Letter, from WNLA to Mocambique Agency-Angoche, 1 October 1913.

57 UJ, WNLA, File 140/14, Letter, from WNLA to the manager, Groenfontein Tin Mines, 18 June 1918.

Potgieter's Rust are not mentioned in the letter, however it is possible that it was for the mine-workers to complete the remaining months on their contracts. The seven tropical mine-workers were allowed to request their dietary preferences and the mine manager of GTM wrote to one of the mine managers on the Witwatersrand about their food rations. The letter mentions that they were the first recruits from the tropical areas to work on the GTM and there was to be no misunderstanding with regard to the food they be given.

1933 going forth

After the lifting of the ban in 1933, the former restrictions on recruitment became a distant memory. Migrant workers were allowed free access into the country under more flexible conditions. Shortly afterwards, the mines witnessed a high number of educated Africans who sought passes to be allowed entry into the country for employment purposes and most of them applied through the WNLA. Those who were granted employment could work in offices as clerks and in some cases as intermediaries between the workers and the owners on the mines. The association encouraged these workers because most of them were willing to pay for their own transport to Johannesburg and they had legal documentation making it easier for their employees.⁵⁸

Although evidence shows that the number of illegal migrant mine-workers who were in the country was twice as high after the lifting of the ban than before its implementation, the government of the Union of South Africa still felt that there was a need for the flow of incoming migrants be monitored. This they did by implementing a law which indicated that the state should be the only entity responsible for bringing workers into the country.⁵⁹ The implementation of this act meant that the recruiting companies, including the WNLA, were being pushed out of business. However, the illegal entry of immigrants persisted.

This new law was not well received by the recruiting companies because it was not only going to disturb how their businesses were run, but would cause their profit margins to drop significantly lower. This perpetuated the various forms of clandestine immigration that existed in the country. The lifting of the ban in 1933 improved the political relations of South Africa and other southern African countries on its borders. However, South Africa continued to be the favoured destination for migrant workers in the region. This tendency persists and has grown over the years because the country appears unable to secure its borders effectively. South Africa is an attractive destination, despite the fact that many of those who manage to come here are faced with the harsh reality of difficult living conditions. So much so that

58 UJ, WNLA, Transvaal Chamber of Mines, File 135/7, Minutes of meeting, 10 June 1914.

59 "State may take over 'foreign' native labour recruiting", *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 July 1947.

some still prefer it to living in their home countries.

Conclusion

The banning of recruitment processes in the tropical areas of Africa as a way of preventing migrant workers from entering the country for employment did not meet with much success. The government of the Union of South Africa faced significant challenges from the mine owners and illegal recruiting companies who not only continued bringing workers into the country but also created conditions which facilitated and enabled the illegal entry of migrants into the country. In effect cheap labour was utilised as a tool for exploitation.

Research has shown that the prevalence of pulmonary disease was used by the South African government as a tool in an effort to break political connections with other African countries. This is perhaps a reflection on differing views on how the country should be run and how the influx of people should be controlled. It also shows the inefficiencies and the errors of judgement of those in power. The spread of diseases on the mine was not caused by foreign migrant workers; it was caused by the conditions to which the mine-workers were exposed and the lack of adequate health and safety procedures.