

LICINISO WEEKLY

The role played by colonial economic and political patterns in the migration of African workers to South Africa

As migrants continue to experience problems such as exploitation, insecure working conditions, non-documentation, and xenophobic violence, a concrete study of contemporary migration patterns reflects both historical inequalities and ongoing capitalist uneven development within the region.



The African Museum in Johannesburg opened in 2010. It gives a graphic insight into the hardship that black, male migrant labourers had to endure (<https://whyjoburg.com>)



Mhlonishwa Mtsetfwa

The migration of African workers into South Africa cannot be understood as a simple search for employment or opportunity. It is deeply rooted in the historical development of colonialism, capitalism, and regional economic restructuring in Southern Africa. The labour migration system that emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries was not accidental. It was deliberately created by colonial governments and mining corporations to secure a constant supply of cheap African labour for mines, settler farms, railways, and urban industries.

Before colonial conquest, many African societies across Southern Africa were organised around subsistence agriculture, communal land ownership, cattle economies, and barter trade systems. Communities produced primarily for survival and local exchange rather than for wage labour. Colonialism disrupted these systems intentionally. European powers transformed African economies in ways that forced African populations into the capitalist



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labour market.

The migration of African workers into South Africa therefore became a structural feature of colonial capitalism. Rural households that once survived independently through farming and livestock were increasingly pushed into poverty through land dispossession, taxation, and labour recruitment systems. As a result, many African men were compelled to travel to South African mines and industries to earn wages necessary for survival.

Historical background

The development of migrant labour in Southern Africa intensified during the late 19th century when

Economies in countries such as Lesotho and Mozambique became heavily dependent on remittances from workers employed in South African mines.

This dependency limited diversified economic development and deepened regional inequality. Economic crises within South African mining industries frequently produced severe economic consequences in neighbouring countries whose economies relied heavily on migrant labour income.

European colonial powers partitioned Africa. Britain, Portugal, and Germany were among the major colonial powers involved in the region. Southern Africa became reorganised economically around settler capitalism and extractive industries.

The discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1867 and gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886 transformed South Africa into the industrial and economic centre of the region. Gold mining in particular required massive labour forces. Mining companies demanded cheap, disciplined, and tightly controlled labour in order to maximise profits.

European labour could not satisfy the growing demand because European workers were limited in number and demanded higher wages. Mining capital therefore depended heavily on African labour. Colonial governments collaborated with mining corporations to establish systems capable of drawing workers from across Southern Africa into South African mines.

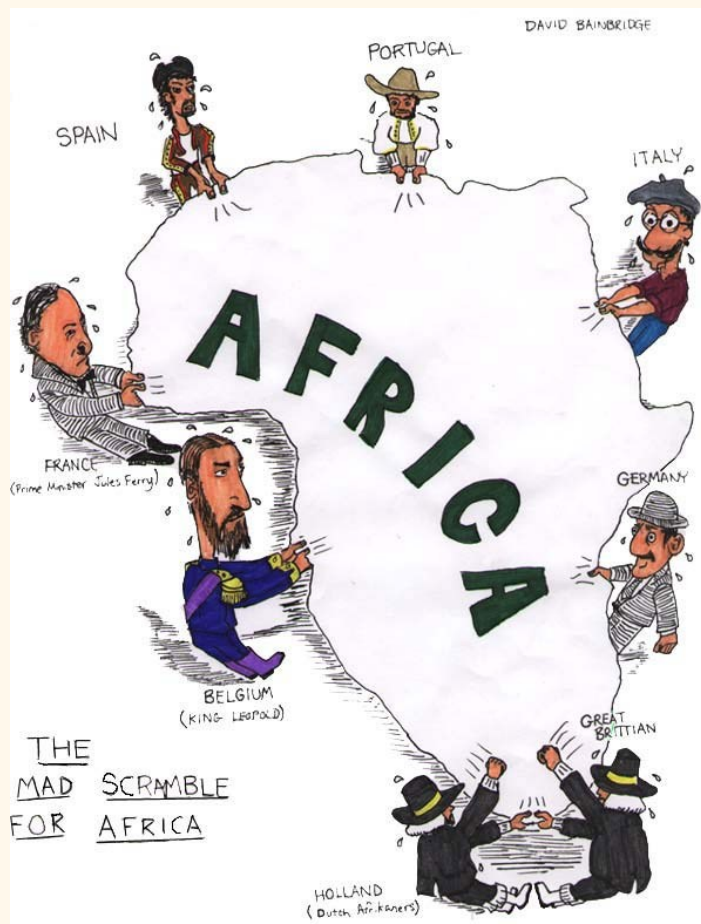
This process positioned South Africa as the dominant capitalist economy in the region, while neighbouring territories increasingly became labour reserves supplying workers to the mining industry.

Colonialism and the creation of migrant labour

Land dispossession

Land dispossession was one of the central mechanisms used by colonial authorities to force African communities into wage labour. African populations lost access to fertile land, grazing areas, water resources, and productive agricultural zones. Settlers occupied the best land while Africans were confined to overcrowded reserves and marginal rural areas.

Without adequate land to sustain independent ag-



ricultural production, many African families could no longer survive outside the money economy. In South Africa, the 1913 Natives Land Act restricted Africans to a very small portion of land despite Africans constituting the majority of the population. Similar policies were implemented throughout the region.

As rural livelihoods collapsed, labour migration became a necessity rather than a choice. Men from territories such as Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland increasingly travelled to South African mines and farms in search of wages.

Taxation and economic coercion

Colonial taxation systems were designed specifically to force Africans into wage employment. Hut taxes and poll taxes had to be paid in colonial currency rather than through cattle or agricultural products. Rural communities that had little access to cash were therefore compelled to participate in the capitalist labour system.

Young men often travelled long distances to mining centres such as Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand in order to earn money for taxes and household survival. Through taxation, colonial authorities transformed African labour into a commodity serving the needs of capitalist accumulation.



Labour recruitment systems

The migrant labour system became increasingly organised through recruitment agencies and labour bureaus established by mining corporations and colonial administrations. Institutions such as the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, later known as TEBA, established recruitment depots across Southern Africa, including in Swaziland.

These agencies were responsible for recruiting mineworkers, conducting medical examinations, arranging transport, processing contracts, and administering wages and remittances. Workers were transported by trains and buses from neighbouring countries to mining centres around Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand.

The recruitment process usually involved registration at labour offices, medical screening, signing fixed contracts, and transportation to mining compounds. Workers were generally employed on temporary contracts lasting six to twelve months.

This system ensured a steady flow of labour while keeping workers economically dependent and politically controlled.

The South African mining economy

The South African mining economy depended fundamentally on migrant labour. Mining corporations sought to maximise profits by maintaining low wages and strict labour discipline. Workers were separated from their families, housed in overcrowded hostels, and subjected to dangerous working conditions underground.

Many mineworkers spent most of the year away from home while their families remained in rural areas dependent on remittances. This arrangement reduced labour costs for mining companies because the social reproduction of labour occurred outside urban industrial centres.

Mineworkers often experienced severe exploita-



Kimberley diamond mine compound - Getty Images

tion. They faced dangerous underground conditions, injuries, lung diseases, and death, while compensation and healthcare remained inadequate. The wealth generated through mining enriched mining corporations, settler governments, and white elites while African workers remained impoverished.

The migrant labour system therefore became central not only to South African industrial development but also to the broader accumulation of wealth under colonial capitalism.

Political purposes of migrant labour

Migrant labour systems also served important political functions. Colonial and apartheid governments used migration controls to weaken African unity, divide workers, and suppress resistance.

Workers from different ethnic and national backgrounds were often deliberately separated in compounds and hostels. Under apartheid, pass laws controlled the movement of African workers and required permits for travel and residence. Police surveillance and administrative controls ensured that workers remained politically vulnerable.

These divisions prevented workers from organising collectively against exploitative labour systems. Ethnic separation within hostels and compounds sometimes intensified tensions and conflict among workers who shared common material conditions.

The migrant labour system therefore operated not only as an economic institution but also as a mechanism of political control.

Impact on African societies

Social effects

Labour migration caused major disruptions within African families and communities. In many rural areas, men spent long periods away from home while women carried agricultural responsibilities and



Workers pick strawberries at a farm near Stellenbosch, South Africa, Nov. 13, 2015 - VOA News

household burdens alone. Children often grew up with limited parental presence.

Communities became socially fragmented as migration reshaped family structures and weakened traditional forms of social organisation.

Economic effects

Neighbouring countries increasingly became labour reserves rather than industrial economies. Economies in countries such as Lesotho and Mozambique became heavily dependent on remittances from workers employed in South African mines.

This dependency limited diversified economic development and deepened regional inequality. Economic crises within South African mining industries frequently produced severe economic consequences in neighbouring countries whose economies relied heavily on migrant labour income.

Political effects

The regional migrant labour system entrenched South Africa's economic dominance within Southern Africa. Colonial patterns of dependency continued long after formal colonialism and apartheid.

The political and economic structures established during colonialism therefore continued shaping regional inequalities and migration patterns into the post-apartheid era.

Migration after apartheid

The end of apartheid in 1994 did not eliminate the structural inequalities created by colonial capitalism. South Africa continues to possess relatively stronger industries, larger urban economies, and more employment opportunities than many neighbouring countries.

As a result, migration into South Africa continues

The migration of African workers into South Africa became a structural feature of colonial capitalism. Rural households that once survived independently through farming and livestock were increasingly pushed into poverty through land dispossession, taxation, and labour recruitment systems. As a result, many Africans were compelled to travel to South African mines and industries to earn wages necessary for survival.

today. Workers from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and other neighbouring states migrate in search of employment within sectors such as construction, agriculture, domestic work, transport, and informal trade.

However, many migrants continue to experience exploitation, insecure working conditions, undocumented status, and xenophobic violence.

Contemporary migration therefore reflects both historical inequalities and ongoing capitalist uneven development within the region.

Regional economic expansion and the flow of wealth into South Africa

The economic dominance of South Africa within Southern Africa is not maintained only through mining and labour migration. It is also reinforced through the regional expansion of South African capital into neighbouring countries. Large South African corporations have extended their influence across Southern Africa through retail chains, banking systems, telecommunications, insurance companies, tourism infrastructure, manufacturing industries, transport networks, and property investments.

Neighbouring countries such as Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and others increasingly function as dependent markets tied to the South African economy. Goods imported into these countries are often produced or distributed by South African companies, while financial transactions, savings, investments, and insurance systems frequently pass through South African banks and financial institutions.

South African retail corporations establish supermarkets, shopping centres, warehouses, and distribution networks across neighbouring countries. Banking institutions expand through regional branches and financial services that absorb deposits, transaction fees, and investment flows into the South African financial system. Tourism infrastructure, including hotels, lodges, transport services, and property developments, is also increasingly dominated by

South African capital.

At the same time, factories, farms, retail outlets, and service industries operating within poorer neighbouring countries frequently rely on cheap labour drawn from economically underdeveloped communities. Workers are often paid extremely low wages while labour protections remain weak. The profits generated through this labour are commonly transferred back to corporate headquarters and investors based in South Africa.

This system allows South African capital to benefit from both regional markets and regional labour. Wealth generated across Southern Africa continuously flows into South Africa through labour migration, trade, banking systems, investment networks, tourism industries, and commercial expansion.

The result is a regional economic structure in which South Africa strengthens its manufacturing, retail, logistics, financial, and property sectors while neighbouring countries remain dependent on externally controlled capital and markets. This deepens uneven development across the region and reinforces South Africa's position as the dominant economic hub in Southern Africa.

Xenophobia and the migration question

Economic frustration within poor communities is often redirected toward migrants instead of addressing the structural causes of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Competition over jobs, housing, and social services can generate tensions between local populations and migrants.

Political actors sometimes exploit these frustrations by blaming migrants for economic problems while ignoring broader issues related to capitalist accumulation and unequal development.

During periods of xenophobic violence in South Africa, migrant-owned shops have been looted and foreign workers attacked. Yet migrants themselves are often members of the working class facing similar forms of exploitation and poverty.

Xenophobia weakens working-class unity and

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diverts attention away from the structural inequalities rooted in colonialism and capitalism.

Key lessons

The history of labour migration in Southern Africa demonstrates that migration is deeply connected to colonial capitalism and regional economic dependency. The migrant labour system was deliberately designed to provide cheap labour for mines and industries while enriching mining capital and maintaining regional inequality.

Colonialism destroyed local economies, imposed taxation systems, dispossessed African communities of land, and created labour recruitment structures that forced migration. These historical patterns continue influencing migration today.

The persistence of inequality, unemployment, and social conflict across Southern Africa reflects the enduring impact of colonial economic structures.

Call to action

African workers across borders share common struggles shaped by exploitation, unemployment, repression, and poverty. The central contradiction is not worker against worker, but rather the broader system of capitalist exploitation and inequality.

There is therefore a need to strengthen political education and build class consciousness among the masses when addressing migration issues. Regional solidarity among workers is necessary in confronting exploitation and resisting divisions created through xenophobia.

Campaigns addressing unpaid pensions for mineworkers, compensation for victims of mining industries, and the rights of migrant workers must involve all affected countries across Southern Africa.

Long-term solutions require organised society to form movements capable of confronting exploitation, regional inequality, and state repression while advancing broader class struggle for economic justice and social transformation.



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This is an abridged version of his presentation on 7 May 2026 on the same subject.