Challenging cheap-labour theory: Natal and Transvaal coal miners, ca 1890-1950

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In the first half of the twentieth century, South Africa’s two main coal-producing provinces, Natal and the Transvaal, were regarded as having separate industries. Comparing the two, the article shows that their geology, markets, ownership and organization were distinctive. In contrast, the patterns of labour struggles were alike, reflecting labour processes, racial divisions, and legal and ideological frameworks that were similar. The historiography of South African mining labour has emphasized the role of black migrants, who ‘oscillated’ between the mines and the rural areas from where they originated and to which they retired. While structuralist analyses argued that migrancy was the bedrock of a cheap-labour system that underpinned white power, leading social historians stressed that migrants were primarily rural men. The account presented here rejects the thrust of both positions, showing that a high proportion of coal miners settled around the mines. More of them would have done so had this been permitted, and the same applies to Africans working on the gold mines. Given that cheap-labour theory strengthens the exceptionalism that runs through much South African history, rejecting it can open up new possibilities for comparative study. In passing, the article reveals that black workers participated in the militant 1913 strike by the Witwatersrand’s white mine workers.

Coal mining’s contribution to South African development has been underrated and its history has been under-researched. Without cheap, coal-derived power, combined with low-cost labour, it would not have been possible to exploit the country’s deep-level gold reserves and without this there would have been no modernizing revolution.

This article compares the labour histories of the country’s two main coal-producing provinces: the Transvaal and Natal. In the mid twentieth century, company takeovers and political changes blurred the distinction between the two territories, but in our period the geo-political divide was re-enforced by contrasting geologies, different markets and sources of labour, and separate owners’ organizations. I proceed from a discussion of these considerations, via a section focussing on the structure of the two labour forces, and thence onto an account of workers as agency. What emerges is that, in contrast to the employers’ perception of the industry, the labour histories of the two provinces were remarkably alike. It is suggested that this similarity was rooted in commonalities with regard to production processes, racialized divisions of labour, and legal and ideological frameworks. This leads to the conclusion that South African coal mining had a single labour history. It is a history in which settled black workers played a more significant role.

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than previously recognized. This assessment challenges the theory of cheap-labour, which explained the development of the migrant labour system in terms of economic imperative and instead it gives greater weight to political contingency.

Geology and markets
South Africa’s principal commercial coal-producing areas formed an arc running from northern Natal, into the Eastern Transvaal, westwards to near Johannesburg, then south into the northern Orange Free State. Moving from East to West, the main seams become thicker, from less than 2 metres in Natal to typically 4 metres around Witbank, the central and most important of the Transvaal coal districts. They also come closer to the surface, from an average of about 200 metres below the ground in Natal to rarely more than half this in the Witbank district. In some of the most northern of the Natal collieries, as well as in most of the Transvaal, coal could be mined using adits or inclines, making the process cheaper than if vertical shafts had been required.

Seams were generally horizontal, but in Natal, unlike the Transvaal, they were frequently faulted and cut through or overlaid by igneous intrusions, making mining more complicated. The intrusions also led to the formation of methane (firedamp), and this, together with the presence of a good deal of dust produced many explosions, often fatal. In addition, immediately above the Natal seams there was often a layer of shale, which meant that roofs could be very unstable, leading to many serious accidents. By contrast, roofs in the Transvaal were usually composed of sandstone, which was much stronger, generally making it unnecessary to undertake timbering, a major expense. However, Natal’s coal had one significant advantage: it was generally higher in quality than that of the Transvaal. Heat from the molten intrusions had even changed some of the mid-range bituminous material into genuine coking coal and anthracite.

It is possible that Africans were mining coal before the arrival of whites, though the evidence for this is weak. In Natal, coal was being used by trekkers from the Cape in 1840, and by 1881 it was known that there was a large reserve of the mineral in the colony. However, the coal was located inland, and large-scale production was not viable until railways linked the producing districts with the coast. As Carolyn Brown has observed, the development of railways has been a ‘persistent theme in the history of coal mining and coal miners’. A key date was 1889, when the Durban to Johannesburg line reached a junction near Dundee, the industry’s major centre.

In 1909, 22.6% of Natal’s total output went to exports (and coal had been the colony’s main export for three years). Even more important were the bunkers that serviced the steam-powered ships docking at Durban, and in the same year 46.8% of output went to this market. In 1912 the majority of local collieries participated in the establishment the Natal Coal Owners’ Association (NCOA), through which they aimed to fix the price of bunker coal and divide the trade among themselves. The significance of exports and bunkers was reflected in the fact that, while most of the collieries were locally owned, British shipping interests – notably Union Castle and William Cory – provided finance and had considerable influence. In contrast to these two markets, the demand for Natal coal on the Witwatersrand remained limited to specialist products and in 1909 only 8.5% of total output went to the inland trade.

The fortunes of the Natal industry were closely linked to international events. Wars were generally good for export and bunker sales, though the disruption of shipping at the
beginning of the First World War had an adverse impact. Major strikes, such as those in Britain in 1921 and 1926 and in Australia in 1923, were also beneficial. However, and more significantly, the 1930s slump led to a marked downturn in trade. This is reflected in the graph below (Figure 1).\(^5\) By then, however, the bunker and export markets had passed their peak, with the former experiencing a terminal decline associated with the shift to oil-fuelled shipping, and the latter losing out to Indian and Japanese coal in eastern markets. However, inland trade gradually improved, strengthened from 1931 by the formation of Natal Associated Collieries (NAC), which determined prices and quotas for the local market. While sales to the railways diminished slightly, these were more than replaced by a demand for the province’s coke; a demand that increased after 1934, when the state-owned ISCOR began to produce steel. The largest local user was, however, the electricity supply industry, which continually expanded to supply an economy and particularly a manufacturing sector that experienced rapid and virtually uninterrupted growth after 1933.\(^6\)

The first record of Transvaal coal was provided by Thomas Baines, the traveller and writer, who, in 1868, noted its use by a small group of white farmers. Ten years later, an analytical chemist, Rowland Atcherley, concluded: ‘There can be little doubt but that the whole High Veldt is one immense coal-field, which at some future day is designed to play a most important part in the history of the world’s industry.’\(^7\) While this was perceptive, commercial exploitation had to wait until after 1886, when gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand. Initially most of the new industry’s coal came from the East Rand (some of it from seams lying directly above a gold-bearing reef). By 1892, Brakpan, one of these collieries, was, on its own, producing more coal than the whole of Natal. In 1895, output in the Witbank district, 90 miles to the east of Johannesburg, was given a boost by the opening of the Pretoria to Delagoa Bay railway line, which cut through the area. With the gradual exhaustion of the East Rand collieries and the completion of a direct rail link to the Witwatersrand in 1906, Witbank emerged as South Africa’s premier source of coal.

![Figure 1. South African coal output 1900–49.](image-url)
Its output grew steadily, and by 1920 it was producing 5.6 million tons of coal, 48.6% of South Africa’s total.8

In 1907, representatives of most of the Transvaal collieries met and agreed that ‘an effort should be made to stop the severe and ruinous competition between [them] by combining together to charge a fair and reasonable price for their coal’.9 They established the Transvaal Coal Owners’ Association (TCOA), which, long before the NCOA had been formed, was agreeing production quotas and selling coal at a fixed price, and doing this not only for the bunker trade but also for exports and the South African market. By 1920, the TCOA was responsible for 88.1% of all coal sold by Transvaal and Orange Free State collieries (which, for simplicity, we can refer to as the highveld collieries). One of the TCOA’s successes had been that of establishing an export and bunker trade at Delagoa Bay, but this trade represented only 16.1% of total highveld sales in 1920. Meanwhile, 23.8% of the two province’s marketed output went directly to the gold mines, with another 15.5% going to the production of electricity, the main user of which was the gold mines.10

By 1920, the Transvaal was producing 62.5% of South Africa’s total output of 11.5 million tons, with 28.9% coming from Natal and a further 8.4% from the Orange Free State. Twenty-nine years later, with total output at 27.6 million tons, 69.5% came from the Transvaal and only 18.9% from Natal. As can be gauged from Figure 1, the Transvaal coal industry obtained greater benefit from the industrialization and general economic expansion that occurred in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s. The main issue was that of price. In 1939, for example, the average pit’s mouth price of coal was 4s 11d in the Transvaal and 6s 7d in Natal. At this date, the Transvaal’s 18,769 employees produced 663 tons of coal per person, while Natal’s 13,531 were producing only 313 tons each. The Transvaal’s output was more capital intensive and it was also more efficient, with every £1 invested producing 2.27 tons of coal, compared with only 1.87 tons in Natal.11

As with the Natal industry, most of the Transvaal collieries were locally owned (though funds were often raised in London and even Paris). However, in contrast to the close link between the Natal industry and shipping interests, the Transvaal industry was closely associated with the Witwatersrand gold industry. By 1920, three of the Rand’s major mining houses already owned collieries. By 1945, Lewis and Marks, which owned one colliery in Natal as well as many in the Orange Free State and Transvaal, was responsible for nearly one-third of all South African output. In that year, it sold all its mining interests to Anglo-American, the largest producer of gold, which thus became the biggest player in South African coal mining, a position that it holds to this day. In time, Transvaal-based capital – including state capital in the form of ISCOR – would extend its control over Natal’s collieries, thereby creating, in effect, a single South African coal industry.12

In 1913, at least nine countries were producing more coal than South Africa. In 1949, by which date its output had increased threefold, South Africa still lagged behind France, Japan, India and Belgium, as well as the really big producers, the USA, the UK and Germany, but it had overtaken Canada and Australia.13 Most of the country’s output came from the Transvaal, which also experienced the greatest proportional increase in production. The province benefited from having huge, thick seams that were uncomplicated and close to the surface, and also from the location of its collieries close to the gold mines. In contrast, the destiny of Natal’s collieries was linked primarily to shipping and exports, producing a market and investment that were more unstable.
The fortunes of both industries were also, however, related to one other major factor, access to a supply of low-cost labour.

Work and race

The most obvious social distinction on the collieries was that between whites and Africans. The former were generally married and permanent, while the latter were mostly single and migrant. It is likely that all the whites were paid more than all the Africans, certainly this was the case in the Transvaal in 1921. In Natal, but not the Transvaal, there were also many Indian workers, and their conditions were generally akin to those of Africans. Racial division, which was such a powerful feature of colliery life, was rooted in the structure and ideology of colonial domination, migration, the character of the societies from whence the different groups came, legislation and the process of mining coal.14

The proportion of whites on the Natal collieries declined from 11.1% in 1889 to 4.0% in 1916, thereafter remaining under 5.0%. In the Transvaal there was a decline from 7.3% in 1896 to 4.4% in 1906, and then a gradual increase, reaching 7.0% in 1949.15 The similarity between the two provinces is striking. In both cases, whites were employed in two broad categories. There were ‘staff’, which included all employees receiving a monthly salary, whether a colliery manager or a clerk, and there were ‘men’, who were paid a wage calculated on an hourly basis. ‘Men’ included ‘miners’, whose main job was that of supervising a gang of maybe 50 black ‘labourers’ and ‘mechanics’, skilled workers who normally worked with one or two black assistants.16 In 1921, in Natal, about 31% of white employees were staff, 25% were miners and 45% were ‘others’ (mostly mechanics); for the Transvaal, the respective figures were 26, 19 and 54%.17 The lower figure for ‘others’ in Natal, and perhaps for the overall proportion of whites, was probably because some skilled jobs there were open to Indians.18 However, in both provinces, all better-paid positions were subject to a colour bar, either legal or customary; in the case of miners, this was legal in the Transvaal but customary in Natal.19

Most of the whites came from Britain. Particularly among the more senior staff a high proportion was Scottish, but one also comes across men from Wales, Northumberland, Cornwall and elsewhere.20 For mining in general – that is, including the much larger gold industry – it was reported that by 1921 nearly 52% of the Transvaal whites, though less than 34% of those in Natal, were born in South Africa, and a good number of these would have been Afrikaners.21 While there were cultural differences among the whites, these were tiny compared to the gulf that separated them from African workers. The gap was reflected in and reinforced by virtually every aspect of life: legal and political rights, language, conditions of employment, accommodation, food, dress, religion and recreational activities. In 1921, Africans received, on average, only 11% of the wages paid to the average white miners and mechanics. This was in the Transvaal, but the position in Natal was similar.22 In emphasizing the importance of ‘race’, we should not, however, underestimate the class differences among the whites. In the 1920s, the Transvaal’s top manager was paid about 16 times as much as an ordinary miner.23

In Natal, Indian employees increased from 9.3% of the workforce in 1889 to 37.7% in 1910. Thereafter the figure declined to 29.5% in 1915 and 9.4% by 1925.24 Most of these workers were indentured labourers. Unlike local Africans, they could not easily ‘desert’. Moreover, with pay for an underground indentured labourer starting at 15s (a little higher than on the sugar fields), they cost as little as one-quarter of the amount paid to
Africans. Some employers would have taken more such workers, but they were not always available, and their numbers diminished following the Indian government’s 1911 decision to halt new indentures. In order to retain free Indian workers, the collieries had to increase pay substantially, so that by 1919 the average Indian colliery employee received about £2 11s per month, compared to an average of £2 8s for Africans (about the same as was paid to Africans in the Transvaal). In this year, the slightly superior treatment of Indians, which also included more expensive food, was justified in racial terms: Africans were said to be ‘more mechanical and less intelligent’.

Even in Natal, the majority of the workforce always consisted of Africans. The employers periodically complained that supplies of local Zulu workers were inadequate, blaming touts working on behalf of the gold mines for this state of affairs. While there was some truth to their claim, other factors were at work, including the fact that in Zululand, unlike many other parts of the country, the land still provided possibilities for subsistence agriculture. The government’s reply to a request for a ban on outside recruiters was simple: ‘To close five [colliery] districts for the purpose of safeguarding the interests of the Collieries, employing 6,700 natives out of a total population of 142,182, is not a proposal [we] could possibly entertain.’ The collieries responded by using agents, sometimes storekeepers, to recruit labour from further afield; from the Transkei, Lesotho, Swaziland and even Malawi. Such long-distance migrants tended to be more reliable than local recruits, who generally preferred to work on their fields during the busy season (July–September). In order to retain African workers, many owners encouraged them to develop a permanent village – usually roughly constructed – adjacent to their colliery. Despite the fact that from 1925 the government attempted to limit the number of married Africans within each colliery workforce to 15%, by 1938 it was being estimated that ‘some 65% of the labour force of the major Natal collieries consisted of permanent labourers who, together with their families, viewed the collieries as “home”’. Another strategy was to provide workers with an advance on their pay in the form of ‘tokens’; these could be spent in local stores, notably to purchase alcohol, and at the end of the month workers’ wages would go directly into the hands of the storekeeper. This was a form of debt-bondage, and in 1938 it was prohibited by the government.

One thing the Natal collieries steadfastly refused to do, despite urgings from the government, was establish a recruiting organization. According to Bill Guest ‘they feared the financial implications’. It was not until 1943 that the Natal Coal Owners’ Society (NCOS) (formed in 1909) overcame its misgivings and established the Natal Coal Owners’ Native Labour Association (NCONLA). This was more than 40 years after the formation of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (referred to as ‘Wenela’). Although the Transvaal collieries benefited from Wenela, it had been created by the Chamber of Mines, the gold industry’s powerful co-ordinating body. In 1901, as a consequence of the Modus Vivendi between the new British rulers of the Transvaal and the Portuguese, Wenela secured a recruiting monopoly in Mozambique. This provided the gold mines and collieries with privileged access to workers who might otherwise have been required to engage in ‘xibalo’ (forced labour for the Portuguese). Wenela’s recruits were transported across vast distances by foot, sea and rail, and then held at a compound in Johannesburg or Witbank before being taken to their gold mine or colliery. On the completion of a contract – which was supposed to last 365 days, but usually took much longer – the process was reversed. It was later explained that support for the highveld
collieries was because of ‘the importance of the coal output to the Gold Mines and the desire of the latter to avoid competitive recruiting’.36

In 1908, Wenela agreed to supply 60% of the collieries’ requirement for ‘native’ labour, increasing the figure to 90% in 1918, before cutting it back to 80 per cent in 1920.37 Thereafter, for the Chamber’s collieries (most of those on the highveld), there was a decline in the proportion of African workers coming from Mozambique. Nevertheless, the figure fluctuated between 53.4% in 1925, 43.3% in 1936, 61.2 per cent in 1944 and 52.9 per cent in 1949. After Mozambicans, the next largest group of workers were Sotho speakers. In 1941, 42.1% of African workers on the Chamber’s collieries came from either Lesotho or from the Transvaal itself and one assumes that the majority of the latter were speakers of the Pedi language, a variant of Sotho. For our period, this was the highest figure for workers from these two territories.38 In 1939, William Gemmill, then Wenela’s general manager, distinguished between South African workers (which included those from Lesotho), who he said were ‘induced’ to work for the collieries, and the Mozambicans, who were ‘compelled’ to do so.39

In 1913, at the Mozambican border town of Ressano Garcia, when recruits were informed that they were destined for the collieries, rather than the gold mines, there was what one Wenela official described as a ‘more or less absolute mutiny’.40 Concerned that poor conditions on the collieries might jeopardize all supplies of Mozambican labour, Wenela drew-up an agreement on minimum conditions of employment, and the following year, under considerable pressure, this was accepted by the newly formed Collieries Committee (CC). The main elements of that concordat, which would significantly improve conditions for African colliery workers, included average pay of 2s per hour for underground workers, a working week of 57 hours and the implementation of minimum standards for food and accommodation provided in the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911. Wenela then enforced these conditions by means of twice-yearly inspections and the threat, occasionally enforced, of restrictions on allocations of labour.41

It is likely that food and accommodation were similar to those in Natal, at least in the years following the First World War. However, in one significant respect the Transvaal workers were better off: whether they were black or white and in common with the situation on the gold mines, they were paid whether or not there was work for them to do. In Natal, as was the practice in coal mining elsewhere in the world, unavailability of railway trucks, a fairly frequent problem, or a slump in sales, as during the 1930s, would lead to a cut in income (and, again, this affected white as well as black workers). One possible reason for these contrasts between the two provinces was that the gold industry provided a more even flow of work than that usual in Natal, where the bunker and export trades could produce large swings in demand.42

In the Transvaal, as in Natal, many employers encouraged their black workers to settle with a family close to their colliery, either building, or allowing their workers to build, a ‘native village’ with thatched houses and, sometimes, ‘native gardens’. By 1924, the number of women who had a permit to live on a colliery in the Witbank district was nearly 25% the number of African workers in the area. At this point, the authorities decided to intervene and while the collieries initially opposed any restrictions, a split developed, and in 1926 the CC agreed to the 15% limit.43 Nevertheless, by 1939, the Witbank magistrate was complaining that ‘[a]round all the mine properties are congregated collections of native huts, occupied mostly by native women’, and, in 1941, because of the need for increased production to meet war needs, coupled with a shortage of building
materials, the government suspended its ‘regulations for the control of native married quarters’.[44] A Witbank mine clerk later recalled (‘with gusto’) that colliery workers ‘enjoyed themselves on these farms [adjacent to the collieries] – women there, beer there, lovers there.’[45] This shift towards the development of a stabilized workforce, similar to that in Natal, raises two interesting theoretical concerns. First, we need to modify the idea, which holds a pivotal position within South African historical sociology, that oscillating or circulatory migration was necessary to ensure the profitability of the country’s gold mines. With the collieries – and, actually, this was also true for the gold mines – restrictions on settlement, hence pressure to ‘oscillate’, were introduced in opposition to the owners and for reasons of policing not profit.[46] Second, we need to challenge a more recent conclusion that migrant workers resisted proletarianization. It is clear that, even before the 1920s, many Africans were already committed to urban life.[47] I will return to this later.

In both provinces, collieries generally used the bord (or room) and pillar method of extraction, which was also common in other countries, notably Britain.[48] Unlike the position elsewhere – where a pair of miners, or a hewer and his assistant, worked each room – in South Africa mining was undertaken by a large team working under the supervision of a ‘miner’, and there was an extensive division of labour.[49] In 1931, a typical miners’ section in Witbank was said to include 20 loaders, 8 drillers, 5 coal cutters, 16 on haulage and other duties and one ‘boss boy’.[50] This specific form of bord and pillar mining was, to the best of my knowledge, unique. Its origin is unclear, but it seems to have existed in the earliest commercial collieries and was probably an adjustment – racially conceived – to South African conditions.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the collieries, especially those in the Transvaal, introduced coal cutting machinery remarkably quickly. By 1920, 82% of the province’s coal was mechanically cut, compared to 52% in Natal, 60% in the USA and only 13% in the UK.[51] There were various reasons for this phenomenon, including the relatively high concentration of capital, the dating of the collieries’ development, the character of the province’s seams, and the need to expand production rapidly (especially during the war), but also, perhaps, the existing division of labour, which would have eased the process of change. In the case of the 1931 miner’s section, both the undercutting and the drilling of holes would have been undertaken mechanically, but loading tubs and tramming them to a main haulage would have been manual.

As a means of overcoming the bias in comparative analysis towards emphasizing differences, it is worth pausing to consider a secondary comparison. Let us place the division of labour in the two territories’ coal industries alongside that in the Witwatersrand gold industry. With regard to pay and conditions there were broad similarities, implying commonalities in terms of labour markets and the nature of the work performed. However, whereas in coal mining blacks outnumbered whites by about 20 to one, in gold the figure was approximately ten to one. This contrast reflected differences between mining a seam of soft rock, and following a vein embedded in hard rock. The latter was more complex and required greater supervision, and it was also much more difficult to mechanize. A further distinction was that of magnitude, with gold mines employing, on average, more than five times as many workers as collieries (2370 compared to 420 in 1920).[52] Finally, the collieries were far more dependent on settled workers than the gold mines (where the proportion of miners living in married quarters was limited to 3%). There may have been various reasons for this difference, but it is likely that the larger size of the gold mines meant that ‘villages’ posed a greater potential threat.
It would be wrong to suggest there were no noteworthy differences between the two provinces in terms of employment practices. The use of indentured labour, recruitment by Wenela, and guaranteed minimum pay in the Transvaal, for instance, were all in their own way significant, and each affected the detailed history of the two industries. However, set against the backdrop of the differences between the two territories that were outlined in the first section and through the contrast with South African gold mining, the similarities seem more interesting. We turn now to an account of labour as agency, before attempting to draw conclusions about the possible relationships between key differences and similarities.

Striking divisions and similarities

There may have been colliery strikes before 1913, but I have no record of them. 1913, however, was a dramatic year. The really big event was a strike by white gold miners on the Rand. This started on 27 May at New Kleinfontein mine, where there was a particularly aggressive manager and a tradition of union militancy. From there it spread, with strikers touring mines pulling out workers as they went. On 4 July a general strike was declared, and by the following day all the Rand’s mines and power stations were shut. On the evening of 4 July, following a mass meeting in Johannesburg, strikers, many of them armed, dispersed across the city. Gun shops were looted, the main railway good's shed was burnt down, and the premises of the leading newspaper and the headquarters of a key mining house were attacked. The Rand Club, the randlord’s social centre, would probably have been destroyed had it not been for the presence of a detachment of British cavalry, which fired on the crowd. Generals Botha and Smuts, the prime minister and his deputy, rushed to Johannesburg, where, since it was clear that government forces lacked the ability to retain control, they met with strike leaders and agreed a truce. The rioting had cost 24 lives, including 11 miners. John Lang, the mining historian, was probably correct to conclude that ‘the strikers might have driven a harder bargain’, but in the weeks and months that followed it was clear that the strikers had been the victors. Local disputes were won and union membership grew rapidly.53

During the strike there were numerous attempts to secure support from African mine workers. Historians have largely assumed that even where there was a response this was minimal and probably based on intimidation by white strikers. In some instances threats were almost certainly made, but statements by African workers and, in particular, a report by H.M. Taberer, the influential head of the Wenela compound in Johannesburg, suggest an alternative assessment. According to one African, his white ‘boss’ told him: ‘it us up to you boys to unite together and demand five shillings a day’. The proposal for a 5s increase appears in other places too.54 Taberer specified five mines where, between 14 June and 1 July, there were stoppages by Africans, and noted: ‘in some instances armed forces had to be utilized to intimidate the natives to return to work’. Reflecting on consciousness, he added: ‘The Natives feel that they are the workers and if the White Men have anything to strike for, they (the Natives) have very much more.’55 He subsequently concluded: ‘In contrast to the attitude towards native Labourers taken up by the European [gold mine] Strikers in 1907, these strikers in July 1913 identified themselves with the Natives by trying to get them to join issue and thus they put themselves on a par with the Native Labourers.’56 Three days after the white miners strike had ended, an estimated 13,000 black miners came out en masse demanding more pay. Six hundred Swazis wore red
rosettes, like those of the whites, and others of the strikers formed pickets and threatened to kill scabs, but with the white strike finished, the authorities were able to turn their force against this action. Beating strikers and imprisoning leaders, they ensured defeat and demoralization.57

The white miners’ strike framed subsequent events, but as yet there had been no action on the collieries (though there had been the ‘mutiny’ at Ressano Garcia). That changed on 16 October, when Indian miners at Farleigh Colliery, near Newcastle in northern Natal, stopped work. By the end of the month the strike had spread to all but five of the province’s collieries, involving at least 2800 Indian colliery workers, and it extended further with Indians employed in other industries also joining the action. This is remembered as the strike led by Mohandas Gandhi and, while he and the satyagrahis were centrally involved, they were taken aback by the scale of the movement. Maureen Swan, the event’s leading historian, suggests that the stoppage, which was able to reduce production to one-third of its normal level, had roots in compound organization. The main demand was for the government to withdraw a £3 poll tax imposed on freed Indians. Most of the strikers were indentured, and it was said they were acting out of sympathy (though of course most would also be free before long). On 29 October – the day the colliery owners stopped providing rations – Gandhi led a march of 4000 strikers and dependents towards the Transvaal, entry into which was illegal for most Indians. At the border, Gandhi and the strikers courted imprisonment (which would have meant food being provided at the state’s expense), but Smuts played a waiting came, stretching the movement’s limited resources, until after many days he arrested the marchers, sending the colliery workers back to their mines as prison labour.58

By 12 November most strikers had returned to work, but as they did so thousands of sugar workers and other Indians in the coastal areas came out on strike. While there were still some workers on strike well into December, the coastal movement was leaderless and confused. The deputy commissioner of mines for Natal commented, condescendingly but presciently: ‘The average Indian here knows that he is better off than if he were in India, but he apparently realizes that a good deal of trouble could be raised in India, which would have the effect of bringing pressure on the Government.’59 Indeed, with a world-wide protest developing and the Viceroy of India publicly criticizing South Africa, Smuts appointed a special commission, recommendations from which led to the repeal of the tax. The government might have backed down sooner, but it feared that this could provoke a strike by African workers, who would gain the confidence necessary to press their own claims. The deputy commissioner wrote in no uncertain terms: ‘The natives here were closely watching the action of the Indians, and if they had been successful, there is no doubt but that a Kafir strike would have followed at no distant date, as just at the present time natives are much unsettled on account of the dipping regulations and dog-tax.’60

The African strike did not happen and yet another opportunity for interracial united action was missed, but unrest among African workers persisted.

During the Indian colliery strike, the Mine Workers’ Union (MWU) and the Engine Driver’s Association (EDA), fresh from their victory on the Rand, were rapidly recruiting new members among Natal’s white colliery workers. On 9 December, just as the coastal strikes were coming to an end, the colliery engine drivers came out on strike. Within two days they had secured a 1s–3s increase in their pay, improving it to 18s per shift. This gave a boost to the miners and, on 1 January 1914, 90 out of the 190 of them in the province started a strike, demanding a 57 hour week and the same 18s. When the owners agreed to
the hours demand and offered 17s, some of the men wanted to return to work, but their leaders, who came from the Rand, were more aware of the bigger picture and insisted that the strike continue. On 8 January, railway workers in Pretoria and Johannesburg struck, partly over retrenchments, and the stoppage soon spread to railway workers around the country. On 10 January, with nine labour leaders having been arrested the day before, the executive of the Federation of Trades ordered a ballot for a general strike, which was won, and on the morning of 14 January this strike began.

The Witbank collieries were seen as a potential flash point for, as Tudor Trevor, the Inspector of Mines for Pretoria District, had advised back in September 1913: ‘In the event of [militants wishing to damage] ... the Gold Mining Industry and through it the general public of the Country, the most vulnerable point which they can attack is the coal supply. ... 74% [of Transvaal coal] was derived from the Witbank area, which is therefore by far the largest supplier of coal both to the Railways and to the Gold Mines.’ He added that the white colliery workers were ‘all members of the Unions and it is believed that they will unhesitatingly obey any orders given by the Union.’ By 8 January the following forces were available to ‘protect’ the Witbank collieries: 30 mounted police (fully armed), 60 Active Citizen Force members (fully armed) and 525 members of the Defence Rifle Association (approximately 50% armed). At some point the Witbank workers did join the strike, but it is not clear when. On 12 January it was reported that they had voted unanimously for the general strike, so there is a good chance that they came out on 14 January.

This time, Smuts had prepared his forces well, and he may even have provoked the general strike intentionally. At midnight on 14 January martial law was declared and the following day there were numerous arrests. These included leaders of the Natal strike, the Pretoria strike committee and 200 miners on the East Rand (following the throwing of a bomb at the police); and the strikers headquarters in Johannesburg were ‘surrendered’ to the police. A big problem for the strike was that support from gold miners was very limited. In Natal, the coal miners were also disappointed by the refusal of the colliery engine drivers to join their stoppage. On 16 January, the Witbank strike was called off, and on 22 January the general action was also terminated. By the latter date, most strikers, including those on the Natal collieries, had already returned and on 26 January this local action was finally ended. The Natal miners experienced a humiliating defeat, with the working week set at 60 hours and many strikers demoted. According to Ruth Edgecombe, there were no further strikes by the province’s white miners until after 1950.

One other feature of the 1914 strikes is worthy of note. On 1 January, the first day of the Natal miners’ strike, 300 African workers’ at Natal Navigation Colliery struck for higher pay and the following day 700 Africans at Glencoe colliery joined the fray. The former were out for two days and the latter, who had 13 ‘ringleaders’ arrested, remained on strike for three days. It is possible that some whites from Johannesburg may have encouraged the strikes, but Edgecombe says that, when the Glencoe strikers danced around the quarters of the white miners, while their intention may have been to encourage the whites, the effect was to frighten them. The strikes, though not successful, were a further indication of the willingness of African workers to learn from white militancy. They were also the first recorded strikes by African colliery workers, and were a precursor of battles to come.

Witbank’s white colliery workers were on strike again in 1922, and this was a far more serious conflict. The strike was provoked by the colliery owners, who, backed by the
government, cut wages and refused to arbitrate. It involved nearly 800 workers, almost all the mechanics and miners employed by the highveld collieries. Starting on 2 January, it soon became enmeshed in the much larger strike by 20,000 Rand gold miners. This massive conflict came to a climax on 6 March, when a general strike was declared. However, over the next two days there were race riots in Johannesburg, and Smuts, now the prime minister, used these to justify the declaration of martial law. Once more, he was well prepared and repressed the workers with great force, with more than a hundred people losing their lives. The strike was called off on 16 March. On the collieries, production was maintained by white staff and black labourers. The whites, but not the Africans, were treated as scabs, but on the collieries no attempt was made to involve Africans in the strike. One wonders whether the failure to secure effective solidarity in 1913 had taken its toll. The workers were badly beaten, nearly half the colliery strikers lost their jobs, the miners’ union collapsed and, as in Natal, there were no further stoppages by whites on the coal mines for the remainder of the period.

By the time that strikes by white workers had come to an end, black strikes were only just beginning. During 1918, in the 10 weeks from 12 August there was an unprecedented show of militancy by African workers on the Witbank collieries. In that period there were stoppages at eight collieries. The first involved 1200 strikers, three-quarters of the African workforce at Tweefontein Colliery, with more than half of them ‘breaking out of the compound’ and marching the 14 miles to Witbank. The marchers, who were said to be ‘rather excited but well behaved’, presented their grievances to the relevant authorities – the Wenela compound manager, the representative of the curator of Portuguese natives and the Inspector of Native Affairs – then, after receiving coffee and porridge at the Wenela compound, they were persuaded to return (by foot). The general pattern of this protest, with its march to Witbank and its involvement of key officials, was followed in the other seven strikes and, indeed, in many more to come. The march was a quintessentially Mozambican tactic. It could be defended as a request to be returned home and might illicit sympathy from Wenela officials concerned to maintain uninterrupted supplies of labour – possibilities that did not exist for the South African miners. Various issues were raised by the strikers, including increased prices at company stores, assaults by white miners and ‘broken shifts’ (according to which a daily task could take several days to complete). The demands were seriously considered, with the owners sometimes having to make concessions. In an analysis of these and five other strikes that occurred before 1926, it was found that there was a strong inverse relationship between occurrence of strikes and high proportions of married workers. In other words, oscillating migrants were more likely to become strikers than were settled workers.

A similar, though more focussed, wave of African strikes occurred in Natal during April 1919. Early in the month, representatives from two collieries, Glencoe and St. George’s, asked for improved pay, justifying this by reference to inflation. From the Chief Native Commissioner for Natal we learn that in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, there had been ‘similar agitation’ and that ‘requests ... were met in various ways’. The owners agreed to discuss the matter, but did not meet before the worker’s ‘request’ had been reinforced by strikes on at least three collieries. However, on 23 April, they agreed to raise pay by 5s for those receiving up to £2 15s per 30 working days, and by 7s 6d for those paid above this amount. Despite this, there was a strike at Burnside Colliery, where about 1000 workers were ‘holding out for a 100% increase’ (the precise meaning of which is unclear). Here, strikers, carrying sticks and iron drills, had their ‘mutiny’ suppressed by
detachments of 150 artillery soldiers and 80 African police, all equipped with pick handles. There were then strikes at two other collieries, again over pay, though the specific reasons are not given. In contrast to Witbank it seems likely that, in general, strikers just gathered together and awaited the arrival of state officials (in practice these were the Magistrate, the Inspector of Native Labourers and, at Burnside, the Commissioner). Despite the peaceful character of all but this one strike, ‘ring-leaders of the various mines were arrested and sentenced to five months imprisonment with hard labour’.68

In the month after these strikes, in May 1919, workers at Tweefontein struck again, this time making ‘a definite and determined demand for more pay’. The compound manager reported: ‘The natives argued that if the Miners were worth £2 per day, they, the natives, should receive 10s per day.’ The following year, 1920, the demand for 10s would figure prominently among those raised in the strike by more than 70,000 black, gold mine workers, and it was presented again in the even larger 1946 African miners’ strike (a strike which, like that in 1920, was limited to the Rand). However, to the best of my knowledge, the historic demand for 10s per day was first stipulated at Tweefontein. Given that, at the time, most workers received only 2s or thereabouts, 10s must have seemed almost revolutionary, especially as it was backed by a strike that was described by a Wenela inspector as ‘well organized’, and included workers using pick handles and bricks against their white opponents. Needless to say, the strike was eventually beaten, and the leaders were imprisoned with hard labour. For South Africa’s black colliery workers, the consciousness reflected in this action was exceptional, and nothing like it was repeated in our period. Nor, indeed, were there further concentrations of strikes like those described above.69

For the period from mid 1918 to the end of 1949, it has been possible to construct a list of 84 black colliery strikes in South Africa; 62 of these were on the highveld and 22 were in Natal.70 For labour historians of the USA or Britain this must seem like a small number, even if we make allowance for the relatively small size of the industry and, even, perhaps, if we were to add that the strikers were non-unionized, non-citizens engaged in illegal acts. Nevertheless, it probably meant that coal mining was the most strike prone industry in South Africa (as, of course, it was in many other countries). Narrowing our focus to the years 1939–48, a period for which we have data for all industries, in highveld coal mining there were, on average, 57 strikers per thousand workers per year. This was higher than for any other groups of black workers, including those in the closely-related gold industry, which, even though it employed about 344,000 workers on average, experienced, to my knowledge, only nine stoppages involving black workers. Notwithstanding the fact that these disputes included the industry-wide 1946 strike, the number of strikers per thousand workers averaged only about 22 per year.71

In general, the Natal strikes were very similar to those in the Transvaal. Following E.P. Thompson and, in a South African mining context, Dunbar Moodie, we might describe them as ‘moral economy’ disputes.72 Unlike the Tweefontein stoppage, they were all defensive in character; that is, protests in defence of established norms, rather than attempts at challenging the status quo. On the highveld, the most common complaints involved assaults, food, payment of wages, hours, and inaction of someone in authority (usually in response to another grievance). In Natal, the issues were very similar, though they also included protests about a failure to provide wages promised by a recruiting agent, changes to working practices, interference in leisure activities and aspects of the token system. Moreover, all the stoppages were short lived; rarely more than three days in
duration and usually less. Sometimes, for various specific reasons, there was violence, but most disputes were peaceful. Moreover, nearly all strikes were settled through the intervention of an agent of outside authority, who was perceived as a guardian of the norms (generally this was a representative of the government’s Department of Native Affairs). However, at least in the case of the highveld collieries, the norms that were being defended can be traced back to the ‘more or less absolute mutiny’ and the 1914 agreement that followed. That is, the ‘moral economy’ was rooted in the political economy of an earlier era.\(^7^3\)

In attempting to explain the militancy of the colliery workers, a number of factors should be considered. First, in contrast to many if not most of South Africa’s industrial and commercial workers, they constituted what, in their classic study, Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel called an ‘isolated mass’.\(^7^4\) In particular, the compound created communities without class divisions; spaces where the workers could organize. Moreover, the colliery not only employed the workers, it also provided housing and food (and in limited ways it assisted with health care and social activities), and this substantially increased the range of possibilities for disputes with the employers. While black gold miners were no less a mass than their colliery cousins, they were less isolated. This was important because it meant that the collieries were far from large concentrations of police (an issue not considered, I think, by other writers). In the case of sustained rioting, police were brought in from Pretoria, but the city was about 70 miles away, and it could take a day to mobilize and transport sufficient men to quell a disturbance. Within the local balance of forces, this simple geographical reality gave weight to the workers’ claims. Finally, in a comment on the analysis presented here, Gwede Mantashe, former general secretary of the National Union of Mine Workers and once a colliery worker, suggested that the greater militancy of the collieries, compared to the gold mines, might have been because they were smaller; this, he said, had been the case in the 1980s, especially in the 1987 strike (then the largest in South African history). His argument was that, because they were smaller, the collieries were easier to organize to the point where it was possible to halt production across a whole mine.\(^7^5\)

Our knowledge of union organization on the collieries remains patchy. As we have seen, white miners and at least some of the mechanics were in unions at the time of the 1913/14 and 1922 strikes. In Witbank, the MWU, the EDA and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers were all active in the 1922 strike.\(^7^6\) In Natal, the Natal Mineworkers’ Association broke away from the MWU in 1916, but rejoined in 1935.\(^7^7\) From sporadic references and general knowledge of South African labour history it is safe to assume that these three unions and possibly others remained a presence on the collieries, but there is space for further research. With Indians, S.G. Moodley was organizing a Natal Non-European Mine Workers’ Union by 1941, and this was formally registered in June 1942. At some point in 1944 it had 238 members, but this figure probably excluded African members, who could not be officially included because they were not employees. Two years later, a review of the union’s books showed it to have 146 Indian and 557 African members. In June 1947 the union was de-registered on grounds of inactivity.\(^7^8\)

Among Africans, the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), which was really a mass movement rather than a trade union, may have had some influence in both provinces in the late 1920s. For Natal, a 1927 report to the Secretary for Labour concluded: ‘Considerable interest [in the ICU] was shown by the natives to begin with, but the indications now are that their interest is on the wane . . . . We are unable to say whether
or not the ICU has been responsible for inculcating the strike idea. In the same year, Witbank's head constable assured himself that there was no ICU involvement in a strike at Schoongezicht Colliery. Nevertheless the scale of the movement and the tone of his comment makes one wonder whether this was the full story. In the 1940s, Natal had the African Coal Workers' Union in 1943 and the Natal Bantu Coal Mine Workers' Union in 1946. For Witbank, it was said that the African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU), presumably the same one that led the 1946 strike, had distributed a leaflet in 1944, and in the same year a body calling itself the ICU wanted to organize at one colliery. Again in 1944, there was a Transvaal African Cartage & Transport Workers' Union asking for permission to unionize all the collieries, and in 1946, after the great strike, an African Coal Mine Workers' Union was demanding 10s per shift. However, there is no evidence that any of these 1940s unions amounted to more than a leaflet or letter and maybe a meeting, combined, no doubt, with a good measure of enthusiasm and/or opportunism.

In reflecting on the account of strikes and unionization presented above, one is struck by a number of issues. First, perhaps contrary to expectations, there were few strikes among whites and only one that was successful (and that was by a tiny group, the colliery engine drivers in Natal). It is probably significant that, unlike blacks, white workers could defend their interests through collective bargaining and political participation. Second, the Indian workers only struck once and, unusually, that was over a political rather than an industrial demand, leading to a political victory and industrial weakness. Interestingly, they obtained some leverage from their links to the Indian government. Third, in terms of strike action, Africans were both more active and more effective than whites and Indians. With the ability to stop production, but lacking political influence, this might not seem so surprising. Yet, despite the fact that their strikes were nominally illegal, they were sometimes successful. This was probably related to a number of factors: they did not demand very much (with one exception), they ably exploited a concern to uphold rules, through the compounds they often mobilized effectively, and the local police were generally too weak to restrain them. Fourth, for an approach of this kind, a union would not have helped. Indeed, by raising the stakes or by holding workers back at the wrong time it might actually have been a hindrance. Fifth, there were attempts to organize across racial divides, notably during 1913 and also the Non-European Mine Workers' Union, but the rifts remained deep. Sixth, for whites especially, racial divisions were not the only ones that mattered, and they suffered, for instance, from gold miners and railway workers or engine drivers and coal miners coming out on strike at different times, rather than together.

Finally, while there were few movements attempting to co-ordinate inter-provincial actions (the white 1913 strike being the main exception), there were no major differences in patterns of mobilization between the two provinces. Obviously this generalization does not apply to Indians and Natal’s whites were not involved in the 1922 strike, but otherwise it does hold, in particular to the pattern of black strikes (except that Mozambicans liked to hold marches) and to the absence of white strikes after the defeats of 1914 and 1922. Moreover, while the white miners had links to the gold miners, mobilization among blacks was separate from that on the Rand.

Conclusions: commonalties and theories
From the employers’ perspective there were two distinct coal industries. This was reflected in the separation of Wenela, TCOA and the CC from NCOS, NCOA, NAC and
NCONLA. Their thinking reflected, in particular, a recognition that the major markets for their products were different. Leading players within these markets had direct interests in the collieries (something that often happened in other countries too), thus reinforcing the contrast between the two provinces. In the case of the Transvaal, the well organized Chamber of Mines enforced a greater level of unity than could have been achieved in Natal by the competing shipping interests. This primary source of difference between the two provinces was reinforced by the Transvaal’s access to Mozambican labour, which was secured though the influence of the gold mines, and by access to indentured labour in Natal. In addition, given that mines were generally run by engineers, it is not surprising that there was a strong awareness of dissimilarities in mining conditions (with these predicated upon different geologies). Moreover, owners and senior managers, and to some extent white workers, would have been more aware than black workers of the differences between Boer and British rule and between the influence wielded by the dominant capitalist interests (gold in the Transvaal and sugar in Natal).

By contrast, the perspective of workers is shaped less by markets, geology and contact with political elites and more by the nature of work and conditions of employment. Here, notwithstanding differences – greater stability of employment in the Transvaal, indenture in Natal, etc. – there were marked similarities. These likenesses were strongly racialized, with differences between races that were almost the same in both provinces. This sameness was rooted in technologies and techniques of production – and, hence, divisions of labour and forms of work – that were common to both the Transvaal and Natal. In part these reflected the fact that the structure of the dual labour market was influenced by broadly similar sources of labour supply. To a significant degree, they were a consequence of both industries operating within a framework provided by the same national state, at least from 1902. This framework included legislation such as the 1911 Mines and Works Act and 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act. Significantly, the paternalism embedded in a third important statute, the Native Labour Regulation Act, offered black workers some limited protection and it provided the legal basis for the Department of Native Affairs, whose officials could be a source of some redress, helping to mould the characteristic form of protest among black workers.

Finally, the division of labour and the statutory framework were justified by and partly a product of the political economy and ideology of imperialism articulating with particular and largely similar indigenous economies and cultures. Also, even before the creation of the South African state, Britain was the hegemonic power in the region, with implications for sources of investment, machinery and skilled labour, and also for the British mores and English language that prevailed on the collieries. One might conclude, therefore, that while the coal industries of Natal and the Transvaal had distinct economic histories, it should be possible to write a single labour history, albeit one alive to regional variation.

One particular aspect of that history is worthy of greater prominence because it has substantial theoretical significance. The present orthodoxy assumes that the institutionalization of oscillating migration was an essential component of South Africa’s economic development. The argument was, first, that without low average wages it would not have been possible to profitably mine poor quality gold ore at deep levels and, second, wages could only be kept low because, for African workers, these need not include major costs of reproducing labour. That is, if workers remained basically rural it would be possible for largely subsistence agriculture to feed women, the next generation of workers and older men, and to provide them with shelter and some clothing. The analysis focused on gold
mining, but it should apply equally to comparable industries, such as coal mining and especially to the Transvaal collieries, whose low-cost power was, like low-cost labour, critical for the survival of the gold mines. Cheap-labour theory tended to regard the virtual absence of settled African workers from the gold mines as a consequence of mining-industry influence. By contrast, social historians have shown that, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mine workers were still committed to rural life and, through their own agency, resisted proletarianization. This approach embodies a valuable critique of the determinism of cheap-labour theory, but it does nothing to challenge the premise that oscillating migration was almost universal among African workers and that this was central to the success of South African mining. As such, the anti-proletarianization thesis is part of the same paradigm as the theory of cheap-labour.

There is much that can be said in support of these positions. In particular, African labour was cheaper than European labour, the mines were generally profitable, and most Africans did move between the gold and coal mines and rural homes. So where is the problem? My concern first arose from learning that by 1924 about one-in-four Witbank mine workers were living with women (sometimes their wives), mostly in colliery ‘locations’. Actually, by 1914 the Government Mining Engineer was already noting that colliery workers ‘become permanent residents on the mine, and they never go away’.

This might have been explained in terms of the majority of Witwank workers, the Mozambicans, representing a special case (a consequence of particular problems in their homeland). However, the fact that an even higher proportion of Africans on the Natal collieries were settling close to their work makes it necessary to reject this conclusion. These workers came from various places, including Natal, but almost none were Mozambicans.

Interestingly, by 1880, even in Kimberley, 9000 of the 22,000 African labourers were ‘estimated as permanently resident on the [diamond] fields’. Even for the Rand we find the Chief Inspector of Native Affairs asserting in 1902: ‘certain natives, who have worked for long periods on the mines... have become married or “attached” to women and if they were not permitted to live with these females... they would leave the mine.’ In 1914, Taberer, when asked by the Economic Commission whether Africans ‘wanted to bring their people to the mine’, responded: ‘It is a strongly expressed wish, it is a growing wish, especially now. You will understand that in most parts of the country they have lost their cattle through diseases... and they say... My home is my work, and I should like to have my wife and children with me at work.’ The implication is clear, what I am calling the ‘anti-proletarianization thesis’ needs, at the very least, to be modified. Doubtless many African mine workers were keen to return to their rural families, but a significant proportion were not, and their numbers were increasing with time. Surely it is possible, too, that some workers who appeared to be keen on returning to rural homes were adjusting their sights as a result of urban settlement being ruled out for them.

The salience of this for cheap-labour theory is that it was not the employers who prevented permanent settlement on the mines — it was the state. On the gold mines, where the limit on married miners had been introduced in 1908, and on the collieries, the justifications for the restrictions were similar. For the gold mines, the main objection to women came from the police, who associated the locations with crime. For the Witbank collieries, the first complaint came from the local magistrate, who, in 1923, asserted that women were engaged in ‘prostitution or liquor selling or both’. By 1926, the Director
of Native Affairs was objecting to ‘loose women’, adding that government policy ‘was entirely opposed to the multiplication of detribalised families in industrial areas’. The Natal restriction appears to have been a consequence of the Witbank regulation, which was applied to collieries in general. There may have been an element of moralism in all this, but the main concern was that unrestricted urbanization would pose a threat to public order.

In time (certainly by the 1940s), the mine owners came to see the benefits of the country’s migrant labour system, but, to begin with, they regarded it, as Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone noted as long ago as 1982, as ‘both expensive and inefficient’. Maintaining a recruiting agency like Wenela was very costly, something that the Natal employers, in particular, clearly appreciated. I am not suggesting that the mines and collieries would have preferred a fully stabilized workforce, and it is possible that, as was the case later with manufacturing, a mixture of semi-skilled settled workers and unskilled migrant workers, served their purpose. In 1920, the Government Mining Engineer commented that ‘a coal cutter [machine] probably saves forty natives’, but the coal cutter also required some semi-skilled labour (a factor that applied less to the gold mines, where conditions prevented similar mechanization, and this may have contributed to the different levels of settlement in the two industries). However, in conditions of labour shortage, which was the case on the gold mines in the early years of the twentieth century and generally in Natal, any labour was welcome.

From a theoretical perspective, costs of reproduction need not have been any greater for settled labour than with migrant labour. Household income could be enhanced by beer brewing and prostitution. Moreover, in Witbank, and perhaps more so in Natal, mine food could be supplemented by local production. In Witbank, land was set aside for ‘native gardens’, which were used for growing maize, pumpkins and ground nuts, and in Natal it was said that African workers ‘usually grow a few mealies [maize], etc. and graze a limited number of cattle’. In practice, wages for settled and migrant workers were similar, and where settled workers constructed their own houses, which was often the case, the collieries saved on the cost of building compounds. All in all, settled workers tended to be cheaper than migrant workers, not more expensive.

There are then three conclusions to this essay. First, the labour histories of coal production in Natal and the Transvaal were more alike than their economic histories. Second, reviewing those labour histories and placing them alongside that of the gold mines demonstrates that many workers were becoming proletarianized, even in the early twentieth century. Finally, cheap labour theory should be rejected. It has provided the keystone locking an arch of exceptionalism that supports South African historiography, and removing it will open up new possibilities for comparative analysis, and, in time, the potential for developing new theories. Such theorization will need to give greater weight to the role and character of politics in shaping labour history.

Notes on contributor

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Notes


2. Edgecombe and Guest, ‘Introduction to Pre-Union’, 309–312; Graham and Lategan, Coals, vii; Coulter, ‘Coal and Other Fuels’, 231; Lang, Power Base, 11–12.


7. Atcherley, Trip to Boerland, 220. Also, see Lang, Power Base, 15, 16.


10. South Africa, Report of the Coal Commission, 4, 6, 65–66; Graham and Lategan, Coals, 13. For most purposes the Orange Free State’s coal industry was treated as an extension of that of the Transvaal. In 1920, South African Railways and Harbours took 25.4% of the highveld sales.


14. Mines, Annual Reports 1921 (1922), 12 and Table 7; Alexander, ‘Race, Class Loyalty’.


17. Mines, Annual Reports 1921 (1922), Table 7.


20. Guest, ‘Commercial Coal-mining’, 66; Hocking, Durnacol, particularly 100; Alexander, ‘Race, Class Loyalty’, 119, n. 20, and 123, n. 55; Coulter, ‘Recollections’.


22. Alexander, ‘Race, Class Loyalty’, 123–124. In my calculation, the monetary value of the accommodation and food received by African workers has been added to their actual pay.


27. Mines, Annual Reports 1921 (1922), 12, 15. See, also, Census and Statistics, Official Year Book No. 6-1923 (1924), 609.


29. MNW, box 204, file 3550/13, Secretary, South African (Vryheid) Coke Company to Minister of Mines, 21 October 1913.


32. Edgecombe, Constancy, 284. This was similar to the position at Enugu (Nigeria) and on the Jharia coalfield (India); see Brown, We Were all Slaves; Alexander, ‘Women’.

34. Guest, ‘Introduction to Post-Union’, 88. See also, SAB, NTS, box 1515, file 227/280, ‘Token System’, 1 June 1938. This report also makes interesting observations about the popularity of permanent settlement on the collieries. The token system had a US equivalent (where tokens were often referred to as ‘clackers’ or ‘scripts’).

35. Guest, ‘Commercial Coal Mining’, 47.

36. S.C. Black, who had been a member of the Wenela board since 1905, quoted in ‘Note on the Preference Allowed to Collieries in the Allotment of Portuguese Natives’, 7 December 1945, TEBA archives, University of Johannesburg, Wenela file 2A/1 Pad 19.

37. Ibid.


40. Wenela file 20/17 Pad 1, Wenela District Manager, Lourenco Marques, to Secretary, Wenela, 11 September 1913.

41. SAB, GNLB (Government Native Labour Bureau) box 304 file 427/18, untitled draft report on working conditions on collieries, dated ca 11 June 1919; Wenela file 20/17 Pad 1, ‘Extract from Minutes of Meeting of Board of Management held on 12 November 1914’; Alexander, ‘Oscillating Migrants’, 511–513.


46. See, particularly, Wolpe, ‘Capitalism’.

47. See Harries, Work, Culture, 222; Moodie, Going for Gold, esp. 21. For an extended version of this critique, see Alexander, ‘Oscillating Migrants’.

48. For Natal, see Edgecombe, Constancy, 108–120.

49. In India and Japan the assistant was usually a woman; see Alexander, ‘Women’.

50. Graham and Lategan, Coals, 70. In addition there was usually a ‘blasting boy’, who was sometimes expected to undertake the blasting, even though this was illegal. Also, miners usually had a youngster to fetch meals and run errands for them (in Natal, he was called a ‘skoffboy’); Hocking, Durnacol, 67. Citing a 1920 source, Edgecombe says that in Natal miners supervised 20–40 workers operating in up to 20 working places; Constancy, 204.


52. Mines, Annual Reports, 1921 (1922), 12.


54. TEBA archives, NRC (Native Recruiting Corporation), file 6.2, specifically statement by Mpondo ka Mkize (a Zulu), 5 August 1913. The NRC recruited men from South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana for work on the mines. In 1913, Taberer was also General Superintendent of the NRC.

55. Original emphasis. NRC, 6.1 RSB, Taberer to Chairman, NRC, 21 July 1913, pp. 1–2. Also, see NRC, file 6.2, ‘Statement by the General Superintendent of the Native Recruiting Corporation’, 29 July 1913.

56. NRC, file 6.2, Taberer, ‘Report on Native Labour for Economic Commission’, 27 November 1913. For a well-researched account of the 1913 strike, see Hyslop, Notorious Syndicalist. According to Hyslop, 207, George Mason, one of the 1913 leaders, claimed that he was responsible for a strike by black miners at New Kleinfontein. Hyslop suggests that this claim ‘seems exaggerated’, but, in the light of evidence presented above, such scepticism is probably misplaced.


60. Ibid., 4.

62. SAB, SAP (South African Police), file 1/185/13, Trevor to Government Mining Engineer, Johannesburg, 8 September 1913, 1. Trevor’s district included Witbank.

63. SAP, file Conf. 6/183/14/3, District Staff Officer to Staff Officer, Citizen Force, Pretoria, 8 January 1914; ‘Rough Diary of Events: General Disturbances, January 1914’, 4. Earlier, the Commissioner of Police had indicated the difficulties of mobilizing a significant presence of regular police in Witbank, reporting that he could only provide 23 men; SAP, file 1/185/13, letter to Under Secretary for Defence, 19 September 1913. This letter is reflection of the level of planning that was underway well in advance of the strike.


66. For details, see Alexander, ‘Coal, Control’, 37–41. For an excellent new account of the strike on the Rand, see Krikler, *Rand Revolt*.


68. SAB, GNLB (Government Native Labour Bureau), box 310, file 125/19/48, Chief Native Commissioner to Director, Pietermaritzburg, to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 30 April 1919; GNLB, box 310, file 125/19/48, Inspector of Native Labourers, Dundee, to Director of Native Labour; GNLB, box 310, file 125/19/48, Chief Native Commissioner to Secretary for Native Affairs, Pretoria, 8 May 1919. There are similar documents in NTS, box 200, file 6800/F473.


70. For the highveld, this figure is calculated from: ibid., 522; Alexander, ‘Paternalised Migrants’, and documents in NTS, box 7687, file 307/332, and NTS, box 7687, file 295/332. For Natal it is calculated from disputes mentioned in Edgecombe, *Constancy*, 294, 357–361. Also from documents in NTS, box 7687, file 278/332; NTS, box 7684, file 219/332; NTS, box 2081, file 199/280; NTS, box 2081, file 197/280; NTS, box 2079, file 189/280; GNLB, box 310, file 125/19/48; GNLB, box 310, file 125/19/48; GN LB, box 410, file 73/42; GN LB, box 410, file 73/5; GN LB, box 410, file 73/10.

71. Calculations draw on data presented in Alexander, ‘Industrial Conflict’, 72–75 and Appendix 1; Census and Statistics, *Union Statistics*, G-5. Dunbar Moodie, the leading authority on the labour history of gold mining, also recognizes the higher level of strike action on the collieries (e-mail 5 February 2002). Indeed, he drew my attention to the fact, and I am grateful to him for this.


73. Alexander, ‘Paternalised Migrants’.

74. Kerr and Siegel, ‘Interindustry Propensity to Strike’.


76. Alexander, ‘Coal, Control’, 37.


79. NTS, box 2081, file 200/250, report to Secretary for Labour following strikes of colliery labourers in Natal, 31 October 1927.

80. NTS, box 2077, file 175/280, C. Lawless, head constable i/c Witbank, to district commandant, Middelburg, 9 September 1927.


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