THE TRANSVAAL LABOUR CRISIS, 1901-6*

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At the end of the nineteenth century, British policy regarding the South African republics was based on the assumption that the Transvaal Uitlanders outnumbered the Boers, so that the enfranchisement of these aliens would alter the political balance within the white community decisively.1 The South African war disproved this assumption: nevertheless Lord Milner was cautiously optimistic when he turned his attention to the problems of Transvaal administration. While he admitted that the Uitlanders were outnumbered, he was confident that the position could be swiftly reversed. The 'certainty of a vast and immediate expansion of mining and other enterprises after the war' would draw thousands of British workmen to the Transvaal gold mines, where they would countervail the Boers. Instead of the 100,000 British, 140,000 Boers and 40,000 other whites who composed the white population at the end of the war, there would be 250,000 British, 150,000 Boers and 60,000 others after five years of peace. The Colonial Office fully shared these great expectations,2 which therefore became the basis of British policy during the Reconstruction years. The industrial boom, however, depended upon a number of variables: capital and skilled white labour were available in abundance, but unskilled African labour—the indispensable base of the industrial pyramid—was scarce. Immigration of British workers was therefore inhibited, since mine-managers were unwilling to employ an increased proportion of better-paid, less manageable, white labour. By 1907, when Het Volk won the first post-war election, there were still insufficient British voters to compensate for internal divisions and the weighting of rural constituencies. The inadequacy of the supply of unskilled labour may therefore be accounted among the reasons for the failure of Imperial policy in South Africa. It is the purpose of this article to explore some of the reasons for this scarcity and to observe some of the results.

The shortage of unskilled labour was acute not only in relation to the inflated expectations, but also relative to the pre-war situation. By 1899 the Transvaal gold mines had built up a labour supply totalling 107,482

* This article is an attempt to infer the actions and opinions of Africans in Southern Africa, from essentially "white" material. As such, it is somewhat speculative; and I am grateful to various people for attacking the wildest of the speculations, which have now been omitted. I am grateful to the History Departments of the Witwatersrand and of Makerere, to Mrs S. Marks of S.O.A.S., and to my research supervisors Professor P. N. S. Mansergh and Dr R. E. Robinson, of St John's College, Cambridge.

2 Colonial Office files 417/326, 42283—Milner to Chamberlain, 8 Nov. 1901, and comments by F. Graham of the Colonial Office Staff.
Africans and 12,350 whites (a ratio of 8·6 to 1). It proved so difficult to recruit Africans after the war that in May 1904—two years after Vereeniging—the numbers were 70,608 and 12,414, making a ratio of 5·7 to 1. The altered ratio reflects a half-hearted attempt by managements to employ unskilled white workers: the reduced numbers meant that many mines were working below even pre-war capacity. Several possible reasons may be advanced to explain the shortage, though it is impossible to establish the relative importance of each. Wages were cut during the war. The mine-owners expected that a reformed government, more in sympathy with industrial expansion, would enable the mines to reduce wages from the pre-war 63s. a month to 35s. During their enforced holiday at the Cape in 1900, the managers of most of the Transvaal mines agreed to create the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, whose purpose was to monopolize the recruiting of African labour, and thereby to prevent the mines from competing against each other for labourers. A wage-rate of 30–35s. was therefore imposed, thinly disguised as an increase on the war-time rate of 20s., but actually a reduction of the 1899 rate of 50s. The new rates compared unfavourably with those earned by every other category of labour in the Transvaal except farm workers, who in any case enjoyed greater fringe benefits. During the post-war boom in capital construction, it was unusually easy for Africans to find better paid alternatives in more congenial surroundings. Conditions for mine-workers were extremely unpleasant: during 1903 the mortality rate was 79·8 per thousand per annum, with a peak of 113·2 during the coldest month. In the Cape at least, during 1904 Africans became aware that this high mortality was being reduced, and also of improved railway and medical facilities, but even then they were discouraged by the 'ill-feeling between black and white' which was known to be common in the mines. Though some improvements in conditions were effected, the mine managers were slow and reluctant to carry them out. After a government commission had reported in favour of a minimum 200 cubic feet of air space per man in the sleeping quarters, the Government had to introduce legislation even to enforce this relatively modest requirement.

Unattractive conditions were deterrent only when Africans had a reasonable choice. Throughout the South African colonies at this time Africans

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4 For example, J. P. Fitzpatrick, The Transvaal from Within (1899 ed.), 105 ff.
6 Cd 1904 (xxxix), 1897. Evidence before the Transvaal Labour Commission, exhibit no. 1.
8 W.N.L.A. report for 1903.
10 Legislative Council debates, 5th session, col. 2060 et seq.
were able to opt for railway work, road building and harbour improvement. It was commonly argued that, as a result of the war, Africans were relatively affluent, but there is no evidence whatever for this assertion. African claims for war compensation were assessed at £661,106, but only £114,000 was available, and that was not paid until 1904 (the tax system yielded twice as much every year in Native taxes). Nor were military receipts honoured until 1904. Over 50,000 Transvaal Africans were detained in camps during the last months of the war, in conditions which produced a mortality rate higher than that of the Boer concentration camps, at a cost of less than a penny a day per head. It is implausible to argue that any significant number of Africans came through the scorched earth campaign in a state of affluence. Nevertheless opportunities for making a living in the Transvaal do seem to have been better after the war, more as a result of incompetence in the Native Affairs Department than of a noticeably permissive policy. The General Manager of the W.N.L.A. complained that the pre-war practice of bribing chiefs to send their tribesmen to the mines was no longer officially approved, and several other reliable observers commented to the same effect. In one case the Supreme Court even intervened to annul a contract which entailed a chief’s undertaking to supply mine labour. No doubt the practice continued, but on a reduced scale. The treatment of Transvaal Africans squatting on Crown Lands also improved. In republican times, officials were also farmers, and made certain that conditions imposed on these squatters were at least as onerous as those imposed on their own employees. British rule involved a division of function between farmer and official, and although the officials generally sympathized with farmers as against their employees, they were too short-staffed to carry out this particular function as efficiently as it had been carried out before the war. The liability to work was less onerous and less arbitrary for squatters than for labour-tenants, and was paid for at Government rates: the rent—£1 per annum per adult—was significantly lower than the real rent in labour, cash and kind paid to farmer-landlords. Again, through lack of staff, the Government was remiss in collecting rents: the Landowners’ Association angrily protested that the Land Department had collected only £5,000 of a possible £27,000, with the results that many of the member’s tenants were abandoning their landlords to settle on Crown

14 Transvaal Law Reports, 12 and 20 Nov. 1902, Supreme Court, Eastwood v. Shepstone; ibid, 5 Oct. 1903, Masilia and others v. Sub-Commissioner at Pietersburg and Israelsohns.
15 Land department annual reports: 1903–4 in Cd 1905 (lv), 2482; 1904–5 in Cd (lxxx), 3028.
Land instead. These complaints were echoed by numerous smaller farmers, who noticed that they were obliged to raise their wages in order to counterbalance the pull of the Crown Lands. One effect of this change was that as late as 1905, though the African population amounted to almost a million, the mine recruiters were able to enrol less than 10,000 Transvaal Africans.

Two-thirds of the labour supply usually came from Moçambique, and during this period difficulties were presented both by Portuguese diplomacy and by considerable African resistance to recruiting agencies. The Portuguese authorities took advantage of the fact that the modus vivendi with the Transvaal had to be re-negotiated to insist on a larger share of railway traffic to the Rand, and it was many months before W.N.L.A. recruiters were allowed to operate. Only after the war did Milner discover that his agreement with the Portuguese was of no value for two-thirds of Moçambique: the Niassa, Moçambique and Zambézia chartered companies between them possessed rights, comparable to those exercised by the British South Africa Company in Rhodesia, over all Moçambique north of the Zambesi mouth. Duffy’s opinion that these companies simply perpetuated on a larger scale the traditional praso system is borne out by the records of an interview between a representative of one company and an official of the Colonial Office, who was handling negotiations for the W.N.L.A. The official was hard-headed, but the revelations of the nature of the companies’ activities upset him to such an extent that he declined to report them fully even in a confidential memorandum. He did record, however, that the company claimed absolute control over the employment of 25,000 workers, and that these would only be forthcoming on payment of £2 per head recruiting fee and travel expenses, whereas the mine-owners were offering only 13s.20 By September 1903 the Chamber of Mines had come to terms with the Niassa and Zambézia companies, but recruiting figures for 1903, 1904 and 1905 proved extremely disappointing: though the workers were contracted for 12 months which was unusually long, in only two months did the figure for Moçambique north of 22° S. exceed 1,000. Since the conditions attached to recruiting in Moçambique benefited the Portuguese authorities, and since the laws entitled the Government to compel virtually any number of adult males to take some employment considered suitable by the state, the shortage of Portuguese recruits can be explained only in

18 Cd. 1906 (LXXX), 2819, enclosure 1 in 54. Territorial analysis, 30 Nov. 1905.
20 C.O. 417/368, 45090—Notes by G. V. Fiddes of interview dated 14 Nov. 1902.
21 Chamber of Mines annual reports and monthly Executive Committee reports.
terms of physical resistance to the increasing demands made upon Africans within the Portuguese sphere of influence.

Similar obstacles faced the W.N.L.A. in its attempts to open up new labour sources elsewhere in Southern Africa. The Foreign Office allowed itself to be bullied into permitting a trial employment of 1,000 Central Africans, but the experiment failed lamentably. Like many other pre-industrial peoples, these were horrified at the nature of underground work: some refused to go underground at all, and so were gaolled with hard labour. They were fortunate. One in ten of the others died during the year: many others suffered severely from pneumonia, which in some cases permanently impaired their vision. The survivors may be assumed to have discouraged their tribesmen from following in their footsteps. Regarding East Africa, mine-owners were encouraged by Johnston’s opinion that large numbers of Baganda were available; but official enquiries were rebuffed by Eliot’s view that labour in East Africa was already too scarce. The Rhodesias were not considered, on the grounds that they were reserved for Rhodesian industrial development. The Portuguese flatly refused to allow recruiting in Angola; and the Foreign Office refused to approach either the Angolan or the Congolese authorities for fear of encouraging forced labour.

Governmental decisions in the belt of territory from Moçambique to Luanda were less important than the fact that a number of recruiting agencies were already quarrelling over the area. Casement’s dispatches throw some light on the scramble for African labour. To the west he observed that Angolan recruiters were filtering into Congolese territory, and that on one occasion a battle had ensued upon the meeting of rival recruiting gangs, so that the local people had been heartened to rebel against both. To the east, he reported infiltration of Portuguese recruiters, presumably agents of the chartered companies, into Barotseland from Moçambique. In view of the apparently inflated demands for labour in this area, it is tempting to look for a common cause for the risings which were common from South-West Africa and Natal to Angola and German East Africa, during roughly the same period, and even to toy with the idea of a concerted resistance. The Herero Revolt, the Bambata rebellion, the Angola–Congo rising, the conquest of Moçambique, and Maji-Maji seem too close in time to be the result of totally local resentments. At first sight the increased demands for labour appear to offer a single explanation, but the increase was too gradual to provoke such fierce and widespread resistance. East African demands for plantation labour simply succeeded previous demands for slaves: Portuguese

26 C.O. 417/359, 34009 and 34626—Foreign Office to Colonial Office, enclosing copies of Casement’s dispatches from the Congo during 1902.
forced labour had a very long history, though possibly new areas were being exploited: Rhodes’s attempts to tap central Africa date from the late nineteenth century: even Katanga was accustomed to alien demands for labourers. Since the demands were nothing new, it is likely that the revolts were a series of spontaneous reactions which cannot be fitted into a pattern. Since the individual tribal responses are so closely connected with individual local policy decisions by different colonial authorities, the notion of concerted political resistance is a will-o’-the-wisp. A concerted decision among industrial labourers, however, to withhold labour for specific economic and ‘civil rights’ purposes is by no means as far-fetched, and was in fact the interpretation which the Transvaal Commissioner for Native Affairs put upon the shortage. 27

Any such decision must necessarily have been made in the mining compounds, the only significant meeting-place for diverse tribesmen. The formal expressions of opinion by South African chiefs, African journalists, and the urbanized, educated group, throw no light whatever upon the matter. Chiefs confined themselves to heart-rending generalities about the loss of their traditional powers; and as they were often involved in sending their followers to work in the mines, they could scarcely criticise the conditions of industrial labour. 28 Journalists tended to be immersed in unenlightening quarrels over the respective merits of British and Boer Native policies: 29 Koranta ea Becoana was disposed to approve of Milner, and although it criticized specific acts of his civil service, agreed with Khomo’s Native Eye that no amount of petty brutalities and injustices would alter their loyalty to the British authorities. The urbanized élite were more concerned with trying to gain their exemption from pass laws, liquor prohibition, and side-walk legislation, than in any more general political programme. 30 The political associations were led by traditional chiefs and by petty tradesmen and professional men living in urban locations, whose immediate interests were reflected in the associations’ petitions. When the war ended, they expected to see reforms in their favour. Only in 1905, when it was clear that Crown Colony rule was expiring, did they express their disillusion regarding the British administration, in terms strikingly similar to those used by white settlers in Kenya in 1960. 31

Events on the Rand during late 1899 and 1900 may provide the key, and

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30 S.A.N.A.C., vol. 4, evidence of Africans resident in Pretoria.
31 For example, Lieutenant-Governor group, Lt.G.109, 105/9—Petition from Iliso Lomzi (Native Vigilance Society) 14 July 1903; C.O. 291/81, 1533—Lawley to Lyttelton 17 Apr. 1905, forwarding petition; Confidential Colonial Office print, African South, 879/89—Selborne to Elgin, 4 Aug. 1906, and enclosures.
they certainly provide sufficient provocation to have put wind into the sails of a protest movement. When war broke out, gold production came to a halt, and labour was required only for maintenance. Nevertheless the labour force remaining was large enough to embarrass the arriving British administrators. They approached the Director of the Imperial Military Railways, Sir Percy Girouard, who agreed to take over responsibility for 14,000 labourers found in the mining area, and who also provided employment for unemployed Africans who were ‘captured’ in the Rand area.32 These captives were employed in work which they had not contracted to perform, for a period longer than their contracts stipulated, and at wages well below the contract level. For the duration of the war the situation was tolerated without undue violence; but when the war ended the workers naturally assumed they could go home, and rioted when this hope was dashed.33 Disillusion was the theme of African attitudes towards the new regime: when the British army reached the Rand and Pretoria, local Africans burned their passes in the misplaced belief that these would no longer be required. Swift disenchantment on this point,34 the herding of rural Africans into concentration camps, and the cut in industrial wages must all have contributed to a sense of betrayal. It would be surprising if migrant labourers did not spread gloomy reports of Rand conditions when they returned to their families. These instances of injustice and misunderstanding would not, however, produce the far-reaching effects of a widespread withdrawal, and to explain this occurrence it may be helpful to lay more emphasis on the disappointed hopes of a more permissive regime, rather than on specific cases of hardship.

The existing pre-war recruiting system was similar to that imposed by the W.N.L.A., except that the former recovered its high recruiting costs from the labourer’s salary. Of the pre-war system the acting Superintendent of Native Affairs in 1901 observed that ‘the traffic in Native labourers has become almost as disgraceful as the slave trade’, and that only East Coast Africans had—and would—come in any large numbers, as they had very little choice in the matter.35 It is surely arguable that the perpetuation of a similar system by a government which was expected to do better might produce an abruptly disastrous effect on people’s willingness to work in the mines. The Superintendent’s predictions were justified when, during 1904, recruiting in the South African colonies remained disappointing, while in Portuguese East Africa the situation began to improve.36 Again, by the end of 1903 the Chamber of Mines had come to the conclusion that ‘some causes must operate to deter natives from re-

35 Transvaal Archives, Military Governor’s Political Secretary group, memorandum by J. Marwick to Military Governor, Pretoria, 6 Mar. 1901.
newing their contracts on the mines’, as the wastage was ‘enormous’ and apparently unprecedented: desertion also had assumed serious proportions. The time of this discovery would suggest that workers arriving at the end of the war may have been just as mortified as those who had been on the Rand for its duration. Furthermore, mine managers were aware of the increased opportunities for labour; it must have been some other circumstance which perplexed them. This evidence is compatible with the unhappy observation of the Commissioner for Native Affairs that the war engendered in Africans ‘a spirit of independence and apparent aggressiveness which was a new and regrettable feature in relations between black and white’, a feature which Lagden thought was aggravated by the post-war demands for labour. Finally, throughout the three years following the war, the W.N.L.A. observed that labourers arriving for work were in a poor physical condition: even when the shortage of labour made the Association anxious to place recruits as quickly as possible, it was found necessary to detain one out of eight to recuperate before going to work. This could well be an effect of workers withholding their labour as long as was physically practicable, though some workers came vast distances on foot. The evidence is, in the nature of the case, circumstantial, but there are sufficient circumstances to lend the theory some credibility.

If Africans expected British administration to bring about economic or social reforms, they were again disappointed, although a series of economic changes was introduced in order to make the best use of existing labour, and to attract more of it. The rigid wage structure introduced during the war was the first to go: in September and November 1902 and again in March 1903 the scale was made more flexible, so as to permit mine managers some discretion in offering better terms for experienced and efficient workers. The encouragement of piece-work rather than daily wages inevitably meant the abandonment of the 30–35s. scale. This change was explicitly recognized in April 1903, when a scale of 45–60s. was adopted, bonuses were allowed for re-enlistment, and managers were exhorted to adopt productivity incentives. The slow increase in productivity and in the labour supply were not, however, sufficient to assuage the impatient demands of both the mine-owners and of Milner himself. Here it is necessary to distinguish between Milner’s hopes and those of the magnates. Since Milner was concerned only with increasing the number of British workers employed, he was not necessarily committed to preserving any particular ratio between white and black labour, and would not have been disturbed by an increased proportion

37 Chamber of Mines Confidential Circulars to Mine Managers, 28 and 30 Nov. 1903. The trend was sufficiently alarming to warrant the appointment of an economist to enquire.

38 Cd 1904 (Ixii) 2025, enclosure in 15—Lagden’s report for year ending 30 June 1903.


40 Chamber of Mines, annual report for 1902, and Executive Committee monthly reports. In the revised scale, scope was allowed for discriminating against Moçambique labourers, which suggests that the Chamber was particularly concerned to increase other supplies.
of white. The mine-owners, on the other hand, had an obvious interest in replacing the white labour force with the more tractable Africans. A consistent thread in magnate policy was the fear of ‘an increase in Trade Union influence on the Australian model’.41 The relative dearness of white labour added another reason for attempting to reduce its role in industry. Typical, though unusually lucid, is the argument advanced by the chief engineer of the Consolidated Gold Fields Group to his principal: his cost analysis showed clearly where savings could best be made—white salaries amounted to 34·5% of costs, African wages and food 24·5%, explosives 12%, coal 8·6% and sundries 20·4%. He asked permission to begin training Africans for semi-skilled and responsible work, so that they would begin to replace the lowliest white workers, ‘though we will have to pass through a succession of strikes to reach this point’.42 The shortage of African workers, and the temporary employment of whites as unskilled workers, made such a policy impracticable during the Reconstruction years. The coincidence was the more unfortunate since at this date the industrial colour bar was ambiguous enough to make some advance of African opportunities feasible. In the absence of formal training of African—or local white—workers, migrant Africans were unable as a group to compete with industrialized and qualified migrant whites: no general law had been required to preserve this state of affairs. Republican enactments, and even the Mines and Works Act of 1903, dealt only with a few specific categories of employment.43

During the course of the controversy over the importation of Chinese labourers, the door was closed on African opportunities for acquiring skills.

A peculiarity of the controversy in the Transvaal was that the major decisions were taken before white public opinion declared itself. The details concern us here only so far as they relate to the industrial colour-bar, and it is important to notice that in advocating Chinese labour Milner was endorsing the magnate view that white workers must remain an aristocracy. Again, the Chamber of Mines decided that Chinese were necessary before putting the issue before the public, and was therefore poised to exert all its influence in the same direction. The imperial government decreed that it would sanction importation only if it were demonstrated that white opinion in the Transvaal favoured the policy. Since the Boers would almost certainly oppose a measure believed to be to the magnates’ advantage, it was necessary to create a semblance of unanimity in the English-speaking white community. The task was by no means beyond the Chamber’s abilities, but the necessity for haste led them to make elaborate concessions in detail to their white artisan opponents. These concessions involved restrictions upon the use of

41 Governor P.S. 76, vol. 211 of 1905, Selborne’s undated memorandum for the Chamber. The presence of Australian ex-servicemen on the Rand added point to the fear.
43 Transvaal Legislative Council debates, 1903, include an historical summary. Non-white engine-winders were an early casualty: the Mines and Works act itself merely enabled the government to reserve occupations simply through regulations.
imported labour: confinement to compounds, compulsory repatriation at the termination of the three-year contract, and above all the prohibition of the employment of Chinese in an enumerated list of capacities, which obviated the risk of their ever competing with skilled or semi-skilled whites. As van der Horst has observed, 'the occupations designated in the schedule have continued to be claimed as belonging exclusively to Europeans'.44 The decision was not intended by the magnates to be applied against Africans as well, nor was it thought to be in any sense final; and legally the door remained open to the promotion of Africans should the magnates feel strong enough politically to get away with it. It is improbable that the position could have remained ambiguous for much longer anyway, and it is unlikely that the magnates would have succeeded in reducing the realm of the labour aristocracy by very much. More important is the timing of the enactment. The industrial colour-bar was legally drawn so as to recognize the field actually occupied by white workers—with a generous margin added—as exclusively theirs. And it was given legal sanction at a time when such a delimitation allowed the white workers an unusually large realm, since they actually occupied an unusually large proportion of jobs, and the magnates were unusually weak. Had the line been drawn either in 1899 or in 1909, when the proportion of white workers was smaller, the number of reserved jobs would probably have been considerably smaller. This addendum to the Importation Ordinance became such an article of faith to artisans that by 1919 they were prepared to defend it with physical force, and it was driven home to the magnates that the price they had paid for a temporary expedient in 1903 had become a recurrent burden.

The Importation Ordinance envisaged thousands of Chinese anxiously awaiting the opportunity to share in the development of the Transvaal mines: therefore, as the governor of the Straits Settlements pointed out, it seemed designed to prevent the immigration of Chinese rather than to encourage it.45 In practice, the only people to accept the conditions were from the far North, where the Russo-Japanese war had cut off agricultural labourers from their ordinary means of livelihood.46 These peasants were therefore comparable to the pre-industrial African migrant workers in a way in which the Cantonese would not have been. Their well-publicized and widely deplored treatment therefore throws much light on the conditions of African workers. Selborne, who succeeded Milner in mid-1905, consistently argued that the criticism of the treatment of Chinese labour was absurd, since there was no obvious difference between their conditions and those of Africans recruited in Mozambique, save the length of the contract.47

47 For example, Cd 1906 (lxxx), 2819, no. 39—Selborne to Elgin, 30 Dec. 1905.
The argument works equally well in reverse. Selborne, again, was disgusted by the white miners: they were 'of a very low type and they have apparently been accustomed to strike the Kaffir with impunity. They thought they could do the same with the Chinese. They made a big mistake.' Though he curbed the more flagrant abuses of position above ground, he doubted whether his influence was sufficient to be effective underground. Wage schedules were rigged in order to reduce Chinese wages while impressing the imperial government with the magnanimity of magnate policy. Bagot, of the Chamber of Mines, chuckled with Robinson, Milner's private secretary, over their success in confusing the imperial government regarding wages: the Colonial Office believed a month to be a calendar month, and not 30 shifts which occupied about 35 days.

State and capital were able to evade the terms of the contract in respect of wages. If after six months the Chinese were not earning 50s. per month, their wages should have been raised to that figure: but when six months elapsed, the employees of Farrar Brothers were earning less than 50s., and the management there, as in other mines, blandly refused to raise the average. The government acquiesced, and throughout the period the Chinese earned less than Africans and less than they expected. During 1905 the averages were 37s. 7d. a month for Chinese and 51s. 9d. for Africans.

A series of agreements between managers and the Foreign Labour department made further inroads on the contract. Managers were allowed to lay down the amount of work which they required of each labourer each shift: they also decided whether or not that amount had been done: the Foreign Labour department would then look into the matter, again referring each case back to managers for impartial expert evidence: the labourers were then liable to be prosecuted for breach of contract. Subsequently the managers were enabled to dispense with the Foreign Labour department altogether, and to decide for themselves to what extent labourers had fulfilled their quota, and to what extent wages should be withheld. Management was not only prosecuting but judging, offering expert testimony, and giving sentences: it was also briefly given power to carry out corporal punishment without referring to the courts. The mine-managers also had the foresight to persuade the government to ban all forms of protest, including peaceful meetings. Forms of protest open to the Chinese were therefore severely limited: the most common being riot and desertion. Since meetings could be regarded by managements as riots, statistics have

48 C.O. 291/84, 25699—Selborne to Lyttelton, 21 July 1905.
49 Chamber of Mines archives, ch. 58—Bagot to G. G. Robinson, 12 Nov. 1904. Robinson, as Geoffrey Dawson, was subsequently editor of the Johannesburg Star and The Times.
51 Cd 1906 (lxxx), 2819, enclosure in 70—report on gold mines for 1905.
52 Chamber of Mines archives, ch. 58—Evans to Chamber, 20 July and 18 Aug. 1904; and Governor P.S. 37, vol. 194 of 1905—Meeting of Evans and the Chamber, 3 Feb. 1905.
no meaning. However, when the first six months expired and no wage increases were introduced, unrest was common. A full report was prepared on disturbances at North Randfontein mine, which may be taken as typical. On 1 April 1905 the labourers struck work in protest against pay; before any violence occurred, the police were called in to compel them to return to work; this prompted a riot which lasted all day and involved 2,000 workers. No alteration was made in the pay.\textsuperscript{54} Desertion was easier: during the first year of the experiment 21,205 cases of unlawful absence were reported to the Government from a working population which had not yet built up to 50,000, and by no means all cases were reported to the government.\textsuperscript{55} Confined to compounds socially, restricted to the least interesting and most arduous forms of work, and cheated of the wages they had been led to expect, it is hardly surprising that vice, perversion, drug-taking, compulsive gambling and occasional violence took place.

Regarding wages, the Africans were better off; but they had to make do with older compounds, and since their food cost roughly half as much as that given to the Chinese, no doubt it was rather inferior.\textsuperscript{56} African contracts were for between six and twelve months, and as they were not as isolated as the Chinese, tribal ethics kept a stronger hold. Nevertheless desertion among Africans was not uncommon, nor was compulsive drinking, while even homosexuality was supposed to be ‘very prevalent’.\textsuperscript{57} The similarity of effects suggests a fairly close similarity of working conditions.

The arrival of the Chinese undermined the bargaining position of the Africans, and the average monthly wage began to decline, whereas it had steadily increased before. Wages to be paid were ordinarily agreed at the outset of a contract, and as contracts lasted a number of months, statistics providing monthly wage averages are slow to reflect wage trends. In the absence of statistics showing the trend in contract agreements, however, monthly averages will serve the same purpose. Until September 1904—four months after the arrival of the first batch of Chinese—African wages continued to rise gradually, reaching a peak of 57s. a month. In October the average was 56s. 8d.; in November 56s. 1d.; in December 55s. 10d.; in January it recovered to 56s. 7d.; in February the decline set in again with 55s. 6d.; March 55s. 1d.; April 54s. 5d.; May 53s. 11d.; June 53s. 6d.; and July 53s. 11d., at which point it settled temporarily; the average for 1905 was 51s. 9d, which reflects the sharper falls towards the end of the year, by which time post-Chinese contracts predominated.\textsuperscript{58} The arrival of Chinese also temporarily saturated the labour market: in January 1905

\textsuperscript{54} Governor P.S. 37, vol. 192 of 1905—G. W. Murray’s report dated 5 Apr. 1905.
\textsuperscript{55} Cd 1906 (lxxx), 2786, enclosure in 28—return presented by Transvaal Attorney-General, 4 Sept. 1905.
\textsuperscript{56} Cd 1905 (lv), 2401, no. 41—Milner to Lyttelton, 30 Jan. 1905.
\textsuperscript{57} S.A.N.A.C. vol 4—evidence of T. E. Mavrogordato, C.I.D. Q 44,548.
prospective labourers arriving from the Cape were actually turned away, an occurrence which would never have happened previously, since—as van der Horst has pointed out clearly—the mines usually operated on the basis of permanent surplus equipment and were therefore chronically hungry for labour. This new trend marks the end of the brief period during which African labour, perhaps unconsciously, held the whip hand. From the end of the war, African labour had been forthcoming in sufficient numbers to discourage the mine-owners from seeking a more expensive substitute, but in insufficient numbers to enable managers to hold wages down. It is curious that when the last Chinese left the Transvaal in 1910, the Moçambique revolt was over, except in the far north, which was not yet regarded as a suitable recruiting ground. Recruits were arriving in large enough numbers to compensate for the loss of the Chinese.

It is one of the sad ironies of South African history that the results of the labour shortage bore scarcely any relation to the presumed purpose of the Africans who absented themselves. The failure of Milner’s anglicizing policy is not a matter in which Africans would any longer feel much regret, as it can now be seen as irrelevant to African political ambition. Perhaps in this perspective also, the precise position of the industrial colour-bar is a matter of marginal concern, though undoubtedly the low level at which it was placed played a considerable role in determining the standard of living and attitudes of the migrant workers. The position of the colour-bar also seems to have discouraged South Africans—as opposed to Basuto and Moçambique Africans—from working in the mines. Only in recent months have the mine-managers succeeded in making white artisans less intolerant of any relaxation of the industrial colour-bar: probably too late to change the African migrant proletariat into a skilled, stable, labour force.

**SUMMARY**

One of the crucial reasons for the failure of British policy in South Africa during the Reconstruction period was an acute shortage of African labour for the mines, which were therefore unable to support a large English-speaking immigrant community. According to the prevailing economic beliefs, there was a fairly rigid ratio between the numbers of unskilled coloured workers and of skilled white workers which the mines could employ, so that the scarcity of African labour did inhibit the mines from expanding their white labour force.

The reasons for this scarcity include the deplorable physical conditions in which labourers lived and worked, and the unusually large demands for African labour in other sectors of the economy. British policy also, inadvertently, put less pressure on Transvaal Africans to take industrial or agricultural employment. However, the scarcity of labour was noticeable not only within British South Africa, but more especially outside its borders, where Africans seem to have been more reluctant than usual to take employment in the mines. It is possible to

argue that the shortage was caused partly by the disillusionment of the workers as a result of their experience of British administration, and partly by a fairly extensive determination to withhold labour until conditions were improved. Such an interpretation is compatible with the facts of the case, though impossible at this stage to prove.

Whatever the reasons for the scarcity, the result was the importation of Chinese labour to supplement the existing unskilled labour force. The well-documented complaints of the Chinese labour throw some light on the treatment of African labour. The Chinese also undercut the wages paid to Africans, who lost their commanding position as unconscious arbiters of the success of mining. Further, the Chinese were employed in terms of a very restrictive contract, whose terms were later extended to cover African labour as well, with the result that the industrial colour-bar was solidified at a time when white labour was in control of an unusually large area of employment.