

Filling a long-felt want

Migrant labour is a horrifying fact of South African economic life but few people know very much about its ramifications and effects on the lives of millions of men, women and children. In his book "Migrant Labour in South Africa", Dr. Francis Wilson presents the first comprehensive study of the subject.

Review by SHEENA DUNCAN

Dr. Wilson has filled a long-felt want with his book "Migrant Labour in South Africa", published in January. The book was written at the request of the South African Council of Churches.

Up to now there has been a limited amount of factual material on the extent and the effects of migrant labour in this country. Dr. Wilson has gathered the known facts from all available sources and has done a great deal of original research himself in order to produce this invaluable work.

Migrant labour has been part of the South African scene for over a century and is now firmly entrenched as part of our "traditional" way of life. The system is being extended by legislation and Dr. Wilson estimates that about 1 305 000 people, that is every second Black person working legally in the White areas, is an oscillating migrant.

These people must all live separated from their families because they are not permitted to bring their wives and children with them to the places where they work.

The book details the conditions in which men live on the mines, on farms and in industrial centres and also analyses the poverty and social distortion which has been caused in the homelands.

One of the most horrifying facts is the extent to which hostels are being built in the homeland townships adjoining border industrial areas. The Government has always maintained that the decentralisation of industry to border areas will halt the break up of Black family life and enable men to live with their wives within daily commuting distance from their places of work.

Now we see that, for example, Mabopane, a town in Bophuthatswana north of Pretoria, is planning a hostel for 10 000 men to be built this year.

Hostels for migrants, instead of sorely needed family housing, are being built in towns

all over the country. The sociological consequences of forcing men to live in unisex hostels are well-documented by Dr. Wilson who describes in detail the different types of hostels, those already existing and those still at the planning stage.

One of the most useful chapters for those who constantly find themselves confronted with the justification that "migrant labour is used all over the world" is an examination of the patterns of migrancy in Europe, the Americas, Black Africa and China.

The only system which remotely resembles South Africa's seems to be that of Communist China where stringent influx controls and campaigns to reduce urban population were used.

"The main emphasis in these campaigns was to get people to move voluntarily, but compulsory measures were also used" and "In the event the target was not reached, nevertheless as a result of propaganda, economic and political pressure, provision of transport, rigorous police check-ups, and with the welcome assistance of a bumper harvest, the campaign succeeded in 'sending down' no less than 800 000 people from China's cities, 500 000 of them from Shanghai."

This all sounds only too familiar. In this as in other aspects of our traditional way of life, such as our legislation for indefinite detention without trial, there are more similarities between us and communist dictatorships than between us and contemporary western Christian democracies.

In his analysis of economic factors underlying South Africa's present condition, Dr. Wilson demonstrates in the simplest terms the fact that the Nationalist Government's declared political aims are totally irreconcilable with South Africa's economic needs and desires. On reading this chapter one despairs that reason, quite apart from the demands of love, has so little influence upon the decisions taken by those who govern us.

Dr. Wilson goes out of his way to be objective in summing up the pros and cons of

the migrant labour system. He is factual and scholarly and has kept emotional comment to a minimum but even so he has been quite unable to produce any convincing reasons why the migrant labour system should be retained.

The case against it is so strong that one wonders why everyone is not immediately convinced that it should be completely done away with. The arguments in favour of the system are entirely rationalisations of White determination to keep power and privilege in White hands.

The book provides well-thought-out suggestions for doing away with migrant labour which provide a constructive framework for all those who are working towards the abolition of the pass laws and influx control and the achievement of freedom of movement for all South Africa's people.

This book must be read. It is important to all of us. It may be ordered from Spro-Cas, Pharmacy House, 80 Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg or from booksellers throughout the country.

Quotes from 'Migrant Labour in South Africa'

FRANCIS WILSON

'TOTAL number of blacks employed on the gold mines: 367 400. By law the gold mines were until 1969 allowed to provide family housing for not more than three per cent of the Black labour force excluding "foreign natives". But as the proportion of South Africans was not more than one third of the total this means effectively only one per cent of the Black labour force was eligible for family housing. However the position of even this one per cent has become tenuous since the issue in 1969-1970 of an official circular sent out by a local Bantu Affairs Commissioner to the mines in the Klerksdorp area instructing them that children might no longer stay in the married quarters.'

'HOWEVER, despite being in the homeland, Mdantsane itself has need of hostel accommodation. Early in 1972 family houses were being used to house approximately 200 contract

workers from the Transkei who did not qualify to live with their families in the area, but who were needed as bus drivers. Moreover, there was in Duncan Village a hostel for 752 men and they had yet to be accommodated in Mdantsane. Thus application has been made for preparation of plans for a hostel complex to accommodate single men.'

'THERE ARE nearly 16 000 men in the zones which are very similar in construction and "feel" to the Dube hostel in Soweto. But it is a bleak, windswept area with hardly a blade of grass and not a flower between all the buildings. The most disturbing feature of the zones, however, is the large number of children living there. They are said to have been brought from home by their fathers in order that, by growing up in Cape Town, they might gain the right to work there as adults.'

STATISTICS for 80 percent of the South African economy show that in 1968 the average White worker earned R2 672 a year, the Coloured R830, the Asian R909 and the African R412.

In 1971 the average White worker earned R3 513, the Coloured R1 058, the Asian R1 182 and the African R519. For the White man this was a 31,8 per cent increase, for the Coloured a 27 per cent increase, for the Asian a 30 per per cent increase and for the African a 26 per cent increase.

The pay gap increased between four and six per cent for Africans over the four years.

The Star. December 15, 1972.