The making of the WORKING CLASS

PART SEVEN: INDIAN WORKERS ARRIVE

IN the 1850's coastal land owners in Natal were searching for cheap labour to build a sugar industry. The Natal Africans would not work for the very low wages offered by the land owners, so the Natal government started to import workers from India. *They were able to do this because Natal and India* were both parts of the British empire. A vast system of labour exportation already existed in India – every year thousands of Indians were sent to different British colonies to serve as cheap labour for the colonial economies. The Natal government simply joined the other colonies as a receiver of cheap labour. These labourers were followed to South Africa by several hundreds of Indian traders. Many of them became very wealthy. But they were a tiny minority of the Indian community and we are going to concentrate on the 150 000 Indians who came to South Africa as contract workers between 1860 and 1911.

The Indian workers had to sign a five-year contract before they got on a ship for the long journey to South Africa. The terms of the contract demanded nine-hours work every day except Sundays. In exchange men were paid 10 shillings a month and a food ration. Women and children were paid half these amounts. Each year of the contract, their wages increased by one shilling so that men were earning 14s by the end, and women and children nine shillings. Their employers were also supposed to provide good accomodation and health services.

But most employers violated the terms of the contract. Between July and December each year, when the mature sugar crop was being harvested, *and a new crop was being planted, many workers* were forced to work as much as seventeen or eighteen hours a day in order to get their full monthly wage. Their accomodation was in very poor condition. Most workers lived in rows of back-to-back rooms, with low ceilings and no ventilation. Sometimes, as many as 20 people had to share a room. These barracks were built from grass and thatch; or perhaps brick and iron as the years went on. They were built on land that was no suitable for planting cane. Often this meant that the land was semi-swamp, where pools of stagnant water collected after rainfalls, and water seeped into the floors of the barracks. There were no sewage systems. With these long working hours and terrible living conditions, many workers became ill. The health service that the government provided was too small to cope with this burden and many workers died when they need not have.

It is easy to understand from this description why Natal Africans would not work for the sugar planters, and it seems very surprising that thousands of Indians kept coming to Natal every year until 1911. The main reason is that the Indian countryside was so impoverished as a result of taxation, landlessness and drought that the conditions of daily life were even worse there than on the Natal sugar plantations.

But Indians did not only work on the plantations. When other Natal whites realised what a reliable and cheap source of labour the planters had found, they also began to demand access to Indian contract workers. By around 1900, thousands of low paid Indians worked for other agricultural enterprises, or served as domestics in hotels, restaurants and private homes, and thousands more worked for the Natal Government Railway or the coal mines in Northern Natal. Except for domestics, they were all unskilled workers. A large company had tried to import some skilled workers in 1896; but the white working class in Durban was so concerned at the possibility of having their wages undercut by cheap Indian contract labour, that they organised big demonstrations. After that, the government made sure that only unskilled workers were brought in.

These workers were never able to organise sufficiently to protest about their terrible conditions and low pay. Employers and state officials kept a close watch on their Indian workforce. The workers were partly controlled by fines, jail sentences and

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Indian workers harvest pineapples (Picture courtesy of Killie Campbell Africana library)

Tea plantation workers (Picture courtesy of the Africana Museum Johannesburg)

beatings. And, if any signs of organization appeared, it was broken up, and the 'troublemaker' was transferred elsewhere. So, the workers conditions barely improved at all between 1860 and 1913.

About half of the workers who survived their five year contract decided to remain in South Africa. To begin with, most of them tried to stay in the countryside. Some of them leased small plots of land and took up market gardening, others hawked this produce to white housewives in Durban. But the Natal whites wanted a cheap labour force, not a class of succesful small farmers. So, in 1896 they passed a law which stated that all Indians who had come to the colony as contract workers, and their children, must pay a tax of three pounds every year. After the Anglo-Boer war, when the Natal economy was severely depressed, thousands of Indians were unable to pay the tax. This forced them back into contract work, where payment of the tax was suspended as long as they remained under contract.

It must have seemed, to many of these workers, as if they would have to spend the rest of their lives working for almost nothing and undergoing jail sentences or beatings if they tried to resist. But in 1913 this all changed. One of the Indian political leaders, called Mohandas Gandhi, stopped concentrating on the problems of the wealthy Indians, and for once turned to the workers' problems. He went to the Natal coalfields with some of his friends, where they told the workers that if they went on strike the three pounds tax would be abolished. The response was overwhelming. Soon Indian workers all over Natal were on strike. The police beat up many of these workers, and shot some of them to death. Nevertheless, they stayed out on strike until the government abolished the tax which had forced them back into contract work.

The 1913 strike was a victory for Indian workers, but only a temporary one. The abolition of the three pound tax meant that Indians were no longer forced into contract work for white employers. But, after the First World War (1914–1918) other kinds of economic pressure forced Indians to accept low paying jobs in industry. Often conditions for these workers were no better than those we have described above. They only began to improve in the 1940's when large scale labour organisation started. We will discuss that in a later issue of FOSATU Worker News.