

Foreign African migrant labour at the Messina Copper Mines, 1905-1960

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Introduction

A.H.Jeeves holds the view that the survival and intensification of South Africa's coercive labour system, based on low-wage, oscillating migration, depended on the ability of the low- wage employers to tap the labour supply of the entire sub-continent.¹ From as early as 1897 the Chamber of Mines, through the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), recruited African migrant labour for the Witwatersrand gold mines. J. Crush, A. Jeeves and D. Yudelman maintain that the large scale use of foreign migrant labour subordinated the entire sub-continent to the South African economy. "In search of labour the controllers of the gold mines constructed a recruiting empire that at its zenith extended throughout southern Africa and north into southern Tanzania. ... the continuous migration of black workers back and forth between rural reserve and the mines was central to profitable gold production."²

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1. A.H. JEEVES, "Migration Labour in the Industrial Transformation of South Africa" in *Studies in the Economic History of Southern Africa Vol. 11: South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland 1920-1960* (London, 1991), p. 123.
2. J. CRUSH, A. JEEVES and D. YUDELMAN (eds.), *Africa's labour empire: a history of black migrancy to the gold mines* (Cape Town, 1991), p. 1.

Through the activities of WNLA which was aided by State labour policies, the Chamber of Mines used the foreign migrant labour system as a policy instrument to secure higher rates of accumulation in the Union, thereby becoming the strongest regional power. This resulted in what Grete Brochmann referred to as “international commuting between the rural peasant communities and the capitalist mining economy of South Africa.”³

The Messina copper industry was not a member of the Chamber of Mines and as such never directly benefitted from the recruiting activities of the WNLA in neighbouring countries.⁴ However, the company indirectly benefitted from the activities of the WNLA in that recruits in transit to the Witwatersrand gold mines passed through Messina, becoming aware of the existence of the Messina copper mines. Once their service contracts expired with the WNLA, some of the foreign migrant workers sought employment at the Messina copper mines instead of returning to the Witwatersrand. Thus, from 1905 neighbouring countries such as Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland were sources of African foreign migrant labour for the Messina mines.⁵

Nonetheless, at a minimal charge any mining company which was not a member of the Chamber of Mines could still use the recruiting facilities of the WNLA to gain access to foreign labour. G. Nattrass found that the tin mining companies at Rooiberg and Zaaipplaats in the Waterberg district employed Mozambican migrant mineworkers. These Mozambicans were recruited through the WNLA at a cost of £ 1 per head. In January 1912, the Rooiberg tin mining company recruited 600 Mozambicans at a cost of £ 600 and regarded it as “money well spent, because the East Coast boys were obedient, efficient and contributed to a marked improvement in the labour position of the company.”⁶

On the other hand, mining companies like the Transvaal Gold Mining Estates Limited (TGME) chose not to use the recruiting facilities of the WNLA. Between 1901 and 1918 TGME directly recruited a substantial number of Mozambicans from the district of Maputo which was exempted as a recruitment area by the 1901 *Modus Vivendi* signed between the Union of South Africa and the government of Mozambique. The Mozambicans helped to stabilise the TGME'S labour complement at strategic times of the year. P. Bonner and K. A. Shapiro maintain that “between October and January, the TGME always experienced an exodus of labour as tenants went home to plough their farms. It was precisely during the local ploughing season that Mozambican workers chose to return to the mines, thereby

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3. G. BROCHMAN, “Migrant labour and foreign policy: the case of Mozambique”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 22(4), 1985, p. 336.
 4. NTS 2169 234/313, Native Labour Bureau and Labour Problems at Messina, 29.11.1954.
 5. NTS 2169 289/280/3/23, Entry into and employment of foreign natives at Messina, 29.5.1914.
 6. G. NATTRASS, *Tin Mining in the Transvaal 1905 – 1914*, (MA,Unisa, 1987), p. 157.

easing the recurrent constraints of TGME’s labour supply.”⁷ For their part, some Mozambican workers saw Pilgrim’s Rest as a staging post on their way to the Rand mines. Some married local women and settled permanently on company land.⁸

Employment of foreign mineworkers

The Messina company chose not to use the WNLA to secure foreign labour. The method of recruiting labour, both foreign and domestic for Messina copper mines was based on the following procedures: all labour was entirely voluntary. No outside recruiting of any form took place. For this reason, under the influence of the company, the Department of Native Affairs did not declare the Messina district as a labour area. Every morning African work seekers assembled outside the offices of the chief compound manager. The latter would then invite Africans seeking work of the type, e.g. rock drilling, lashing, ore sorting, fitters and carpenters, messengers, clerks and sanitation for which vacancies existed, to step forward. Those Africans who were physically and mentally suitable for the jobs available were then selected. The remainder were turned out of the compound. Selected Africans were then informed of the rates of pay they were to receive. Once they accepted the rates of pay, they were then registered, medically examined at the Native Mine Hospital and finally allotted sleeping accommodation.⁹ Tables 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate that the Messina mining company was heavily dependent on foreign migrant labour.

Table 1

Territorial analysis of Africans employed by the Messina Transvaal Development Company, 1910¹⁰

Country	Number employed
Transvaal	211
Southern Rhodesia	226
Mozambique	58
Nyasaland	6
Total	501

7. P. BONNER and K.A. SHAPIRO, “Company Town, Company Estate: Pilgrim’s Rest, 1910-1932”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19(2), June 1993, p. 182.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. NTS 7683 186/332, Vol. 1, Company recruitment policy, Annexure A.
 10. GNLB 43 3170/517/4, 12.11.1910.

Table 2

African labour force at Messina copper mines, 1915¹¹

Country	Number employed
Transvaal	591
Southern Rhodesia	546
Mozambique	442
Nyasaland	22
Others	9
Total	1610

Table 3

Rate of pay: African mineworkers at Messina mine, 1917¹²

Classification	Category Rate of pay per shift
Hard rock	Overhand drilling : minimum 12 inches 1s.
	Overhand drilling : standard 24 inches 2s
	Underhand drilling : minimum 18 inches 1s
	Underhand drilling : standard 36 inches 2s
Soft rock	Overhand drilling : minimum 24 inches 1s
	Overhand drilling : standard 48 inches 2s
	Underhand drilling : minimum 36 inches 1s
	Underhand drilling : minimum 72 inches 2s

Surface work: The average rate of pay for surface work was 40s a month.

In addition, all mineworkers received the following uncooked rations:-

Mealie meal : 2 lbs. per worker per day.

Meat : 1 lbs. per worker 3 times a week.

Vegetables : 1¹/₂ lbs. issued weekly to about 2000 workers.¹³

11 . GNLB 43 984/12/41, 12.10.1915.

12 . NTS 2209 365/280, 17.9.1917.

13 . NTS 2209 365/280, 17.9.1917.

From the above statistics, it is clear that foreign migrant labour was cheap. It became an important labour cost reduction instrument for the Messina company and the South African economy. At this stage the mining company did not house or care for the majority of foreign migrant workers' families, nor did it provide such families with medical or social benefits. Again, the mining industry did not support the foreign migrant workers once they became redundant or unemployable due to injury or old age. This meant that the wages of the mineworkers were lower than would have been the case if they had lived with their families. This amounted indirectly to the rural areas of Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Mozambique subsidising the base mineral mining industry at Messina. Further, the company had no intention to proletarianise individual mineworkers for permanent wage labour. They applied a contract system, which ensured that workers would leave the Messina copper mines after completing the 12 months service contract. However, the majority of these foreign migrant workers kept coming back after a month or so to enter into new contracts. Each time they returned to enter into new service contracts, they would start by earning the minimum wage in their work category.¹⁴

Mozambican migrant mineworkers

From the 1880's Mozambican workers took up employment on the Kimberley diamond mines and the Witwatersrand gold mines. Until the second half of the 20th century migrant labour from southern Mozambique was the largest of foreign labour recruited to South African mines by the WNLA.¹⁵ Indeed southern Mozambique became "one large compound for natives of the Rand." In the words of W. Gemmill, the head of the WNLA: "The mining industry has been built up largely upon the labour of the Portuguese natives, who work underground when no other natives would do so. Mining work is now second nature to the Portuguese native. He has become a natural miner ... and his whole life is centred around the custom of work on the Witwatersrand." ¹⁶

The emigration of Mozambican workers to South African mines was governed by a series of international agreements beginning in 1897 between Mozambique and the Transvaal Republic, followed by the *Modus Vivendi* of 1901, the Transvaal - Mozambique Convention of 1909, and the Portuguese - South African Convention of 1928, revised in 1934, 1936 and 1940.¹⁷ Direct monetary payments per worker

14. Statement by A. Chirwa, a former underground mineworker at the Messina shaft between 1942 and 1959, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996.

15. J. CRUSH, A. JEEVES and D. YUDELMAN (eds.), *Africa's labour empire: a history of black migrancy to the gold mines*, pp. 234-235.

16. Quoted by L. VAIL and L. WHITE, *Capitalism and colonialism in Mozambique: a study of Quelimane District* (London, 1980), p. 206.

17. M. HARRIS, "Labour Migration among the Mozambique Thonga: Cultural and Political factors", *Africa*, 29(1), 1959, p. 50.

recruited, guarantees to repatriate clandestine emigrants, maximum contract time, and permission to establish Portuguese Native Affairs inspection and tax – collecting facilities (*Curadoria*) on Union territory also figured prominently in the bargaining of the agreements.¹⁸

For instance, after 1914 all Mozambican mineworkers were recruited on an eighteen-month contract, the first twelve months being on deferred pay, payable in Mozambique on the return of the migrant worker. Under the Mozambique Convention of 1928, the maximum period of service of Mozambique migrant workers was limited to eighteen months, the initial contract being for 313 shifts (twelve months) and any subsequent contract being limited to 156 shifts. After the first nine month's service and during any period of re-engagement one-half of the wages earned was paid to the migrant mineworker upon his return to Mozambique.¹⁹ However, many clandestine Mozambican workers found employment on other South African mines, which were not members of the Chamber of Mines. The Messina copper mines attracted many such clandestine Mozambican migrant workers.²⁰

In Mozambique, peasant agriculture was severely restricted. The colonial administrators did not allow the peasants to engage in commerce freely. Instead, the commercial sector of agriculture was monopolised by the Portuguese settlers who had confiscated the most fertile areas. Thus the peasant economy remained at the service of the colonial economy without possibilities of independent reproduction²¹. This compelled the majority of Mozambican peasants in the rural areas to flock to the mining industries of the Union.²²

The Messina company had in its labour force clandestine Mozambican mineworkers who came from the districts of Tete and Sena in Portuguese East Africa north of latitude 22 degrees South of the Equator.²³ In view of the geographical position of the Messina company a majority of Mozambicans from the Tete and Sena districts regarded Messina as the natural place for them to seek work chiefly on account of its proximity to their kraals.²⁴

18. *Ibid.*

19. M. WILSON, *Migrant Labour in South Africa* (London, 1972), p. 111.

20. NTS 219 289/280/3/23, Entry into and employment of foreign natives at Messina, 29.5.1914.

21. Statement by J. A. Pepete, a Mozambican who was employed at the Messina shaft as a carpenter between 1944 and 1979, Nancefield Location, 9.3.1995.

22. G. BROCHMAN, "Migrant labour and foreign policy: the case of Mozambique", *Journal of Peace Research*, 22(4), 1985, p. 337.

23. GNLB 406 60/3, J.C.V. Lyle, additional Native Commissioner for the Zoutpansberg to H.S.Cooke, the Director of Native Labour, 10.11.1928.

24. GNLB 406 60/3, T Garside, mine Secretary to J.C.V. Lyle, 5.11.1928.

The majority of these Mozambican mineworkers who were domiciled along the Portuguese East Africa - Rhodesian border were not in possession of valid Portuguese work permits. This meant that the Portuguese authorities were not benefitting financially from their employment since they were not subjected to the 60 per cent deferred pay as agreed between the Portuguese colonial administration and the Chamber of Mines. The Additional Native Commissioner for the Zoutpansberg, J.C.V. Lyle, suggested that it would greatly assist the Portuguese Curator in collecting taxes and locating Mozambican workers if the Messina mining company was made the sole avenue of employment of the Mozambicans in the Zoutpansberg district.²⁵

Already clandestine Mozambican immigrants were eligible for employment on coal and gold mines affiliated to the WNLA, provided that such workers were physically fit and reported either to the head office of the Portuguese Curator in Johannesburg or the WLNA compound. Lyle urged for the adoption of a similar approach with regard to clandestine Mozambican mineworkers at the Messina copper mine.²⁶ The mine management was eager to retain the services of the Mozambican mineworkers, the majority of whom had acquired skills as underground workers on the Witwatersrand gold mines.²⁷

However, Cooke was unable to permit the Messina copper mine to officially employ Mozambican mineworkers since the special sanction of the Portuguese colonial administration would first have to be obtained. This was further complicated by the fact that the Messina company was not a member of the WNLA, which had the sole authority to recruit Mozambican workers to the Union according to the Mozambican Convention of 1928.²⁸

The Mozambique Convention of 1928 permitted WNLA recruiting agents to recruit up to 8000 Africans a year in Mozambique and established that 47.5 per cent of seaborne import traffic to the Witwatersrand would pass through Lourenco Marques harbour. It provided for the payment of the Portuguese government of registration, engagement and monthly fees for each recruit, and regularised the deferred pay system and compulsory repatriation of recruits at the end of their contract periods.²⁹ From Mozambique, South African mines got a contingent of labour that could not be bettered for regularity, that remained on the mines for

25. GNLB 406 40/3, Lyle to Cooke, 10.11.1928.

26. Ibid.

27. GNLB 406 40/3, Garside to Lyle, 12.11.1928.

28. DNL 222 13/98, Employment of Portuguese Natives: Messina Mine, 30.11.1928; GNLB 406 40/3, Mozambique Convention 1928, Repatriation of Portuguese Natives, 30.11.1928.

29. J. DUFFY, *Portugal in Africa* (London, 1962), p. 137; GNLB 406 60/16, Mozambique Convention, 1928.

longer contract periods than any other group of workers. In return, Lourenco Marques found “a place in the sun” as an important harbour.³⁰

Under the terms of the Mozambique Convention of 1928, the supply of African mineworkers was to be reduced by 5000 per annum for the next 5 years. This would be achieved by not renewing the two year expired passports of the workers.³¹ At Messina there was confusion as to whether Mozambicans whose service contracts had expired had to be sent home or not. However, upon closer study of the convention it became clear that Mozambicans at the Messina copper mine were not affected by the convention. Part 1 of the Mozambique Convention clearly stated that the convention was applicable to African mineworkers from territories of Mozambique South of Latitude 22 degrees South of the Equator under direct State administration.³² Therefore, Mozambican mineworkers who were domiciled North of Latitude 22 degrees South of the Equator could not be offered the alternative of employment on the Witwatersrand gold and coal mines.

Reasons advanced for this exclusion included the assertion that Mozambican workers from further north were found to be susceptible to tuberculosis in the mines. The area was also officially designated to be a labour supply base for the Mozambican plantations. Yet a growing number of Mozambicans not only from the districts of Tete and Sena, but also from the WNLA recruiting areas skipped the border and entered Southern Rhodesia and eventually made their way to the Messina mines.³³ The push factors for these Mozambicans included the attempt to avoid the Mozambique labour code which prohibited African idleness, determination to avoid conscription as *shilbalos* or forced workers in Mozambique and in some cases the fear of being drafted to unpopular mines in South Africa by the WNLA recruiters.³⁴

Therefore the Messina copper mines, which operated outside the Chamber of Mines circle could offer these Mozambicans employment provided they held legitimate Portuguese passports. Given this assurance, the Messina mine management gradually increased its intake of Mozambican mineworkers as reflected in Tables 5 and 6.

30. R. FIRST, “The Gold of Migrant Labour”, *Africa South in Exile*, 5(3), 1961, pp. 13-14.

31. GNLB 406 60/61, Mozambique Convention, H. Pirow, Government Mining Engineer to the Secretary of Mines and Industries, 28.8.1929.

32. GNLB 406 60/61, Mozambique Convention; Cooke to Lyle, 26.5.1928.

33. J. DUFFY, *Portugal in Africa*, p. 137; DNL 242 101/98, Portuguese Natives at the Messina Mines, 21.6.1929.

34. Statement by Pepete, Nancefield Location, 9.3.1995.

Table 5

Messina Mine Employment Statistics, 1935³⁵

Country	Number employed
Transvaal	409
Portuguese East Africa	141
Southern Rhodesia	921
Northern Rhodesia	832
Nyasaland	800
Total;	3103

Table 6

MESSINA MINE EMPLOYMENT STATISTICS, 1943³⁶

Country	Number employed
Transvaal	279
Portuguese East Africa	627
Southern Rhodesia	1608
Nothern Rhodesia	258
Nyasaland	1459
Tanganyika	31
Bechuanaland	4
Total	4255

The Mozambique convention had far reaching socio-economic effects on Mozambican families. The Mozambican peasant mineworkers worked long successive contracts and spent most of their working lives down the mines of the capitalist - segregationist system. The result was that agricultural patterns in Mozambique were distorted to such an extent that this system of migrant labour exploitation could not immediately be ended or changed when Mozambique gained independence in 1975. Peasant families had become dependent on wages from mine labour for the purchase of the basic necessities of everyday family life and essential instruments of production like ploughs, oxen, grain and hoes for agriculture.

35 . NTS 2204 328/280, 16.3.1936

36 . NTS 7683 186/332, 8.5.1943.

Migrant mineworkers from Nyasaland

Between 1905 and 1920 labour migration from Nyasaland to the Messina mining company was sparse, as shown on Tables 1 and 2. Since the Messina company did not have any recruiting agency in Nyasaland, the few Nyasas who were employed at the copper mine had found employment on their own initiative. All African adult male inhabitants of Nyasaland who wished to leave their country were required by the Native Labour Ordinance of 1904 to be issued with a pass costing 6d. enabling them to seek employment as migrant workers. In 1909 the Nyasaland colonial government decided to issue the pass without charge because the majority of Nyasas simply left the country without paying the required fee of 6d.³⁷

From 1904 Southern Rhodesian mines became the most favoured centers of employment for Nyasaland migrant workers. Between 1900 and 1907, mineworkers in Southern Rhodesia were earning an average wage of between 30s. and 45s. a month. F.E. Sanderson has shown that the Nyasaland labour migration to Southern Rhodesia increased so considerably - almost half of its adult male population - that the Nyasaland administration in 1910 withdrew permission for the recruitment within its borders of migrant workers. This prohibition had little impact on the labour movement of the workers because they continued to cross the border to the nearest center of recruitment or moved out individually without recruitment as before under the leadership of experienced travellers.³⁸

It was only after 1920 that a growing number of Nyasas made their way to the copper mining and farming areas of Messina. Apart from the social and economic pressures within Nyasaland, migrants were attracted to Messina and the Witwatersrand gold mines by the vastly superior wage rates, which were offered to mineworkers. In comparison with the usual wage rates for the unskilled workers of between 3s. and 6s. a month in Nyasaland, Nyasa migrant workers could earn between £ 2.0.0 and £ 2.15.0 for 30 shifts at the Messina copper mine.³⁹ When the mine wage levels in Southern Rhodesia began to decline after the First World War, thousands of Nyasas began to use this territory as a transit route between the Union of South Africa and Nyasaland. Thousands moved on to the Witwatersrand gold mines whilst a few hundreds decided to stake their future with the Messina copper mining company.⁴⁰

37. J.C. ABRAHAM, Report on Nyasaland Natives in the Union of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (Zomba, 1937), p. 8.

38. F.E. SANDERSON, "The Development of labour Migration from Nyasaland, 1891-1914" in *Journal of African History*, 11, 1961, p. 266.

39. JUS276 3/326/19, Rates of Pay to Messina Native Employees, 1919; CF. Sanderson, "The Development of Labour Migration from Nyasaland", pp. 261-263.

40. See Tables 5 and 6; NTS 1789 260/20, Natives seeking employment at Union mines, 11.8.1920.

In 1935 a Nyasaland Government Commission was set up to examine the reasons for labour migration. The commission found that though some young men became labour migrants to prove that they were men, or out of a spirit of adventure, this could not account for the second, third and subsequent returns to the mining centers. The basic cause lay in the economic field. The commission found evidence that the most impoverished areas in Nyasaland, with poor land and no export crops, had the largest proportion of men away from home - 62 per cent of them were classified as being permanently away. On the other hand, the areas with fertile land and not far from European settlements had only 24 per cent of its men permanently away.

The gradual increase of Nyasaland migrant workers to Messina was also partly brought about by the relative “sense of security” which was in-built in a system of employment by the mine management. Whilst Nyasaland migrant workers who were employed at the Rand mines had to return home after the expiry of their service contracts, those employed at the Messina company could organise their own accommodation outside the mine property. With no financial benefits from the company, they could then stay for a minimum of one week locally or return home for a month before coming back for re-employment.⁴¹ The Nyasaland colonial government attempted to keep the bulk of its male adult population at home. However, until 1936, it failed because it lacked an adequate administrative staff, enforceable penal sanctions and a high degree of inter-governmental cooperation.⁴²

Migrant mineworkers from Southern Rhodesia

Southern Rhodesia stood out in sharp contrast to the other territories that supplied foreign labour to the gold mining industry on the Witwatersrand and at Messina. By the turn of the century, Southern Rhodesia had undergone industrialisation and urbanisation which closely resembled that of the Union of South Africa.. By contrast Mozambique, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Tanganyika were predominantly agricultural and pastoral economies with low living standards and little industrial activity.⁴³

After the subjugation of the Shona and Ndebele in the 1890’s, the White settler community developed restrictive legislation to segregate the races geographically and in employment.⁴⁴ In the mining industry the State and mining capital

41. Statement by Milanzi, Nancefield Location, 11.7.1997; DNL1227 131/61 Cooke to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 8.7.1936

42. F.E. SANDERSON, “The Development of labour Migration from Nyasaland, 1891-1914”, *Journal of African History*, 11, 1961, p. 269.

43. McNAMARA, “Black worker conflicts on the South African gold mines, 1973-1982” (Ph.D., UW, 1985), p.142.

44. A.K.H. WEINRICH, *Black and White Elites in Rural Rhodesia* (London, 1987), p. 136.

cooperated in maximising accumulation through a web of coercive labour legislation, specifically the Master and Servant Ordinance of 1901 and the Native Pass Ordinance of 1902 which were designed to regulate the mobility of African labour and stabilise employment under contract.⁴⁵

The gold, copper, zinc, coal, asbestos and lead mines in Southern Rhodesia exposed African labour to harsh labour conditions underground and in the compounds. The Rhodesian mines had low profitability compared with the mines in South Africa. As a result wages were also far too low, facilities sparse and primitive, compounds were crowded and the food was poor. As a result African mineworkers on Rhodesian mines developed a common worker consciousness through their shared experiences of difficult and dangerous underground and compound conditions, of the better wages and conditions which prevailed on the Rand's gold mines. Many of these workers who were recruited by the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau, resorted to the "stop-go pattern of employment followed by desertion a few months later, whereby large numbers of workers managed to limit their stay on Southern Rhodesian mines and farms to the time it took them to save enough for the next stage of their journey southwards"⁴⁶

From 1900 the Rhodesian mine owners faced strong competition from the Transvaal mines for the African cheap labour. In 1901 the Rhodesian authorities tried to safeguard their labour supplies by entering into a *modus vivendi* agreement with the WNLA. In terms of the agreement the WNLA would not recruit in Southern Rhodesia, Ngamiland or Zambezia. The WNLA was then allowed exclusive rights of recruiting in Mozambique. However, the WNLA had to supply 12 ½ per cent of the workers recruited from Mozambique to Southern Rhodesia. Unfortunately for Rhodesian mine owners, the agreement could not be implemented because Mozambican recruits were not willing to work in Southern Rhodesia. This resulted in the WNLA failing to deliver its 12 ½ per cent obligation.⁴⁷

Between 1906 and 1910 Rhodesian police under instructions from the Native Commissioner patrolled the entire length of the Limpopo River in an attempt to stop African work-seekers from entering the Transvaal. However, the work-seekers were adept at eluding the patrol. The Rhodesian authorities lacked the bureaucratic and police capability to control their borders. Negotiating with the WNLA offered

45. I. PHIMISTER, *An economic and social history of Zimbabwe 1890-1948: capital accumulation and class struggle* (London, 1988), p. 86.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

47. C. VAN ONSELEN, *Chibaro: African mine labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900 – 1933* (London, 1976), p. 85.

the hope of getting some control over the migration and possibly putting some enforceable limits on it.⁴⁸

In 1939 the WNLA concluded a formal agreement with the three Central African governments of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The agreement gave the WNLA the right to establish its depots, camps and transport systems in the region. In return, the WNLA undertook not to engage ‘ northern voluntary ’ labour within South Africa itself. This was an important concession by the WNLA since it had the potential of preventing clandestine migrants to South African mines. However, the Messina company was not a member of the WNLA and Rhodesian clandestine African migrants continued to be offered jobs at the mines.⁴⁹

Individual Southern Rhodesians left their communities on their own initiative to seek work both in the mining and secondary industries of the Union of South Africa. From the late 1910s, the majority of Southern Rhodesians who found their way to the Messina mining company were coming from the rural communities there. Since the majority of Rhodesian mines were situated in the remote rural districts of Rhodesia, it meant that these rural work-seekers brought with them acquired skills of mine work from mines such as Wankie Colliery, Cam and Motor Mine, Globe and Phoenix and Shamva mine.⁵⁰

Declining wage rates for African mineworkers caused the move by Rhodesian mineworkers to the Messina mining company and other centers of industry in the Union of South Africa. The availability of surplus local cheap labour and the influx of cheap migrant labour from Nyasaland enabled the Rhodesian mine bosses to consistently adjust wages downwards between 1912 and 1933. ⁵¹In his study on labour supplies in Southern Rhodesia, G. Arrighi found that because of this continued downward wage adjustment process, African mine wages were lower in 1922 than they had been in 1904. ⁵²

A good number of these Southern Rhodesian mineworkers came from rural communities where Catholic, Anglican and Methodist missionaries had established mission stations. The three main activities at these mission stations were the

48. I. PHIMISTER, *An economic and social history of Zimbabwe 1890-1948: capital accumulation and class struggle*, p. 89.

49. D. YUDELMAN and A. JEEVES, “New Labour Frontiers for Old Black Migrants to the South African Gold Mines, 1920-1985” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13(1), October 1986, p. 109.

50. Statement by Ndlovu, a Rhodesian migrant mineworker employed at the Messina No. Shaft, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996; NTS 2209 365/288, Garside to Lyle, 7.5.1917.

51. C. VAN ONSELEN, *Chibaro: African mine labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900 – 1933*, p. 33.

52. G. ARRIGHI, “Labour supplies in Historical perspective : A study of the Proletarianisation of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia”, *Journal of Development Studies*, 6(3), 1970, p. 200.

preaching of Christian religion, education and the rendering of health care services. At these mission stations, missionary education emphasised industrial training, habits of discipline and obedience to employers. These missionary goals fitted very well with the policy of the Messina mining company and the ideology of the Union government, which aspired for a subservient working class. Because of the reasons advanced above, the Messina mine management were always prepared to hire Rhodesian work-seekers whenever the opportunity arose. This is borne out by the high numbers of Southern Rhodesian mineworkers as reflected on Tables 5, 6 and 7.⁵³

Table 7

MESSINA MINE LABOUR FORCE, 1954⁵⁴

Contry	Number employed
Transvaal	244
Southern Rhodesia	1418
Northern Rhodesia	159
Nyasaland	1312
Portuguese East Africa	891
Coloureds	2
Others	25
Total	4087

The administration of Southern Rhodesia became aware of the gradual exodus of some of its experienced mine labour force to Messina. However, very little could be done to stop this process because the Messina company was not directly involved in recruiting them to its mines. In January 1917, the Southern Rhodesian government approached the Union government seeking permission to visit the Messina mining company where a large number of its African workers were employed. The purpose of the visit was to afford the Southern Rhodesian government representative, W.E. Thomas, the opportunity to acquaint himself with the conditions under which Rhodesian mineworkers were employed, rate of wages and to collect Native Tax due to the Southern Rhodesian government by such mineworkers who were liable therefore.⁵⁵

53. Statement by Ndlovu, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996; NTS 5521 221/43, Director of Native Labour to Secretary of Native Affairs, 14.3.1954.

54. NTS 2169 289/280/3/23, 29.5.1954.

55. NTS 2582 14/F 473, Rhodesian Chief Native Commissioner to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 29.1.1917.

The Southern Rhodesian representative found that the average rate of pay for Messina underground mineworkers was 40s. a month compared to 15s. a month in his country. He also found that although the Messina company was not a declared labour area, the mine adhered to the Transvaal Food Ration Regulations. The officer also reported that everything necessary for the well-being of Rhodesian mineworkers was provided for at the Native Mine Hospital. In the opinion of Thomas, better wages, better food rations and better living conditions in the compounds were the pull factors for the Rhodesian mineworkers to Messina.⁵⁶

Between 1930 and 1950 even those Rhodesians, who were domiciled in the rural areas along the South African - Rhodesian border flocked to Messina to seek employment. Uppermost in the minds of these people was the desire to raise enough funds to buy livestock back at home. Because the majority had no experience of underground mine work, they were employed for surface work in the smelter division, at the pump station, rock sorting and some as messengers.⁵⁷ Prior to 1966 when the WNLA's right to recruit in Southern Rhodesia was legally barred, the Messina mining company remained the single largest employer of Southern Rhodesian mineworkers in the Union.⁵⁸

At the Messina company, foreign migrant mineworkers who had acquired mining skills were highly valued. As a result, many of them had their contracts repeatedly renewed. However, when they became pensioned as a result of old age or physical disability due to mine accidents, they were repatriated to their countries of origin.⁵⁹ In contrast, for example, the TGME, which operated in the Pilgrim's Rest district, pensioned off some of its long service mineworkers on plots of land on their farms. This policy applied especially to foreign migrant mineworkers who had become involved with local women. The majority of such mineworkers were Mozambicans who had been recruited by the TGME to maintain its labour supply at times when the tenancy system proved inadequate.⁶⁰

Attitude of local Africans to foreign migrant workers

The abundant supply of cheap African labour from Nyasaland, Mozambique, Southern and Northern Rhodesia to the Messina mining company had some negative impact on local Africans. First, it encouraged the mine management to keep the wage levels of African mineworkers low and thereby contributed greatly

56. NTS 2582 14/F 473, W.E. Thomas to Rhodesian Chief Native Commissioner, 17.9.1917.

57. Statement by F. Manda, a former Rhodesian underground mine worker at the Harper mine, Nancefield Location, 9.3.1995.

58. GNLB 465 73/25, Director of Native Labour to Secretary of Native Affairs, 20.4.1960; James, *Our Precious Metal*, pp. 33-39.

59. NTS 2169 298/280/3/23, Employment of foreign natives at Messina, 23.7.1923

60. A. MABIN, "The Land Clearance at Pilgrim's Rest", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13(3), April 1987, p. 404.

in retarding their economic and social upward mobility. It undermined and disempowered the local adult male community from negotiating for better wage levels in return for their labour. As a result, there were sporadic outbursts of anger and frustration among the local unemployed at Messina directed against foreign migrant workers who were perceived as spoilers because they accepted the exploitative wage structure offered by mine management and thereby contributed to their exclusion from employment opportunities and their economic woes.

The locals, not only at Messina, but also at other mining and industrial centers in the Union of South Africa, blamed the foreign migrant workers for their unemployment. In 1928 this attitude manifested itself when the Transvaal African Congress, spearheaded by Selby Msimang, pressed delegates to apply political pressure on the government to deport all Nyasas, arguing that these men, who often worked as mineworkers or domestic servants, deprived local men and women of employment opportunities.⁶¹ This move was also an attempt to thwart the efforts of the twin forces of capitalism and segregation (the forerunner of Apartheid) to use foreign labour as an instrument of bypassing local labour which was regarded as susceptible to trade union movements.

The locals therefore opted to join the ranks of migrant workers to the Witwatersrand gold mines and industries where wage levels were reported to be better structured. For both foreign migrant workers and locals, migrant work contributed in retarding the development of agriculture in their respective areas. The absence of mature, physically strong adult males meant that old men, children and women had to attend to agriculture. Migrant labour also led to social disruption within the communities by the loosening of social sanctions and created economic and social insecurity among woman, children and the aged.

Savings and deferred pay schemes

Another aspect of foreign migrant labour to the Messina copper mines which calls for attention is the matter of deferred pay. Between 1905 and 1935 the company did not make provision for deferred pay. This was one reason why some foreign migrant workers preferred to work at the Messina mines instead of the Witwatersrand gold mines. In 1935 the Messina company offered mineworkers the opportunity to save their hard earned cash through the savings and deferred pay schemes. However, these schemes were optional. The basis on which the company conducted the savings were similar to those employed by the gold mines on the Witwatersrand and Orange Free State except that they did not run a remittance agency. Whenever the African mineworker expressed the desire to save his money, a Saving Book was issued to him and the amount deposited was then entered. The

61. *Umteteli wa Bantu* , 18 February and 31 March 1928 .

mineworker was responsible for the safe-keeping of his Saving Book which he produced on each occasion he desired to withdraw or deposit money. ⁶²

The mine management was advised by the mine auditors that owing to the small amounts involved on each account, it would be too cumbersome to credit each depositor with interest. Without even consulting the account holders, the mine management resolved to credit the Native Welfare Account monthly with interest at the rate of 3 1/2% per annum on the aggregate amount standing to the credit of the savings accounts. Representations made by the account holders to the chief compound manager for interest to be credited to their accounts proved futile. In February 1957, the total number of savings accounts was 429, showing the total amount of £ 9 248 .1s. ⁶³

If the mineworker elected to have a certain portion of his wages deferred, his authority was obtained through a Deferred Pay Application form. All deductions from wages for deferred pay were then recorded on a Deferred Pay Record Card. Interest on the amounts of the Deferred pay accounts at the rate of 3 1/2 % per annum was credited to the Native Welfare Account. The number of Deferred pay accounts in operation in February 1959 was 820 and the total amount was £ 10 092. ⁶⁴

Only 1249 of a total of 5426 mineworkers opted for the two schemes. The majority, especially those in the lower wage brackets, preferred to use their earned cash to purchase clothing and gifts for their children, wives or parents in their respective countries of origin. The deferred pay scheme had problems because the colonial governments to which the savings were sent by the company took long periods before paying out to the account holders. This presented economic and social problems to the family of the returned worker who expected to see the rewards of migrant labour immediately upon his arrival. It also delayed the migrant worker from returning to Messina to renew his service contract with the mining company. ⁶⁵

The majority of foreign migrant workers who opted for the Savings Book or Deferred Pay Scheme were those living in the single sex compound who had no immediate or extended families to look after at Messina. Mineworkers who resided in the family housing units with their families were obliged to use their hard earned

62. NTS 10024 3191/408 H, Native Saving and Deferred pay schemes, 27.9.1959.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Statement by Chirwa, a foreign migrant worker from Nyasaland who was employed at the Harper shaft in 1954, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996.

cash to supplement the rations they received from the company in order to cater for their families.⁶⁶

In January 1959, the Messina mine management found that the Native Savings and Deferred Pay schemes were in conflict with the newly promulgated law as published in Government Gazette No. 63 of the 9th January 1959 under the Native Labour Regulations Act, Chapter 2, Section 14(1) which stated that “no person could conduct a saving scheme or remittance agency on behalf of natives employed by him save by the written consent of the Director of Native Labour.”⁶⁷ Provision was also made that an amount standing to the credit of a depositor who had deserted from the services of the company and whose whereabouts were unknown was after a period of 2 years to be paid over to the Director of Native Labour. The employer had to furnish full details of each depositor, the amount deposited and interest standing to the credit of such a deserter when remitting accounts. The administration costs of the schemes were to be borne by the mining company. The latter also had to lodge with the Director of Native Labour, a Deed of Security of £ 1000.⁶⁸ At the Messina mines, prior to 1959, any deserter who had opted for a Savings Book or Deferred Pay scheme forfeited all his savings to the mining company.

All African Peoples Conference on labour supply to South Africa

At the beginning of 1958, the Messina mining company African labour force consisted of almost 95 per cent of foreign migrant workers. However, in December 1958 the Messina mine management, like other mining houses in South Africa, was horrified by the resolution of the first All-African Peoples Conference which called upon the Rhodesians and Nyasaland to withhold their mine labour from the South African mines and divert such labour to the development of their own countries. This process was to be seen as part of the economic boycott of South Africa as a result of its apartheid policies and as an essential measure to bring to a stop the disruption of family life in Central Africa.⁶⁹

As a result of this resolution, the Tanganyika government announced in October 1960 that it would end the agreement signed in 1959 by the British colonial government and WNLA, under which government facilities were used for the recruitment of African migrant labour for South African mines.⁷⁰ Although at this stage the Messina mines had an insignificant number of Tanganyikans under its

66. Statement by Adam Mashakgomo, former underground worker at Campbell, Nancefield Location, 23.6.96.

67. NTS 10024 391/408/H, Director of Native Labour to the secretary of the Messina (TVL) Development Company, 20.4.1959.

68. Ibid.

69. *The Rand Daily Mail*, 12 December 1958.

70. *The Star*, 21 October 1960.

employment, a clear message was sent out that its reliance on the Nyasaland and Rhodesian labour force could also come under fire. The possibility of the occurrence of such an event compelled mine management to seek government assistance in its renewed attempts to recruit South African labour, especially from the Sibasa and Zoutpansberg districts.

Conventions of the International Labour Organisation with special reference to South Africa

African political leaders who propagated the withdrawal of foreign migrant leaders from South Africa also claimed that the latter violated various Conventions of the International Labour Organisation. Indeed a brief reference to some of the Conventions of the International Labour Organisation of which South Africa was a member, clearly illustrates that both the Union government and the Messina mining company (and other mining houses in the country) deliberately violated the rights of African foreign migrant workers. For years the Messina mining company maintained that African foreign migrant workers offered themselves for work and were not recruited. This was an attempt to avoid compliance with International Labour Organisation Conventions on the recruitment of migrant labour. Such an attitude manifested itself in the behaviour of the Union government which by 1955 had only ratified 11 of the 111 Conventions passed by the International Labour Organisation since 1919. The Conventions which were ratified by South Africa related to night work, underground work by women, accident compensation and wage fixing machinery.⁷¹

The definition of recruiting in Convention 50 of 1936 covers “all operations undertaken with the object of obtaining or supplying the labour of persons who do not spontaneously offer their services at the place of employment, or at a public emigration or employment office or at an office conducted by the employers’ organisation.”⁷² The foreign migrant worker at the Messina mines, who was unable to make a minimum living from his country of origin, was not a free agent in the sense that he could not move into an industrial labour market and offer his labour to the highest bidder. He could not leave his area before he received a pass from government authorities. Even then, in the majority of cases, he had to sign a contract to work on the mines. Other employment opportunities were seldom open to him, the most common being in the farming sector.

The general approach of the International Labour Organization was that steps had to be undertaken to ensure that the economic and social organization of the population should not be endangered by demands for adult male migrant labour.

71. G.C. LODGE, *Spearheads of democracy: labour in developing countries* (New York, 1962), p. 99; R. FIRST, “The Gold of Migrant Labour”, *Africa South in Exile*, 5(3), 1961, p. 21.

72. R. FIRST, “The Gold of Migrant Labour”, *Africa South in Exile*, 5(3), 1961, p. 21.

Clearly the siphoning of adult males, especially from Nyasaland, Mozambique and the Rhodesias to the Messina copper mines must have had disastrous social effects on various communities, accompanied by the shattering of families and depriving children of adequate parental control, among others. The absence of the majority of men in some districts in the above-mentioned countries threw the burden of agriculture on to the young, the women and the aged, besides stultifying progress even further and making them more dependent upon the migrant labour system for cash with which to pay taxes and supplement the grain harvest.

Article 6 of the Migrant Labour Convention (97) lays down that foreign migrant workers should receive treatment no less favourable than that given to the country's own nationals, including the right to belong to trade unions, social security provisions and overtime arrangements. Recommendation 100 reads "any discrimination against migrant workers should be eliminated."⁷³ Yet foreign migrant workers at the Messina mines, like their African South African counterparts, were deliberately discriminated against in all aspects by the mine management aided by government policies that aimed at perpetuating the economic exploitation and social degradation of African mine workers.

As a result of its migrant labour policies, the government did not ratify the Conventions (97) of 1949 and 1955 for the Protection of Migrant Workers. In refusing to ratify the Recommendations of 1949 and 1955, the government position was that : "The problems associated with migrant workers vary greatly, and their solution is essentially a matter to be determined between the governments concerned or, in the case of internal migration, in accordance with national laws."⁷⁴

The Union government also argued that it should be left to national authorities to determine the extent to which any Recommendation could be applied to various categories of migrant workers. In this instance the national authorities were following a policy of discrimination in respect of service conditions of employment and occupation to the detriment of all African mineworkers. Such negative responses by the Union government to the various International Labour Organisation's Conventions and Recommendations aimed at the setting of international labour standards, contributed greatly in empowering the mining industry in South Africa to deny foreign migrant workers the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.

73. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION (ILO), *The ILO: in the service of social progress: A workers' education manual* (Geneva, 1969), pp. 131-132.

74. ILO, *Trade unions and the ILO: a workers' education manual* (Geneva, 1979), p. 41.

Opsomming

Buitelandse Trekarbeid by die Messina Kopermyne, 1905-1960

Die artikel ondersoek die verskaffing van trekarbeid uit ander Afrikalande aan die Messina kopermyndustrie. Die mynindustrie se afhanklikheid van buitelandse trekarbeid het dit vir die Messina maatskappy moontlik gemaak om op die kort termyn te spaar op arbeidskoste. Die trekarbeiders is uitgebuit. Hulle het geen ander opsie gehad as om die loonstruktuur te aanvaar nie. Op die lang termyn het die reëling egter 'n probleem geword vir die tweeledige onderdrukkende kragte van kapitalisme en segregasie. Buitelandse trekarbeiders het naamlik die nodige vaardighede verwerf en die meerderheid werkkategorieë beskikbaar vir swartmense gemonopoliseer ten koste van plaaslike werkers. Ter wille van groter helderheid oor die situasie by Messina, word verwys na die werwingsveldtogte wat deur die WNLA geloods is en gerig was om buitelandse arbeid vir die Witwatersrandse goudmyne te bekom. So word in 'n vergelykende konteks klem geplaas op die uitsonderlikheid van die Messina myne.