



# Migrating for Work Research Consortium



Project funded by the European Union EU-South Africa Dialogue Facility EuropeAid/132200/L/ACT/ZA. Coordinated by the African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand

## Mobilising Migrant Workers in the South African Post-Migrant Labour Regime: Precarity, Xenophobia and Invisibility

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1. **Shift in migrant labour regime and implications for migrant workers' mobilisation**
  - a. Major restructuring in core sector of economy (Minerals-Energy Complex – Fine & Rustomjee 1996) trend towards gradual phasing out of historical migrant labour system (First et al. 1972; Burawoy 1976)
  - b. Unbundling and outsourcing (construction, security, cleaning) (Kenny & Bezuidenhout 1999) + fast growing emerging sectors (hospitality, services to persons) largely unregulated
  - c. Class differentiation among economic migrants to SA (low-skilled) : Protected workers (essentially miners); working poor in outsourced & emerging sectors & agriculture; small entrepreneurs





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## CENTRAL QUESTION:

**What are the theoretical and empirical implications of this profound structural shift in terms of migrant workers' conditions of employment and mobilisation in contemporary South Africa?**



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## 2. The shift from mining to services: facts and questions

- a. **Dwindling of foreign labour in mining:** neat after 2003 (Tables 1 and 2)(57% in 2000, to 47% in 2005 and down to 22% in 2012)
- b. **Redistribution of foreign workers across industrial sectors** (Table 3) : between 7 and 9% of the workforce in agriculture, construction, trade and 13% in private households (domestic service). They are about 3 to 5% in other sectors. Small nbs but probably underestimated too.
- c. **Sectors:** Major structural changes
  - i. **Mining:** Major losses (over 1.2 M jobs since 2003); stabilisation of gold, platinum boom; labour brokers dominate labour provision; increasing issue of illegal mining, commodity boom but largely ignored by the unions.
  - ii. **Agriculture:** Major restructuring (from 1 M in 2007 to 600K in 2012); foreign workers no longer confined to border areas but work as far as Western Cape; increase in recruitment of seasonal / precarious foreign workers.
  - iii. **Hospitality:** Boom of hotel industry and qualitative improvements but scarce statistics; increase in recruitment of precarious foreign labour.



## 3. Organised labour and its response to foreign labour in South Africa

- a. **Huge variations across sectors:** Mining (80% union density & union diversification – 22% foreign labour); Domestic work (1% UD; 13% FL; COSATU Affiliates); agriculture (5-7% density; 9% FL; mostly COSATU affiliates); hospitality (10% UD; 9% FL; COSATU affiliates)
- b. **Limited union policies on migrant labour:** 1/59 unions surveyed in 2012 had a distinct policy in place. Some activities, mostly around universal solidarity and sensitization to rights campaigns.
- c. **COSATU:** Very ambivalent; on paper some progress (insertion of progressive line at last Congress); but in practice: either passive or even opposed to migrants. **Impasse of universalist position:** has not created internal space to rethink positionality of migrant workers in a post-migrant labour regime.
- d. **Citizenship:** Specific fault line among the workforce (distinct from employment status: casual / permanent)





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## 4. Current dynamics: Precarity and xenophobia leading to invisibility

### *i. Extreme precarity & exploitation as deterrent to organisation & mobilisation:*

- Historically distinct organising cultures
- Unions not trusted: perceived as trouble-makers;
- Strike busting strategies and divisive tactics / employers

### *ii. Xenophobia:*

- Waged work has become synonymous with regained citizenship (Barchiesi 2011)
- Unions also perceived as anti-immigrant and in alliance with government
- Migrant labour keeps dividing union leaders and xenophobic attitudes / perceptions are widespread even among leadership (reg. documentation; participation in information meetings; discriminatory recruitment of workers)
- Fragmentation between some progressive shop stewards & rank & file (less inclined & with direct conflict of interests)

### *iii. Invisibility:*

- Tactics of invisibilisation: Avoidance of unions; Command of local languages; reliance on ethnic solidarity networks (reproduces Apartheid era solidarity for lack of another option); acquisition of citizenship;
- Alternative protection: Use of government mediation structures (CCMA) & private legal representation; direct representation through workers' committees, faith-based orgs.



### South African farm worker, Mpumalanga (2013):

*It is so obvious....it is the first thing you would notice when you arrive in the morning. Soon after the Morning Prayer session people just automatically split according to their groups/nationalities. **You can also see during our meetings...whereby only South Africans will raise their voice and express unhappiness, whilst the non-South Africans keep quiet. Now, if the majority, who are foreigners, do not support our grievances we fail.** That then exposes us South Africans as people who are a bad influence.*

### Foreign farm workers, Western Cape Province (2013):

*No, by the time when we were working, if it will be heard that you want to protest, people will be shout to you and they will say, they will chase you away. So there was nothing like that. People they're protesting against the salary... Because **we didn't know the rights for here in South Africa, we didn't know the rights which to take.***

*Yeah, it's good for South African workers, **we can't strike because we are foreigners.** We don't have anywhere to report if they don't give you money. If you're not satisfied with the conditions, **you have nowhere to go without papers.***

*If it comes time for strike or protesting, he [the owner] took us and hide us somewhere so that we don't join the South Africans. Because they used to do strikes. **So he take us and he hide us somewhere, when the strike is over we come back and work with them again... He take us to the cattle ranges. We were beaten if we protest... Yeah he beat us, otherwise he take our money, 'cause he was just also our bank.** We work there and he keep money for us, when the season is finished, he give us our money... No option. But he gives us the money unless we do something wrong. **Because he said he's our father, we don't call him boss, we call him father [Our emphasis].***



## Concluding points



- **Radical shift in migrant labour regime** is a direct outcome of restructuring in core sector ; Sectoral redistribution ; New labour migration: deregulation, casualisation, precarity (disposable labour): **Has profound implications for the mobilisation of migrant workers**
- **Experience of mobilising in mining was essentially based on class solidarity and invisibilisation + structural specificities of the sector:** has had almost no spill-over effects to other sectors;
  - **Agriculture** remains particularly exploitative, patriarchal and relies at least partly (in some crops) on disposable foreign labour but largely hidden;
  - **Hospitality:** Avoidance of unions is condoned by both foreign and SA workers alike;
- **Casualisation & citizenship:** play as current major fault lines and SA unions remain very ambivalent about and divided over those issues, largely bec. of their questionable relationship to SA capital.



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