

# The Forces of the African

by  
Jack Woodis

## Revolution (3)

THE migratory character of the African labour force has naturally a negative effect on trade union organisation. But is it such a dominant aspect of the whole problem that it requires special attention. Mr. Noon has commented that migrant labour is "the end result of all the problems which confront African labour". One must admit there is much truth in this statement. Compelled to take up wage labour through the poverty of his agriculture and the decline of his handicrafts, coupled with the pressing need to earn cash to meet taxation, and often driven by various open and disguised forms of forced labour, the African has often had to travel far from his own poor, soil-eroded land to the mines or rich farm and plantation lands owned by Europeans. Frequently this involves incredibly long journeys across frontiers to neighbouring territories.

Anxious to maintain his right to a piece of land in his Native Reserves to which he can return when out of work, or ill or too old—for he has been faced with absence of any social security provisions in the towns, mining compounds and European farms—the African worker has been obliged to return constantly to the countryside. The usual pattern of wages based on a single man's needs, with hostel accommodation for single men only, and often under terms of contract which debar him from staying at his job for more than a year or at most two years (this is often the case with mining) are further factors which compel the African periodically to return to his village or small plot of land.

All societies going through a process of change from pre-capitalist forms of economy to the introduction of wage labour have known labour migration. But in Africa, where the break-up of the old society has taken place under conditions of colonialism and with a limited growth of modern factory production, the extent of labour migration has been quite phenomenal, and has had some quite unique features. It has been a migration of single adult males, or of husbands unaccompanied by their wives and children; the act of migration is repeated time and again in the life of the individual worker; the scale and character of the migration is such that it has often produced a totally unbalanced population both in the countryside and in the urban areas. In the towns one finds mainly men between fifteen and forty-five, with far less women, children or old folk. In the rural areas there are women, children and old men, but few young men.

### WAGE LABOUR

The 1949 *Handbook of Race Relations in South Africa* referred to a study of seven areas in South Africa which revealed that an average of thirty per cent of all males were away, engaged in wage labour. In relation to the men of working age, the percentage in certain districts reached almost one hundred per cent. A 1952 survey for Basutoland showed that the whole territory was deprived of fifty to sixty per cent of its able-bodied men each year. Dr. Marvin Harris has shown that "well over fifty per cent of the active Thonga population in Mozambique is away from home working for wages in the employ of Europeans." Official figures for Nyasaland for 1954 indicated over 42 per cent of adult males suitable for employment were working outside the territory. With good reason, Dr. Margaret Read has written:

"The chief export of Nyasaland in the past fifty years has been men."  
How dependent European enterprises in Africa have been on migrant labour can be judged by a few figures culled from official reports. Two thirds of the miners on the Rand come from outside the Republic of South Africa. Nearly half the labour force in Southern Rhodesia is immigrant labour. Migrant workers are the majority of the labour force in Uganda. They make up a quarter of the mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia. The U.N. *Economic Survey of Africa Since 1950* (published in 1959) stated that the majority of Africa's million mineworkers were migrant workers. It further estimated: "The vast majority of wage earners south of the Sahara are probably migrants."  
All available reports up until a few years ago reveal that the migration of labour in Africa has constantly increased. Thus the U.N. *Special*

*Study on Economic Conditions in Non-Self Governing Territories* (1958) wrote of the "large-scale migration which... are in the main a phenomenon of the African labour situation", and added: "The most recent information indicates the continuation of these movements." The I.L.O.'s *African Labour Survey* (1958) points out that since the Second World War the continual enlargement of the modern economic sectors "have served only to intensify these migratory movements." It adds that "the information available... supports the view that the proportion of men who regularly absent themselves from their homes has been steadily growing in many territories during the last few years."

Why has this pattern of cheap, unskilled migrant labour persisted with such stub-

*that migrant labour is likely to be cheaper in the long run than permanent labour. Apart from a rising scale of wages, a permanent labour force would require social amenities, such as housing and recreation, of a more white employers, provided they can get their labour at what they consider to be extensive and costly type*

*than the migrant labour will accept. Even more costly, whether at the employers' or the Government's expense, would be the necessary provision for old age and unemployment. The 'reasonable wages', do not,*

as it has often been termed. For more than sixty years migrant labour has continued. It has had a most negative influence on the ability of the African workers to acquire skill and normal industrial discipline; it has helped to depress wages; and it has created enormous difficulties for those trying to organise African workers into trade unions.

Yet, despite the distorted and stunted character of the economy which has developed in most parts of Africa, with its serious results for the working class, the number of

his figures are an underestimate. Figures given by the U.N. *Economic Survey of Africa Since 1950*, and published in 1959, are unsatisfactory since they omit a number of important territories, including South Africa, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Guinea and the whole of the former French Community. For those territories which appear both in Hailey's 1956 table and the UN 1959 table, the latter shows a further addition of about half a million workers as having taken place over the few years between the two reports. Totals given in the I.L.O. *African Labour Survey* of 1958 are also inadequate, since they, too, exclude a number of territories apart from North Africa. (These have been given in their separate North African Survey, 1960). But the I.L.O. Survey gives a valuable table showing the growth of the working class in a number of African countries between 1938 and 1955:

	1938	1955
Angola	315,549	400,921
Belgian Congo	522,527	1,206,043
French West Africa	178,908	372,500
Gold Coast	63,779	233,585
Kenya	172,760	434,577
Nigeria	227,451	319,755
N. Rhodesia	152,230	252,937
Nyasaland	177,000	289,123
Sierra Leone	22,107	41,619
S. Rhodesia	107,581	267,286
Tanganyika	207,106	389,220
Uganda	72,680	225,453
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,219,678</b>	<b>4,334,019</b>

Refer to table on the left.

This table shows that the African wage earning class had almost doubled by 1955, compared with the pre-war period. In the last ten years it has grown considerably more. When due allowance is made for all the inadequacies of available statistics it is probable that for the whole African continent there are now at least 20 million African wage workers in a total population of some 250 million people.

Representing about 8 per cent of the population, this is

wage earners has steadily grown, especially since the Second World War.

Figures produced by Lord Hailey in his *African Survey Revised*, 1956, give a grand total of 7,554,384 African wage earners. His table, how-

at some time in their lives (and usually on a number of occasions) is several times greater than the total size of the labour force revealed in labour statistics. A Government report for South Africa in 1955, for example, stated that "with the exception of cripples and disabled persons, nearly all males are employed outside the Bantu areas at one or another stage between the fifteenth and fiftieth birthdays."

This may be rather exceptional but there is no doubt

Year	Number of Urbanised Africans	Percentage of African Population Classified as Urban
1921	508,000	13
1951	2,312,000	27
1960	3,500,000	35

that in most African territories the majority of adult African males have been employed in wage labour at some stage of their lives.

Not all African labour has been migrant, casual and unskilled. Over the past sixty years a growing number of workers have settled down in African urban areas, or in the African sectors of larger towns under European rule, and have acquired some degree of skill, becoming permanent workers, and living in towns with their families, their ties with the countryside loosened. This development still only affects a minority of African workers, but it is a growing phenomenon, and has naturally been more marked in those territories which have been characterised by most industrial development, such as South

course, also taking place in the new states which are making rapid progress towards industrial development, such as Ghana). But even the smallest and most underdeveloped territory has been influenced by these changes as can be seen by the growth of African urbanisation.

Admittedly, urbanisation in Africa has not yet gone very far. Compared with even other underdeveloped regions of the world, such as Asia and Latin America, African towns are very small and the number of Africans living in them remains a small minority of the total population. The 1957 U.N. *World Social Situation* report estimates only about 6 million Africans south of the Sahara living in towns of 20,000 or more. This is less than 6 per cent of the total African population, and compares unfavourably with 12 per cent for India (1951), 21 per cent for Iran (1950), 24 per cent for Mexico (1950),

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and 29 per cent for Egypt (1947).

Nevertheless urbanisation of Africans has quickened over the years, in some cases at a remarkable rate. In Nigeria, the population of Lagos rose from 126,608 in 1931 to 270,000 in 1955; and of Enugu, from 15,000 in 1939 to 60,000 in 1953. The 1958 Report of the Urban African Affairs Commission for Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia shows that the African population in the seven main towns increased from 248,000 in 1951 to 324,700 in 1956. In the former Belgian Congo, 500,000 Africans—nearly half the labour force—were living in towns in 1953. In South West Africa, the percentage of Africans living in towns rose from 5.9 per cent in 1936 to 9.4 per cent in 1951.

The following table indicates the rapid growth of a number of towns in the French-speaking territories:

Refer to Table on columns 5 and 6:

Source: *Les Classes Sociales en Afrique Noire*:

by Raymond Barbé: 1964  
This table shows that the populations of Dakar and Brazzaville increased ten-fold between 1910 and 1956, while that of Conakry went up 12 times over the same period. The hundred-fold increase in Abidjan's population is quite extraordinary. Senegal has a number of other growing towns in addition to Dakar; by 1943 it was estimated that 18 per cent of Africans in Senegal were living in towns of over 20,000 inhabitants, and a decade later the estimates was 25 per cent.

It is in South Africa, the most industrialised region of Africa, that African urbanisation has made the most rapid headway.

Refer to Table above:  
By 1946, in Johannesburg alone, there were 357,175 Africans—more than the total number of Africans resident in urban centres in the whole of South Africa in 1904.

It should not be thought that urbanisation figures are conclusive evidence of a break with the migrant labour system through which the African worker maintains his links with the countryside and with agriculture. Even the majority of African town workers are, in fact, temporary and migrant. This is borne out by investigations on the Northern Rhodesian Copper Belt, where urbanisation and stabilisation of the working class is more advanced than in most other African territories. A study by Dr. Clyde Mitchell, based on figures for 1951-53 in four areas of the Copper Belt produced these results:

	Roa Antelope	Other Luamhya	Ndola Broken Hill
Labour migrants	54.5	53.3	54.7
Temporary Stabilisation	39.0	38.8	22.6
Permanent Stabilisation	7.9	6.5	12.7
			55.5
			37.9
			6.5

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TABLE IX  
EMPLOYMENT OF AFRICAN LABOUR, 1 BY MAJOR CATEGORIES  
(Thousands of Workers)

Territory and year	Agriculture	Forestry	Mining and Quarrying	OTHER EMPLOYMENT								Total	Over Total
				Electric power production	Building and Construction	Industry	Commerce	Transport	Domestic and other services	Public administration	Miscellaneous		
Belgian Congo 1950	238.8	—	113.8	—	848.2	134.9	62.1	62.1	—	—	255.5	609.4	962.0
French Equat. Africa 1950	44.3	22.0	27.1	—	17.1	14.2	9.1	5.6	8.2	44.4	0.7	99.3	192.7
French West Africa 1947	50.0	10.4	4.7	—	—	41.1	39.9	18.4	—	50.8	28.9	179.2	244.3
Gold Coast 1950	20.0	—	44.3	1.7	33.7	10.1	19.22	15.2	9.7	30.5	38.5	120.0	183.3
Kenya 1950	201.9	—	8.3	1.4	16.3	34.7	19.3	5.2	—	95.1	—	210.5	420.8
Nigeria 1957	55.0	—	70.6	0.8	—	10.0	—	28.7	—	92.1	—	131.9	257.5
Northern Rhodesia 1949	32.4	—	37.0	—	—	21.0	—	3.9	32.0	9.7	36.0	102.6	172.0
Southern Rhodesia 1950	177.0	—	59.5	3.7	43.0	52.0	19.0	10.0	—	93.0	0.8	221.5	458.0
Tanganyika 1951	232.7	4.4	18.3	—	45.0	28.4	19.9	24.1	51.1	31.2	—	200.2	455.4
Uganda 1950	29.5	3.6	5.8	—	34.5	24.4	2.5	6.4	7.2	39.3	—	132.2	171.2
<b>TOTAL :</b>	<b>1,122.0</b>		<b>389.4</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>274.4</b>	<b>370.8</b>	<b>191.0</b>	<b>179.6</b>	<b>108.2</b>	<b>393.1</b>	<b>360.4</b>	<b>2,006.8</b>	<b>3,518.2</b>

- Including extra-territorial workers
- Building and public works
- Including 3,200 Europeans
- Of these, 77,375 were employed by the Government and 106,963 by private enterprise
- Including fishing.

Source: *Enlargement of the Exchange Economy in Tropical Africa*, p.24, U.N., 1954

Note: For explanation of the above Table (ix) see our previous issue, Column 7, of Page 6.

bonness, despite the advice given frequently in official and semi-official studies in favour of a permanent, stabilised and urbanised labour force? The answer is that migrant labour has appeared to the European employers, economically advantageous. The Report of the East African Royal Commission, 1953-1955, candidly explained:

"White employers on the whole are ready to put up with migrant labour provided the supply is constant, for the important reason

naturally, concern themselves with the problem of whether the African by working for them is undermining the economic life of his own village."

It is only now, when the African peoples are building up their own independent states that the opportunity arises for sweeping changes in the economic structure and for vast improvements in the field of social services and social security which will make it possible to send migrant labour, this "curse of Africa",

ever, excludes not only North Africa, but a number of territories in tropical Africa. Moreover, as he himself points out, his figures are an underestimate. In some cases, the year quoted is 1951, and in one instance it is as early as 1947. In addition, it does not include workers employed by Africans, nor a good deal of the more casual labour. Figures given by John A. Noon in 1944 (again excluding North Africa), give a total of 8,142,253 African wage earners. And he, too, stresses that

Dakar	26,000 (1910)	54,000 (1931)	231,000 (1955)
Conakry	6,600 (1911)	6,800 (1931)	70,000 (1950)
Abidjan	1,400 (1912)	10,000 (1931)	125,000 (1955)
Douala	—	27,000 (1931)	125,000 (1956)
Brazzaville	10,000 (1900)	20,000 (1933)	99,000 (1956)

already an important force. Moreover it should be appreciated that this figure represents the number of wage earners employed at any given time. One should bear in mind that as a consequence of the migrant labour system, the number of Africans who have engaged in wage labour

Africa, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, the former 'Belgian' Congo, and Senegal. (It is, of

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Thus as recently as a decade ago only a very small percentage of workers on the Copper Belt, could be classified as permanent and stabilised.

Migrant labour in Africa is still overwhelmingly predominant, though stable settlement in the towns is growing. What has happened is that the flood of migrant labour from the countryside to the towns has risen faster and higher; and each time that the flood has seeped back again to the villages the residue left behind in the urban areas has been added to, bit by bit. It is this residue which is growing and which will become increasingly important.

Small as it is, impermanent as it may still be, an African proletariat has been born. As an industrial proletariat its numerical strength is still very limited but the very nature of the economy of Africa already gives it an importance in the economy far greater than that suggested by mere numbers.

\* \* \*

For the majority of African peasants, the colonial system has been an absolute disaster. In nearly every territory sixty years of imperialist exploitation have been sufficient to plunge them into the most abysmal depths of poverty and misery.

The herding of Africans into the poorest land has meant a terrible land shortage which figures alone do not adequately convey. Overstocking and overpopulation have been the unavoidable result, coupled with the most intensive exploitation of the soil. The old, traditional African farming method of shifting cultivation, which allowed land to return to grass for considerable periods (a few years at a time) and so regain its fertility, is no longer possible. Instead, in a desperate attempt to provide sufficient food, the peasant is driven to keep his land continually under crop. This exhausts the land—and so the crop yield diminishes, and the crisis, for man and soil, deepens. Dr. Hinden describes the process in these words:

*"The land, throughout most of Africa, is held communally. Private rights to any particular strip of territory are very uncommon. Agriculture follows the 'shifting' system. Trees are felled and bush burnt to fertilise the soil; crops are grown on the cleared space, and after a short period of cultivation the 'farm' is abandoned and the cultivator moves on to his next clearing. Village*

*sites move together with the shift of cultivation, and this system can be continued indefinitely if the population is sparse enough. All that is necessary is to allow an adequate period of time to elapse for the regeneration of the trees and bush, and then the trees may once again be lopped, the bush burnt, and cultivation recommenced. But, as soon as the population becomes too dense for its area, the forests will not be given time to regenerate, and the fertility of the soil will ebb."*

And this is precisely what has happened in so much of Africa. The population has become "too dense for its area" largely because government policy has crowded it into insufficient reserves.

Ken Brown (in his book *Land in Southern Rhodesia*, 1959) has shown how this process has gone ahead in Southern Rhodesia. It is often argued, he says, that if Africans were given more land, they would only ruin it.

*"This is a fallacy," replies Brown. "The fact is indisputable that when, before the advent of the Europeans, Africans had abundant land, the erosion they caused was negligible and the soil maintained its fer-*

*tility and structure.*

Thus overcrowding and land shortages, coupled with crippling restrictions on African agriculture, have resulted in the decline of soil fertility, erosion, and, for most African peasants, ruination. This has been particularly so in central, eastern and southern Africa where there has been considerable white settlement. The East African Royal Commission, 1953, reporting on the British colonies of East Africa, stated:

*"Throughout our enquiry we were impressed by the recurring evidence that particular areas were now carrying so large a population that agricultural production in them was being retarded, that the natural resources themselves were being destroyed, that families were unable to find access to new land, and that land which should have been lying fallow was being encroached upon."*

The Commission Report adds:

*"One of the most vivid impressions which we have formed as a result of our enquiry is the fundamental poverty which prevails in the East African territories."*

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# THE AFRICAN REVOLUTION (3)

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No less disastrous has been the effects of governmental land policies in Northern Rhodesia. Throughout this territory one can see eroded soil, destroyed villages and appalling poverty. Describing these Reserves, Dr. Hinden has rightly said that these have become "centres not merely of stagnation, but of deterioration."

Similar scenes are to be seen today in Southern Rhodesia, where erosion and loss of fertility by the soil is widespread. The report of the Natural Resources Board for 1954, making a plea for "plain speaking", declared that "it is no exaggeration to say that at the moment we are heading for disaster. We have on the one hand a rapid increase taking place in the African population and on the other a rapid deterioration of the very land on which these people depend for their existence."

## DEVASTATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

The very devastation of the countryside throughout so much of Africa—which is itself a natural consequence of government policy of creating a land shortage and overcrowding for Africans—begins a viciously descending spiral which can only be broken by breaking the colonial system itself. Faced with impoverishment, and driven by the poll tax, the African peasant is forced to leave his rural economy and become a migrant

labourer. As a result whole villages are largely denuded of their able-bodied males. In Northern Rhodesia, for example, by 1941, 110,000 able-bodied men, including eighty per cent of the men between fifteen and thirty-five, had been taken off agricultural work (Leonard Barnes: *Soviet Light on the Colonies*, 1944).

A more recent traveller in Northern Rhodesia (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1959) says:

*"I went into many villages in Northern Rhodesia hundreds of miles from the Copper Belt where only old men and women were living. All the able-bodied men... were off to the mine..."*

Thus food production has been left mainly in the hands of women, children and elderly men. But traditional African agriculture involves much heavy work, including climbing of trees to lop off branches for burning to make ash for seed-beds, the construction of fences to keep out animals, and so on. Women, old men and children are unable to cope with this work. The decline becomes a catastrophe. Famine sets in. And so the agrarian crisis deepens and deepens.

Noon (in his book *Labour Problems of Africa*, 1944) says:

*"The villages of Nyasaland are threatened with the collapse of their entire economic structure by the absence of as high as seventy per cent of the adult males."*

He adds that "the successive stages of this cycle are the departure of men for the south, then the deterioration of local agriculture, which in another turn of the wheel

forces a greater number of males to leave the protectorate."

The 1938 Colonial Office Report on Nyasaland gave 113,500 or 27.7 per cent of all adult males as being engaged outside the colony. By 1954 the figure had risen to 160,000—so the further decline in agriculture can well be imagined.

"Whole territories," says Basil Davidson (in his book **THE AFRICAN AWAKENING**, 1955) "such as Nyasaland and Ruanda-Urundi have become little more than reservoirs of migrant labour; and their consequent impoverishment is visible for all to see. Nothing in all Africa is sadder to the heart and eye than the great native Reserves of the Transvaal and the Cape Province."

## PATTERN

And this is the pattern throughout most of imperialist-held Africa. How near to the edge of catastrophe African agriculture has been forced by the land robberies and the devastating blows of the migrant-labour system which, like a giant grab, constantly dips, scoops and denudes whole villages of their manpower, is strikingly indicated by a United Nations Report in 1953 (*Aspects of Economic Development in Africa*), which says:

*"... where migrant labour has been drawn from the indigenous agricultural economies in high proportions, this has often had a deleterious effect on output and on farming practices, giving rise to a vicious circle in which the*

*outflow of labour reduced productivity, and falling productivity increases still further the pressure on workers to seek wage employment."*

It adds that "eventually a stage may be reached at which the system of migrant labour, based on the labourer's retaining his place in a subsistence agricultural community, may break down."

## AGRARIAN CRISIS

So profound had the agrarian crisis become in many African territories by the early 1950's (as revealed in the Pim Report for Northern Rhodesia the Keiskammahoek Survey and the Tomlinson Commission in South Africa, the East African Royal Commission on Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, and numerous other reports and studies) that the British imperialist authorities, aware that they were standing on the abyss of a complete agrarian breakdown throughout east, central and southern Africa, sought, at a late hour, to shore up the crumbling rural economy and to establish an ally for themselves in the African countryside by encouraging, on a limited scale, the growth of an African capitalist farmer class. To this end, as advocated in the East African Royal Commission Report, they strove to introduce individual title to African land in place of the traditional system of communal land tenure. By means of 'model farmers', and 'Yeomen farmers' and 'land consolidation' schemes they introduced measures to settle Africans on small plots of land to which they were given individual title.