

Digging deep for a solution

Why is SA's migrant system so resilient?

by [Charlotte Mathews](#), 10 October 2013, 08:10

THIRTY years ago the violence and personal suffering on SA mines could be broadly laid at the door of the migrant labour system.

Workers, who were not allowed to live off mine properties, were crammed into hostels. The result was general and ethnic-based violence, alcohol abuse, the spread of infectious and sexually transmitted diseases, loss of dignity and psychological stress.

Migrant labour was again identified as a major contributor to the violent protests that exploded at the platinum mines around Marikana near Rustenburg last year. Deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe told the recent mining lekgotla that migrant labour was "a scar on the face of democracy" and the mines had made no attempt to find a more humane alternative.

But he is incorrect. As mines and communities have changed over the past 30 years, so has the migrant labour system, and there are new sources of exploitation.

Ruth First Fellow Kally Forrest, who has researched migrant labour after apartheid, said in a recent lecture that only about 30% of mineworkers are migrants now, whereas 15 years ago they were in the majority. This is because the mining charter requires mines to employ more people from local communities, and the Immigration Act requires mines to get exemption and pay a levy for every foreigner employed.

Platinum miner Lonmin, for example, says 84% of its workers are South Africans and 16% have foreign nationality. Over a third of the South Africans come from the Eastern Cape.

Lesiba Seshoka, spokesman for the National Union of Mineworkers, says the NUM does not oppose migrant labour in itself but expected by now that the mining companies would have ensured workers were not separated from their families.

The NUM has fought hard for miners' rights to live in more decent accommodation. The mines have had to spend millions on upgrading accommodation around the mines, and mineworkers can now opt to receive the "living-out allowance", to be used towards food and accommodation, rather than stay and eat in the hostels.

But there have been unintended consequences, says Chamber of Mines senior executive for employment relations Elize Strydom. Workers receiving the living-out allowance have been using it to supplement their income, rather than spending it on decent food and housing.

She says mining companies cannot insist on checking how the allowance is spent because the unions will accuse them of being paternalistic. "But I believe we and the unions need to reflect on this."

Many migrant mineworkers are trying to maintain two households, one at the mine and one in their place of origin, on a single salary, which has pushed them deeper and deeper into debt.

Garnishee orders, which enable creditors to deduct directly from salaries, can be abused. Some mineworkers' take-home pay is severely curtailed, increasing their financial pressures. The mining companies are now working with various government departments to see what can be done about employee overindebtedness.

In other mining countries like Canada and Australia, employees on remote mines work on a "fly in, fly out" system: six to eight weeks on the mine and two to three weeks at home.

Seshoka says the NUM supports a shift system that allows migrant workers to spend more time with their families, and where the employers are responsible for the transport arrangements. "We have certainly raised this with the mining companies before and will raise it again."

Strydom says halting the use of migrant labour isn't a solution, as it sustains labour-sending areas like the Eastern Cape and Lesotho.

"A fundamental solution to the problem should be to invest resources in those areas so they offer people not just a basic livelihood but careers. That requires more intervention by government," she says.

Lonmin, one of the first mines to be affected by the wave of unrest around Rustenburg, devised a "renewal plan" after Marikana, which included a commitment to look at migrant and local labour supply. Abey Kgotle, executive vice-president of human resources at Lonmin, says the company will give an update on the renewal plan when it announces its financial results in November.

But addressing migrant labour issues is not simply about building more housing, and changing the living-out allowance would not be a lasting solution.

"Taking a short-term approach, and just looking at living-out allowances, is not addressing the bigger picture," Kgotle says.

Forrest says work for contractors who provide labour to the mines has become the new form of exploitation. Employees of these businesses, which recruit locally, generally earn less than mine employees. Contract rockdrillers may earn about half the lowest salary of a permanent worker doing the same job.

Forrest says unions should be recruiting more actively among contract workers, whom they have neglected. Seshoka says the NUM came late to this sector, which was a mistake.

Labour contracting is more common in platinum mining than gold and coal. Strydom says this is because about eight years ago chamber members in gold and coal undertook to ensure that their own and contract workers had similar pay and benefits. As a result, using contract workers no longer offered economies to the mines.