UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
HISTORY WORKSHOP

STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

6 - 10 February 1990

AUTHOR: Benjamin Mazower

TITLE: Problems in Paradise : The Farm Labour Shortage in the Natal Midlands, 1940 - 1951

PROBLEMS IN PARADISE:
THE FARM LABOUR SHORTAGE IN THE NATAL MIDLANDS, 1940-1951

"The native in the rural areas is in paradise, physically and morally. He does not want for anything. When I say that there are very few human beings who literally do not want for anything. But, comparatively speaking, he's the happiest man in the world."1

"On the whole the days of the farm native glide by in peaceful monotony."2

The 1940s heralded a new era in South African agricultural development. The onset of war brought with it an enormous rise in the demand for foodstuffs and raw materials which engenderd the development and restructuring of commercial agriculture in the following decades. The Marais commission looking back 30 years later remarked enthusiastically how "The Second World War fanned the fires of production in South Africa to new heights. The pattern and tempo of development in the agricultural industry was radically changed and speeded up." Agricultural progress since the war, it concluded, could "rightly be regarded as an agricultural revolution."3

At the same time farmers suffered from an acute shortage of agricultural labour. The critical shortage of farm labour during the 1940s and 1950s has been clearly recognised by several scholars. Francis Wilson, Mike Morris and Alan Jeeves, among others, have all identified the phenomenon as a major influence on the agricultural economy and state labour policy throughout this period.4 However the reasons for this shortage as well as its exact nature remain to be explored.

The most thorough of the existing studies has been Morris' Apartheid, Agriculture and the State. His work, rooted in the prevailing statist perspectives of the 1970s, concentrated almost exclusively on the shortages impact on state policy and the state's response. While it analysed thoroughly state policy by failing to delve below the level of state policy it glossed over the actions of farmworkers and failed to analyse either the shortage's dynamics or its local variations. Nonetheless Morris did make a vital contribution to our understanding of this process above and

---

1 University of Cape Town, Manuscripts division. BC 630 Minutes of Evidence to the Native Laws Commission of Enquiry(hereafter Fagan minutes) p2408.
2 The Farmer and Home Companion, 18.7.47.
3 Second Report of the Commisssion of Enquiry into Agriculture. RP 84\1970 p5.
4 F Wilson "Farming 1866-1966" in The Oxford History of South Africa vol 2. A. Jeeves "Industrial South Africa in Southern Africa 1932-1960." M. Morris "Apartheid, Agriculture and the State, The Farm Labour Question." SALDRU Working paper No 8. 1977.

beyond the sphere of state policy. Although he failed to develop or analyse it he firmly defined farmworkers' urban migration not, as liberal historians would have, as a result of the impersonal "pull" of the towns but as the specific form of class struggle that labourers chose to escape from agricultural oppression and exploitation.

Yet this too needs further development. Since Morris' piece much of South African historiography has concentrated on "hidden sstruggles" or everyday resistance -that vast middleground of actions that fall between passivity and organised open collective defiance. As Christine White has emphasised it is no longer sufficient merely to acknowledge actions such as arson, sabotage or flight as a form of resistance. What must also be determined is what is being resisted. If resistance is not differentiated e.g. resistance to landlord, resistance to state policy, etc. the impact of the various processes at work becomes lost under the general label of oppression.5 To try and tease out the different processes contributing to the shortage of farm labour in the 1940s and the response of farmers, organised agriculture and the state, we will examine the shortage in one key area of commercial agriculture, the Natal Midlands.

The Labour Shortage

The region's broken topography and varied access to markets meant there were few areas were one form of farming predominated. Timber farming occurred to a significant extent only in Lions River and Pietermaritzburg where individual farmers, timber companies and the local municipality all owned plaintations. Stock farms were found in parts of Lions River, Estcourt and Weenen. Such land was generally over 4 500 feet, had poor soil, was subject to frost and thus unsuitable for crops or timber plaintations. The most common farming activity was mixed farming, a combination of dairy and arable or timber farming, carried out in those ares with good soils and good access to local markets.

Throughout this period labour tenancy remained the main farm labour system in the Midlands. In 1941 all Lions River farmers had labour tenants on their farms while two years later the "majority" of New Hanover farmers carried labour tenants. In 1944 the Weenen magistraite reported that "natives in this district are mostly farm labour tenants". whilst in Bergville Africans residing on the farms were "largely labour tenants".6 Contemporary studies estimated

---

5 C White "Everyday Resistance, Socialist Revolution, and Rural Development: The Vietnamese Case." Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol 13. No 2(1986). pp49-63.

6 All files, unless otherwise stated, are in Natal Archive Depot, Pietermaritzberg. 1\HWK 3\2\2\1, Advisory Board minutes 26.11.1941. 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5, Advisory Board minutes 20.3. 1942. Central Archives Depot(CAD) Pretoria, JUS 1013 21\280 Weenen Inspection Reports, 1944. CAD, NTS

that outside the coastal sugar and timber areas 75 per cent of Natal's farm labour consisted of labour tenants.7 The remainder was seasonal .casual labour only employed during times of high labour needs such as harvesting and planting.

Under the labour tenant system a tenant family rather than merely an individual contracted to work for a farmer for part of the year in return for access to land for grazing and ploughing. In Natal the most common contract was the six month system in which the tenants worked for six months on the farm and for the rest of the year moved to the towns or mines to boost their cash income. By the 1940s many farmers in the Midlands paid cash wages for at least six months. Tenants received a low cash wage in the contracted six months and a higher cash wage for each extra month worked.

Contracts and conditions varied from region to region, valley to valley and farm to farm. In some areas tenants were contracted for nine months "in" and three months "out", in others the system was twelve months "in" and twelve months "out". On some farms the whole family worked for one six-month period on others their labour obligations were staggered throughout the year. However the essence of all contracts was that the family could only remain on the land while it supplied able bodied labour.

Family members' experience of labour tenancy differed according to their position in the group. The younger members were especially disadvantaged. Although the family head contracted to supply labour most of the work was carried out by his children particularly his sons. In Weenen and New Hanover only forty to forty-five per cent of kraalheads actually worked8 and while in Lions River ninety per cent were so obliged this was only on condition that they were fit enough or not too old.9 Not only did younger family members do most of the work but they also received few rewards. Only married men were granted access to land. Payments in kind and even some times in cash went only to the kraalhead. V. Zwane, for example, recalled that after he worked constantly on the farm for two years because no other family members were available the farmer refused to pay him directly. Instead the farmer told him, "You have finished today, go and fetch your grandfather (the kraalhead) to draw your money for you." When the grandfather arrived the farmer gave him the money saying "Ndolozo, your child has worked for me...here is the money I am giving him."10

1779, Chief Native Commissioners Conference 1944, Annexure "A".
7 N Huruwitz Agriculture in Natal 1860 -1950. Natal Regional Survey, vol 12. 1957. p29.
8 Calculated from labour tenant contracts cited in magistraites' criminal cases.
9 1\HWK 3\2\2\1\ 2\16\5, Farm Labour Advisory Board, Tabulated Results of Questionnaires.
10 Killie Campbell Library(KCL) Durban. Oral History Project, KCAV 363 Interview V.W.Zwane, 18.11.1986.

As already noted throughout this period farmers sufferred from an acute labour shortage. Farmers continuously bombarded agricultural journals and their own organisations with complaints of insufficient workers. Year after year the Natal Agricultural Union(NAU) passed resolutions noting with "considerable anxiety the situation brought about by the exodus of natives from the farms." and seeking to draw "the attention of the government to the shortage of farm labour."11 In 1949 the magistraite at Impendhle reported that "most farmers in the district are unnable to get adequate farm labour."12 The president of a local dairy asssociation observed that "farmers close to urban areas are continually losing labourers who prefer to slip away to work in the town." He himself had lost "six boys who simply took French leave, dispensed with the formality of getting permission to go."13

The shortage was partly due to a dearth of seasonal labour. During the mid-forties Umvoti farmers remarked that labour supplies "were not unsatisfactory" but did call for greater control over Africans living in locations and Crown lands to ameliorate the paucity of togt labour.14 Bergville farmers reported shortages of "reaping hands" and complained that there was "very little outside labour offering." The local magistraite observed that the labour scarcity occured only at certain times "i.e. ploughing and reaping seasons."15

The lack of off-farm labour was compounded by a shortage of regular staff. Such shortages often occurred on farms where conditions were comparatively poor. The amount of cash paid and the extent of land provided for ploughing and grazing were both important considerations for tenants. In New Hanover a general labour shortage persisted with the exception of "the larger farms on which a more liberal allowance of agricultural and grazing ground is possible and which are therefore attractive to the native."16 "The very great shortage of labour" in Estcourt, said a local official, was due to "the poor wages paid, want of better accommodation, long hours and poor quality of food."17

Particular branches of farming were unpopular for their own peculiar reasons. In the Midlands dairy farming was the most noticeable of these. The Klip River Dairy Farmers Association chairman reported in 1948 that the labour position had deteriorated to such an extent that some dairy farmers had either sold or reduced their herds. Other dairy farmers complained that the desertion of young male workers

---

11 NAU Archives, Pietermaritzberg. NAU Minutes, Resolutions to 1948 Congress.
12 1\IPD 3\3\2\2\ 2\16\5, Annual Report for 1949.
13 The Farmer and Home Companion(FHC) 14.4.50.
14 KCL, KCM 33662. Umvoti Agricultural Society, Minutes, 6 March 1944.
15 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\9. Bergville Farmers Association to Magistraite, 23.6.43. Mr Dicks to Magistraite, 28.6.43. Native Commissioner to CNC, 30.6.43.
16 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5. Magistraite to CNC Natal, 26.6.43.
17 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\9. Acting Assistant Native Commissioner to CNC Natal, 25.5.43.

had forced them "to employ a class that is really unemployable." According to the president of a national dairy producers union the reasons for dairy farming's unpopularity were obvious. He listed the "perpetual milking, early morning, late at night, Saturday, Sunday, all days every day. Boys don't like it and won't have it any longer and there is no double time or time and a half or minimum pay like there is in a cheese factory or garage so why should they like dairying?"18

The shortage of regular farmworkers was due largely to the permanent migration of young Africans from the farms. For the sons and daughters of the kraalheads labour tenancy was an institution of double exploitation, exploitation by the farmers and by their families. The Native Farm Labour Committee noted that young kraal members' dissatisfaction with being bound by a contract made only with the kraalhead was one of the principal causes for the desertion of farm labour. Since the "young natives were the main source of the workforce their desertion left the farmers with the elderly, sick and inefficient workers."19 Farmers reiterated that their complaints were "directed mainly against the younger type of natives." and stressed "the very apparent difference between the outlook of the older type of natives and the younger generation- lack of respect of the farmer and master and lack of respect for authorities."20 As Morris has pointed out, the youth had little interest in the perpetuation of a system under which "they were bound to provide most of the labour under conditions where they they received none of the direct benefits."21

As labour tenancy's attractions waned alternative avenues of employment increased. During the 1940s the industrial sector expanded enormously and the temporary departure of many white workers to the army led to a huge influx of Africans into the urban industrial workforce.22 Even during the 1950s industry remained labour rather than capital intensive with a high labour turnover.23 The vast majority of industrial workers were employed as casual unskilled labour. An ex-union organiser in Durban recalled that "it was only late in the 1950s that Africans could say 'I am an operator in the mill' or 'I drive a lorry for the Railways.'

---

18 FHC 23.4.46; FHC 14.4.50; NAUNLU June 1951.
19 Report of the Native Farm Labour Committee 1937-39. Pretoria, 1939. Paragraph 39-40.
20 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\1A. Acting Magistraite to CNC Natal, 21.6.45.
21 M.Morris "The State and the Development of Capitalist Social Relations in the South African Countryside: A Process of Class Struggle." Unpupblished Phd, University of Sussex. 1979. p217.
22 D.Posel, "Influx Control and the Construction of Apartheid 1948-61." Unpublished Phd Oxford University 1987. p38.
23 P.Bonnner "Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand 1935-55." History Workshop 1987. p8.

Before this time everyone would do the same work."24 In Natal the number of industrial establishments rose from 1 292 in 1936 to 2 273 in 1953, while the number of people employed increased from 44 674 to 127 111.25

Rural towns as well as the cities contained increasing job opportunities. In Estcourt, for example, in the late 1940s the opening of new food processing factories and a large construction programme led to many workers from nearby farms "finding their way to town."26 As in the cities wages were far higher than those on the farms. Against an average farm wage of around 10s per month workers at the Estcourt factories and electricity works received from 45-67s per month.27

Government departments, the railways, the Post Office, and road building were all areas in which regular hours and high wages attracted fleeing farm workers. A dairy farmer complained in 1950 that "Boys" from a tenant family which had been on the farm for 30 years were saying, "why work on the farm for £2-4 per month when the railways pay from £6-12 per month and you do not have to work over weekends." He went on to protest indignantly "It makes me sick to see boys loafing when they are getting double the pay of farm natives. Is a boy more value scoffling weeds on the railway or planting wheat or milking cows?"28 The chairman of the Hluhluwe Stock Farmers Association reported that a government "Bush clearing scheme" operating in the area paid its workers £5 per month plus a cost of living allowance. Since local farm wages were £2 10s per month "natives are leaving the farms on wholescale and going to this government work."29

Farmworkers' urban employment included domestic service. Despite the protestation of the Chief Native Commissioner for Natal that "no Zulu would go to Pretoria",30 ex-labour tenants found domestic employment in Durban, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. The Native Farm Labour Committee found that the " employment of males not females as domestic servants in Natal and the Transvaal" was one reason for the farm labour shortage.31 In Durban domestic service was still the preserve of "kitchen boys" and many new arrivals to town used the position as a secure base from which to look for commercial or industrial work.32 A Benoni council investigation in 1951 found that employers of domestic servants were prejudiced against " urban juveniles and prefer to employ rural youths whom they regard as more

---

24 I Edwards "Mkhumbane Our Home- African Shantytown Society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960." Unpublished Phd university of Natal, Durban. 1989. p108.
25 Fifty years of Progress-The Development of Industry in Natal 1905-55. The Natal Chambers of Industries. p49, p83.
26 FHC 15.10.48.
27 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\9. Asst NC to CNC Natal 26.5.45.
28 Central Archives Depot LDB 1758 R2989. 24.5.50.
29 ibid.
30 Interview with T Turton. Durban March 1989.
31 Report of the Farm Labour Committee, op cit para 27.
32 Edwards op cit p106, p111.

amenable and reliable."33 Many of the female tenants who complained to the Estcourt magistrate that their husbands had deserted them gave domestic addresses in Cape Town as well as the three cities already mentioned as their husbands last known place of employment.34

Trekking townwards was a thus major escape route for workers resisting exploitation on the farms. Their seizing of urban opportunities was a fundamental cause of the farm labour shortage. The Native Commissioner in New Hanover lay in no doubt that "so long as the native is free to sell his labour to the best advantage and wages in a town are so much higher than those the farmer is economically able to pay the shortage will continue."35 This was combined with a seasonal labour shortage caused by the seepage of Africans from the reserves. Throughout the 1940s officials observed that "a large number of natives resident in the locations prefer to seek employment in the larger towns of the Union rather than enter the service of neighbouring farmers".36 Casual labour it appeared also preferred to turn to the towns rather than farms for work.

There is unfortunately little evidence as to the exact patterns of off farm migration in the Midlands. A purely impressionistic estimate from archival sources is that around half of those leaving settled in Johannesberg, around a third in Durban, and the rest in urban centres such as East London, Pretoria and Cape Town. In 1943 Nottingham Road farmers complained of labour tenants breaking their contracts and obtaining work "in the towns, particularly in Johannesburg."37 Five years later Colenso farmers reported that "they used to want to go to Johannesburg and now it is Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, and Kimberley."38 It is clear that family and ethnic connections helped dertermine patterns of migrancy. Many employers deliberately choose workers from a particular area and workers obtained jobs for their relatives in the same company; at other times workers chose a certain destination because they had a relative there with whom they could stay while they searched for work.39

While the workers chose their destinations for a variety of reasons they shared the experience of migrating alone, leaving their families on the farms. Very few families migrated together off the farms. A survey carried out in Cato Manor in 1948 of 780 Africans found that of the 100 family heads 41 had recently moved directly from the rural areas. Of those only six had come from white farms or country towns.40 Farmers often complained not only that their workers migrated to the towns but that when they found

33 quoted in Bonner op cit p8.
34 2\EST 4\1. and see below.
35 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5. Magistraite to CNC, 26.6.43.
36 1\NHR 32210 2\18\7. Annual Report 1940.
37 1\HWK 3\2\2\1 2\5\9. N.R.F.A. to SNA, 16.12.43.
38 Fagan Minutes p2748.
39 Edwards op cit p110.
40 Ibid p43.

jobs in industry their "wives, children, cattle and other vermin" stayed on the farms without providing labour.41

The migration of farm youth often jeopardized the position of their family. Since the family's residency on the farm depended on maintaining a supply of able-bodied labour, one son's desertion could lead to the whole family's eviction. Reporting on a pattern common throughout the Midlands the Native Commissioner for Richmond noted that "owing to many of the younger boys leaving the kraals (of their fathers) on farms, and not giving labour as labour tenants, farmers in this district have been serving notices on the fathers to vacate the farms."42 For this reason sons and daughters who deserted the farm were chased after by delegations of brothers, parents and members of the extended family who pressurised them to return.43

The migration of married men also meant hardship for their wives and families who remained on the farms. In a complaint typical of many, Esta Sibuya,who lived on a farm near Estcourt, reported in November 1945 that her husband had been in Johannesburg for 11 months and only on two occasions had he sent her money. Not only had he made no provision for his mother, she continued, but "I have two children, he has written repudiating the youngest child as his own. I wish him to return home and send me money in support of myself and the two children." Similarly Emmala Bhenga, living on a farm near Winterton, complained that her husband had left her and their five children without support for the previous 15 months while he had been in Johannesburg. Moreover the farmer refused to allow her to harvest the crops on the land granted to her husband.44

Occasionally wives' actions went further than lodging complaints with magistrates. B.A. Dladla from Weenen who obtained work in Johannesburg's Non-European Hospital found that his wife refused to accept her desertion passively. After lodging a complaint against him for non-support she embarked on a furious revenging crusade which left Dladla writng to the magistrate bewailing his fate and begging for a divorce. "In the first place" he wrote, "she has sold my house's door without my permission after which she left Natal for Johannesburg where she again took all my articles such as blankets, pairs of trousers and all from where I kept them and ran away with them back to Natal. When she arrived in Natal she sold them all. She also sold everything of mine which I left in Natal." After this his wife returned to Johannesburg and settled by herself in the Orlando location ignoring her husband's strictures to go home to Weenen.45

---

41 FHC 17.5.46.
42 1\RMD 3\3\1\8 N1\15\4. Meeting of Native Chiefs, 18.5.43.
43 J.B.Loudon White Farmers and Black Labour Tenants: a study of a farming community in the South African province of Natal. Cambridge 1970. p130-2.
44 2/Est 4/1 28.5.46. and 29.11.45.
45 1\WEN 3\3\2\1 2\7\3. Dladla to magistraite, 14.9.45.

Not all migrating farm workers moved to the cities. Wattle and timber plantations ,especially those owned by timber companies, offered higher wages than arable or pastoral farmers. Particularly in areas where timber estates existed next to other types of farming ,in the period from September to March when intensive plantation operations coincided with peak labour demand in arable farming, many labourers temporarily moved to the plantations to take advantage of the higher wages.46

Others moved off the farms onto the so-called Blackspots from where they led a migrant existence working in the towns but maintaining an extra urban home. A Local Health Commission survey in 1945 of these "rural urbanised areas" remarked that contrary to prevailing assumptions the amount of farm labour provided by their residents was "negligible."47 According to the Native Commissioner for Pietermaritzburg "many of the natives at Edendale were ex-farm labourers who had settled there because they could not make a living on the farms."48 Others moved off farms into various locations. Farmers from Muden complained to the Chief Native Commissioner(CNC) of "great numbers" of Africans leaving the farms for Kranskop location and Zululand. They added that "members of this Association are greatly inconvenienced by the scarcity of labour, and if you can assist us to retard the migration of Natives it will be greatly appreciated."49

Attempts to overcome the labour shortage

Farmers tried by a variety of means to obtain new labour. Among the more unorthodox were a few calls to import farm workers from Europe. An NAU editorial in 1945 declared that farmers had to get workers "to fit the job, not to invert and cramp the job to suit ethnic peculiarities. If natives don't cooperate we must use white workers as in America, New Zealand and Australia".50 Argentina and Canada were also cited as examples of success due to flinging open the gates to European immigrants. Farmers had been impressed by the Italian prisoners of war used during the war but a scheme announced in 1947 by General Smuts to attract farm workers from North Italy and Austria for was soon dropped.51

Of greater material consequence was a renewed attempt to force rent paying tenants to supply labour. Under the 1913 Land Act those kraalheads (and their decendents) who had been rent paying tenants before 1913 could continue on that basis. In 1936 the Native Land and Trust Act repealed this laying down that the formal approval of the Governor General had to be obtained to enable these rent paying kraals to continue. Owing to the difficulty of finding places for

---

46 FHC 11.6.48.
47 Pietermaritzberg Commissioner for Cooperation and Development(PCCD) Correspondence Box 3, N2\10\3 pt3. Local Health Commission; Supplement to Joint Memorandum. 15.10.45.
48 CAD NTS 1779. CNC's conference 1943,p7.
49 1\KRK 3\2\2\1 2\5\3. Muden Agric Assoc to CNC 10.11.50.
50 FHC 26.1.46.
51 NAU Minutes 26.2.46.; NAUNLU August 1951 ;FHC 10.10.47.

kraals should approval be withheld, the state felt that approval must be granted in every case. To save the work that formal applications would have entailed it was agreed that the kraalheads and their desendents could remain as rentpaying tenants until Chapter IV of the 1936 Act was enforced in the district concerned. Failing this the tenants could continue to pay rent either until they were given notice to quit or their contract altered from rent paying to labour supplying.52

A number of tenants had their contracts changed in this way. Sometimes it was altered by the existing landlord but it occurred more often when the farm was sold to a new owner. In 1944 E. Zondi and several others complained to the magistrate in Lion's River that their landlord had told them that they must either become labour tenants or leave the farm but could not continue as rent payers.53 The Zuma brothers reported to the Chief Native Commissioner that the farm where they paid rent had been a location during their grandfathers time. Around 1900 the land was purchased by European farmers but their father, by then the kraalhead had remained a rent paying tenant. As descendents of a pre 1913 rent payer they continued to pay rent for the site. In 1943 the farm changed hands, "and suddenly our new landlord told us to leave his farm. We pleaded with him to give us longer notice as we had lived on those sites all our lives, and would find it hard suddenly to find a new place." However the new farmer remained resolute since he claimed that "the attitude of these people, who do not and never have worked for the farm, is having a bad effect on the farm labour generally."54

In 1947 M. Hlengwa faced a similar situation when the farm where he lived was taken over by a new owner. Hlengwa's family had paid rent there since 1889 and the previous owner had told him that he "was allowed to remain on this farm until death on condition that I paid rent." The new owner called a meeting where he told tenants they would either have to enter labour tenancy agreements or leave the farm. None of the tenants entered into contracts but instead continued to tender rent which was refused. As a test case Hlengwa was taken to court where the owner explained that he wanted to lease the farm to another farmer who needed the tenants to work on another farm in New Hanover. As the new owner made clear "I want the natives off because I want to farm labour tenants."

For the residents the change in tenancy produced anger and confusion. Hlengwa protested "I have not done anything at all to cause this tenancy of mine to be broken... I have not been told that I have done or have omitted to do anything."55 Nonetheless the court issued a warrant for their removal. On 14 December 1948 Hlengwa's family were ejected and their huts destroyed in circumstances which,

---

52 1\HWK 3\2\2\2 2\35\2. Magistraite to J Franklin 9.3.44.
53 ibid.
54 1\HWK 3\2\2\2 2\35\2. Magistraite to CNC, 31.12.43.
55 1\CPD·1\1\1\1\1. Case 1015 of 1947, Meyer v. Hlengwa.

their lawyer claimed, "would have created an uproar if they had been white people."56

Tenants reacted to these attacks in a number of ways. Some, as in the case above, refused to supply labour until forced by a court order or threat of eviction. Others moved to urban or peri-urban areas to find alternative employment rather than submit to the rigours of farm labour. A further reaction was the desperate bid by Africans to buy land so that they could maintain a rural toehold outside the sphere of the farm economy. The CNC received a constant stream of letters such as this one from chief Bhewula Mncunu. Writing from a Mooi River farm he asked him "to let me know whether it is possible for me to obtain a farm which is for sale in the Mooi River district because we natvies has (sic) got it very bad nowadays."57 A lawyer from Ladysmith noted that "natives are ready to snap up land in the locality at astonishing prices."58 Lawyers for the Xaba family from Impendle, evicted off the farm where they had paid rent, enquired "Whether there is not a piece of land somewhere in the native area in the same District which could be acquired by their families who are now landless and are entirely at the mercy of farmers in the District".59 In almost every case the CNC replied that there was no land available for sale to Africans.

Labour farms were also used by farmers to circumvent the labour shortage. These farms, located mainly in the Msinga, Muden and Weenen areas were farms kept purely so that the tenants would work on the owner's other farms. In Estcourt an official noted in 1943 that "those farmers who have labour farms have plenty of labour but others are experiencing a very great shortage."60 An Ixopo farmer who owned a labour farm in Umzinto observed that "without my labour farm I could not farm here anymore."61

The value of labour farms was demonstrated in 1947 when the government expropriated two Weenen labour farms. The owner, dissatisfied with the compensation offered, took the matter to court. Both sides agreed that the farms were very badly eroded and that as farming land it had "no real value at all." But since the farms contained "141 occupied native huts" farmers testifying for the owners argued that the readily available labour supply made their market value much higher than their agricultural value alone. They produced handbills for other farm sales in which labour ,listed as "55 full grown male natives, 13 umfaans and 14 girls, all labourers under contract for six months alternative service", was included as a major selling point. As one

56 1\CPD 3\2\2\16 2\43\2\3. Cowley and Cowley to CNC, 13.11.50.
57 PCCD Box 4. N2\10\3 part2, Mcunu to CNC 1.4.42.
58 PCCD Box 4. N2\10\3\48, Walton and Tatham to NC Ladysmith, 10.12.46.
59 PCCD Box 4. N2\10\3 H3, Herschensohn to Dept of Lands 24.8.42.
60 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\9 Actg Asst NC to CNC 25.5.43.
61 PCCD Box 6. N2\10 3 J Farrell to Magistraite, Umzinto.

witness pointed out what was of value was not merely the land, "but the right to use human beings."62

A further attempt to counter the labour shortage occurred in the late 1940s when several farmers' associations drew up proposals for a uniform labour contract. They aimed to attract new labour, to make their existing labour more productive and to stop farmers attracting labour off other farms by offering better conditions than their neighbours. The contracts all reflected the desire to intensify demands made on the labour tenant and to limit the resources available yet few called for a total change to wage labour. The Mid-Illovo Farmers Association called for male workers to work full time on the farm with two months unpaid leave each year. The Richmond Farmers Association called for either nine months service or three months leave on no pay or eleven months work and one month's paid leave while the Underberg association called for able-bodied men to work the whole time "if necessary" and one month's paid leave per year.

The differences were more marked in their proposals for the limits on tenants access to land. They reflected the different stages of capitalist development in the regions with Mid-Illovo the most and Underberg the least developed. The mid Illovo plan called for lobola to be paid in cash not cattle presumably to remove the need in farmers eyes for tenants to keep cattle. The Richmond farmers proposed merely that tenants' stock be limited to around four per adult and that the labour tenants dependants be reduced by limiting polygamy. Underberg suggested that each family be allowed three acres of land and each Kraal head permitted up to a maximum of six head of cattle and two horses. Except in the high paying capital intensive mid-Illovo region farmers recognised that tenants could be better kept by offering access to land. In the cases of Richmond and Underberg stabilisation was to be further enforced by the stipulation that no farmer should accept a new tenant without written approval from his previous landlord.63

None of the proposals was ever implemented, as they were intended, throughout the province. While individual farmers may have put features of the plans into practice, as the Estcourt Farmers Association pointed out, it was impossible to "lay down a hard and fast system for the whole province when conditions in the various districts differed so vastly."64 Any attempt to enforce a framework throughout a district let alone the province would have been problematic at a time when the very labour shortages the proposals were intended to solve meant farmers increased incentives to attract or retain labour rather than standardising conditions with their neighbours.

As labour tenancy appeared unable to satisfy their labour needs a few farmers introduced full-time service to provide a more stable work force. In Lion's River, one of the most

62 1/WEN 3/3/2/2 Govt.v Estate John Geekie 1947.
63 FHC 3.9.48.; 18.3.49. ;20.5.49.
64 FHC 1.4.49.

progressive farming districts, around 20 percent of farmers employed full-time workers in the early 1940s.65 Other farmers tried to convert their workforce from labour tenancy to full-time service but were defeated by their tenants' refusal to behave in a more economically agreable manner. Colenso farmers reported in 1948 that "it would be far better for farmers if they had boys for 11 months of the year and you know you have a boy for 11 months of the year and he will not go to town for six months. We tried it and the boys don't like it." Asked if they had increased wages at the same time they replied, "we tried boys working 11 months at 30s per month (double wages) with free grazing and free lands. There were one or two who tried it but the others won't."66

Organised Agriculture and State Farm Labour Policy.

The NAU's labour policy throughout this period contained two main tenets. Firstly the stabilisation of the African labour force by dividing it into two separate groups; an agricultural or rural and an industrial or urban. This was to ensure that farm workers could not leave the farm and that industrial workers' families would move nearer to their workplace in the towns. The labour shortage would be solved they believed "If legistlation was introduced to ensure farm natives work only on the farms and those working in the towns should be housed in native villages, nearer to towns and bring their families with them."67

Once the labour force was stabilised the agricultural section could be transformed into full-time wage labourers. Unlike the majority of its members who continued to rely on labour tenancy the NAU, throughout the 1940s, remained firmly in favour of full-time service. But while full time wage labour remained imperative in the long term the supply of farm labour was the immediate concern. "The division of labour is ranked as first," stated the NAU president, "and second comes the scrapping of the part-time system of farm labour."68

Organised agriculture proposed several measures to effect these changes, all requiring increased state intervention. "Proper methods" of identification and registration were seen as a vital part of effective labour control.69 The abolition of the plethora of different passes and their replacement by one general identification document was coupled with a system of registering the identity, abode and place of work of every African in a central office. This was to enable officials to control African movement through the enforcement of pass laws. "You have no hope of controlling anybody or anything which has no identity or abode. (The centralised system) is the only system under which a native will never have any hope of getting away from

65 See footnote 6.
66 Fagan minutes p2748.
67 FHC 1.4.49.
68 FHC 11.3.49.
69 NAU Minutes 4.11.49.

his identity."70 argued the NAU. The distribution of labour was to be carried out by a system of labour bureaux. All Africans seeking work would have to register with the bureaux who would then channel the workseekers into existing vacancies. The flow of labour to the towns could thus be carefully controlled while farmers would, in theory, receive a steady inflow of those looking for work.

The NAU's emphasis on control ran counter to the prevailing policy in the Native Affairs Department(NAD). While the NAU sought measures to prevent labourers leaving the farms the NAD argued that farmers had to attract workers through better pay and conditions. The Department told organised agriculture in 1940 that the "special shortage of labour on farms is largely due to the unsatisfactory ...conditions of employment and that it is only by an improvement in these matters that the present difficult position of the farmer will be alleviated."71 Although there was some degree of principaled opposition to the maltreatment of farmworkers in the NAD72 there were more important reasons for their reluctance to impose compulsion. Firstly the liberal streak within the NAD believed that farmworkers, like any other workers, had the right to sell their labour to the employer who offered the highest wages. Confining farmworkers to the farms would obviously prevent such actions taking place.73 Moreover since compulsion bred resentment increasing obligations on the African would not only be difficult to implement but would make existing legistlation more difficult to enforce.74

The state had attempted to control labour tenancy in 1936 by chapter four of the Native Trust and Land Act. When proclaimed in any one district it required the registration of all labour tenants, established labour tenant control boards to limit the number of tenants living on a farmer's land, and defined the minimum period for which labour tenants had to work. Chapter four was enforced only once. In 1937 it was applied in Lydenburg where the raising of the minimum period of service provoked massive tenant migration to unproclaimed districts which resulted in its withdrawal. This experience later led the NAU to demand its implementation throughout the province to prevent a similar occurrence. However the state refused to implement it since under the act it had to supply evictees with alternative land. Opposition from farmers prevented any large scale purchase of compensatory land and so implementation was delayed until the mid 1950s.

The dominant tone of state farm labour policy was set out in the 1939 Native Farm Labour Committee Report. The bulk of its recommendations placed the onus for solving the crisis on farmers and local municipalities. It advised farmers to improve conditions, end labour tenancy and set up their own

70 NAU Letter Book 18.9.53
71 NAU Minutes. SAAU to NAU 2.9.40.
72 D Duncan "The State Divided: The Civil Service and Farm Labour Policy in South Africa, 1924-1945."mimeo 1989.p2-3.
73 ibid p6.
74 CAD NTS 1779. CNC Conference 1944 Annexure "A".

recruiting organisations. Local councils were to enforce strictly the urban areas act to halt the influx of farm labour and the state's role would be limited to magistrates establishing local advisory boards with farmers representatives to advise farmers on how to attract and retain labour.75 The outbreak of war disrupted prolonged consideration of these recommendations but at least one of these, the establishment of advisory boards, was carried out.

The Native Labour Advisory Boards were set up by the NAD under general circular number 20 of 1941.76 It stipulated that each board should be chaired by the local magistrate and include at most three farmers' representatives. The Board's chief function, continued the circular, was to "make a more adequate supply of labour available to farmers and the method by which this is to be done is to popularise farm labour with the natives by giving attention to such matters as the improvement of wages, rations and housing of labourers." The Boards had no power to enforce their decisions but instead relied on "members to use their influence with their brother farmers and to induce them to regulate their labour matters in accordance with the recommendations of the Board." The directive clearly illustrated the main characteristics of the state's farm labour policy; its focus on farm conditions and its refusal to use compulsion to achieve its aims.

The Boards began their work by distributing questionnaires to all farmers on the wages and benefits paid to their labourers. The Boards intended to draw up a model contract to attract labour. However they faced considerable opposition from the very farmers they were intended to help. Nottingham Road farmers argued that the Boards efforts were not only misguided but were a betrayal of farmers' interests. "We do not agree that farm labour, as such, is generally unpopular... We feel that by his unquestioning acceptance of this point of view the Secretary for Native Affairs is adopting a defeatist attitude and one which colours all his proposals to remedy the shortage which undoubtedly exists."77 In Estcourt and Lion's River around half the farmers failed to reply and many other famrers shared the feelings of a New Hanover respondent that "unless it is compulsory to answer this questionnaire, I would rather have nothing to do with these affairs, as they involve a lot of extra work."78

Farmers' opposition to the Boards soon undermined their efficacy. In Umvoti the farmers' rejection was so complete that a board was never set up. In New Hanover the wage question proved too controversial and the Board changed tack declaring that an improvement in labour "will not be brought about merely by the payment of a higher wage" and instead devoted their efforts to the "restoration of the attributes

---

75 Duncan p6.
76 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\1.
77 See footnote 34.
78 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5. F.Redinger to Mag 7.2.42.

of honesty and reliability... to the natives."79 The enforcing of wartime rationing and regulations soon became a higher priority for magistrates and enquiries by the CNC in 1945 showed the Boards to have effectively ceased functioning in 1942.80 By 1945 the Native Affairs Department admitted "with regret that they have achieved very little and in many cases have already ceased to function."81

With the failure of the Advisory Boards the state acted sporadically to stem the efflux of farm labour. In 1942 the Native Affiars Department expressed concern that labour tenants in town to look for work were joining the Native Military Corps. It ordered its officials to forbid "any native, whose documents show that he is a farm labourer who has been given permission by his employer to obtain employment in a town for a limited period, to enlist for military service."82 At a local level magistrates tried to pursuade Africans living in the reserves of the attractions of farm work. At Richmond in 1946 the Native Commissioner addressed a meeting of chiefs, indunas and headmen stressing the advantages of labour tenancy "such as family life, lands to plough and grazing for small herds of cattle as well as a permanent home(!)." He explained that the "Smaller wages paid on farms as against towns was more than offset by there being no rent to pay for accommodation, arable land and grazing."83 Magistrates also tried to prevent Africans settling in the reserves. The same commissioner noted that "many natives wish to live on locations and Trust farms but...I have more often than not refused to allow them on the reserves because of the fact that the farm labour position will become more serious than it is if natives are allowed to squat on the reserves, Trust farms and locations."84

At a national level the Smuts government continued to ignore the agricultural unions' demands for state intervention. This was for two reasons. During the 1940s agriculture's position waned within the political economy. While mining retained its key role in the economy as a major source of tax revenue and the largest earner of foreign exchange manufacturing, stimulated by the wartime expansion, by 1946 became the largest single contributor to the GDP.85 Both industry and mining's labour demands were at odds with those of organised agriculture. Industry depended on its increasing labour demands being met by a flow of manpower.86

---

79 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5. Magistraite to NAU, 24.3.42.
80 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\1a. Mag to Mr Despard, 9.6.45.
81 Report of the Native Affairs Department for the Years 1944-45, Government Printer Pretoria. p91.
82 1\EST 3\1\2\6 2\5\9. General Circular 25 of 1942.
83 1\RMD 3\3\1\8 N1\15\4. Quarterly Meeting of Chiefs, Indunas and Headmen, 26.9.46.
84 1\RMD 3\3\1\8 N1\15\4. Quarterly meeeting of Native Chiefs, 15.9.44.
85 D Innes Anglo; Anglo American and the rise of modern South Africa. Cape Town 1984. p144, 167.
86 D Hindson Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat. Johannesburg, 1987. p55.

And mining was opposed to any scheme intended to boost the supply of farm labour which could interfere with recruiting for the mines.

Government policy reflected these concerns and remained weighted against the interests of organised agriculture. During the war it softened various laws intended to prevent rural Africans obtaining work in the towns. In 1940 it relaxed provisions of the Native Service Contract Act so that Africans arriving in towns without documents could lawfully look for work. From 1942 to 1946 urban pass laws were relaxed in all major urban centres except Cape Town. Although their enforcement was tightened after that the police were instructed to use "their powers sparingly".87

The second reason for the government's non-intervention was the continuing dominance of the NAD's policy. In 1947 the CNC reminded the NAU congress that in his department's opinion the only way to "stem the tide of migration is to offer better wages."88

While the NAD continued to press for the amelioration of farm conditions farmers remained adament that the only solution lay in greater control of the farm population. Farmers newspapers abounded with articles carrying titles such as "Control the native: that is the key to the farmers difficulties today."89 In New Hanover the magistraite noted "There is a unanimous desire for control."90 and a farmer, rejecting the use of advisory boards, suggested instead "some legistlation compelling all native workers to have a Labour Pass Book with their photo to encourage better labour."91

The farmers' urge for greater control was part of a growing hegemonic consensus favouring greater control over the African population. The decade's industrialisation, African urbanisation, and the resultant social conflict led to two national enquiries into policies and methods of control over the black population. Both the Sauer (1947) and Fagan (1948) Commissions, espoused respectively by the Nationalist and United parties, recommended a national system of labour bureaux and population identification operated by central government to achieve firmer control.92 The Chairman of the Fagan Commission, referring to the need for a national identification document, remarked that "There is a remarkable unanimity on this point which we hardly expected. practically everyone who has appeared before us has expressed the same view."93 A joint memorandum from the Natal Coal Owners Society and Natal Mine Managers Association epitomised the views widely stated by other European witnesses "It is considered that the continuence of the pass system is necessary for the same reason as

87 Morris Apartheid..op cit p18-19. Hindson op cit p55-56.
88 FHC 26.9.47.
89 FHC 23.1.48.
90 1\NHR 3\2\2\7 2\9\5. Advisory Board minutes, 20.3.42.
91 ibid, Meyer to Magistraite.12.11.44.
92 Hindson op cit p59.
93 Fagan minutes p2436.

passes are necessary for soldiers in the army. Natives, like soldiers, are largely moving units and this form of control and restraint is necessary for their ready identification in an organised community."94 Although the two reports differed on whether registration at the labour bureaux should be voluntary or compulsary they both reflected the widespread desire for a tighter system of influx control.95

The Nationalists' election victory in May 1948 signalled the arrival in power of a new class alliance in which agricultual interests were strongly represented. Senator Verwoed told the Senate that one of the Nationalists main objectives was "The imposition of state control in matters of labour in such a way that the necessary farm labour will be sufficiently assured."96 In 1949 the retitled Department of Native Affairs drafted the Native Laws Amendment Bill in close conjunction with the SAAU. From the early forties the SAAU had had a priveleged position in the NAD through a liaison committee comprised of departmental representatives and members of the SAAU and the provincial agricultural unions. It met "when necessary" to discuss all labour matters affecting agriculture such as labour supply, conditions of employment and policy generally. It was this committee which participated in drafting the NLA Bill.97

The Bill made provision for a national labour bureau system intended to redirect job seekers surplus to urban requirements to the farms. Yet it fell short of organised agriculture's demands. Firstly it was only once urban labour demand had been satisfied that the bureaux would direct labour to the farms. Secondly while agriculture insisted on compulsory registration the bill remained ambivalent on this point making provision for the "voluntary or compulsory registration of natives with labour bureaux".98

This ambivalence reflected the Nationalists uncertainty. Their majority in parliament was small and the UP opposition insisted that registration be voluntary. Facing opposition from the United party and powerful urban local authorities whose powers the NLA superceded with central government state control, the Nationalists compromised and fell short of agriculture's demands and the Bill was withdrawn in late 1949. The DNA under Jansen remained cautious. In 1950 Jansen warned that as far as the farm labour shortage was concerned, "The creation of labour bureaux will undoubtedly help, but it should be realised that there cannot be any compulsion."99 It was not until the early fifties that the Nationalists were in a strong enough position to adhere more closely to the demands of organised agriculture.

---

94 BC 630 B2.2.2. Joint memorandim 22.1.47.
95 Posel op cit p132.
96 quoted ibid p69.
97 Ibid p106.
98 Ibid p108-9.
99 The Native Policy of the Union of South Africa. A statement by Dr. the Hon E.G. Jansen, Minister of Native Affairs. G.P. S4279. 1950-51. p13.

Conclusion

The farm labour shortage during the 1940s illuminates some significant aspects of the agricultural economy. It shows firstly the limits of the farmers' authority and the strength of the tenants' actions. During the tremendous expansion of commercial agriculture the farmers and organised agriculture were unable to staunch the flow of their most productive workers to other areas of work. It was an act of everyday resistance, uncordinated and individualistic, carried out on a remarkably large scale not merely in the Natal Midlands but nationally as well.

The reasons for the migration show social relations under labour tenancy to be much more complex than those of Master and Servant. Labour tenancy involved not only the farmers demands on the tenants but also an intense conflict of interests within the tenant family, a conflict which propelled the disadvantaged members to trek townwards. At the same time the resistance revealed the precarious link that the workers had with the land. Migration and the ensuing evictions of families unable to supply labour brought to the fore the dominance of the farmers' and the state's fundamental tenet that Africans were there only to provide labour. Migration was an ambiguous form of resistance entailing advantages for those who went and hardship for those left behind. In short the labour shortage produced complex struggles which at different times revealed both the power of the farmer and the potency of the tenants' own actions.

At the same time the state failed to find a solution. Despite constant and vocal calls by farmers the state either followed a policy of non-intervention or else pursued a policy inimical to most farmers. By concentrating on state policy existing analyses have perhaps overemphasised farmers' calls for state action. While these do reveal important aspects of the crisis they were only one part of a complex whole. Certainly state policy was an important factor but a useful evaluation must include its enforcement at a local level through magistraites and native commissioners. Such an analysis reveals the relative lack of state action during this period. However as the farm labour shortage continued into the 1950s farmers and the state were goaded into greater attempts to control farmworkers actions.