

DATA TRENDLINE  
BLACK MIGRANT WORKERS' VIEWS ON CAPITALISM

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Migrant contract employees form a majority of the total black labour force in South Africa, and as such are a vital element in our production system. At the same time, however, they are the workers who are most marginal to the social world of our urban-industrial complexes.

Migrant workers are not entitled to permanent domicile in these areas, since they work on prescribed annually renewable contracts. They have homes outside the networks of urban social and commercial facilities either in rural homelands or fringe shack settlements. Therefore their contact with the norms and values of our free enterprise system is narrow - through their employers and their commercial contacts as consumers.

IMAGES OF EMPLOYERS

Given the central importance of the employment relationship for migrant workers, it is of great interest to assess their images of white employers in South Africa.

In mid 1982 the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, in co-operation with IMSA (Pty.) Ltd. and the Unit for Future Research at

the University of Stellenbosch conducted a nation-wide survey among 676 male migrant workers, in hostels, private township lodgings (often illegal) and in squatter settlements.<sup>1)</sup> We tapped the perceptions of employers with the question, "*Which of the following is true of most of the owners of factories and workplaces where people like you work?*" A number of statements, some positive and others negative were presented. More negative than positive statements were presented because the intention was to assess the strength of negative images.

The results for the total sample formed the following profile:

<u>IMAGE OF EMPLOYERS</u>	<u>PERCENT AGREEMENT</u> (n 676)									
	<u>%</u>									
	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	
<u>POSITIVE</u>										
<i>Help blacks by providing work</i>	69									
<i>Pay as much as possible without losing profits</i>	38									
<i>Try to help blacks by appealing to government</i>	10									

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1) L. Schlemmer and V. Møller: "*Migrant Labour in South Africa II Emergent Stress in the Migrant Labour System*, Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Natal, Durban. Paper prepared for the Workshop on the Rural-urban Nexus in South Africa, Unit for Futures Research, Stellenbosch University, June 2-4, 1982. The study was designed and analysed by L. Schlemmer and V. Møller in CASS, and field work was conducted in the vernacular by the highly trained team of black interviewers of IMSA (Pty.) Ltd.

	<u>%</u>									
<u>NEGATIVE</u>	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	
<i>Favour coloureds and Indians over blacks</i>										94
<i>Get as much from us for the least pay</i>										91
<i>Call police whenever a dispute arises</i>										90
<i>Don't allow us to show our ability</i>										83
<i>Try to replace blacks with machines</i>										83
<i>Work with and support the govt.</i>										78
<i>Don't care about blacks as people</i>										73

These results obviously are based on reactions to ideas presented to the blacks interviewed. As such we do not know what the strength of feeling is behind each response. What is remarkable, however, is that the positive items obtain such a low response compared with the negative. Basic perceptions of employers generally are very poor, with the image saved only somewhat by the perceived value of the work offered.

It is of some interest to consider the effect of age and education on migrant workers' images of employers. Generally the 18 to 24 year old workers and those over 45 years are slightly more positive in their attitudes than those between 25 and 44 years. The following are the clearest examples:

	%		
	18-24	25-44	45+
<i>Owners help blacks by providing work</i>	78	65	77
<i>Owners don't care about blacks as people</i>	65	76	68
<i>Try to help blacks by appealing to government</i>	15	8	14

Tentatively, we would suggest that the workers over 45 are more conservative by nature, and those under 25 are more grateful for having obtained work at all than the middle group.

On virtually all items the workers with std. 6 and 7 education are more critical than the less well-educated and the better-educated. These are the men with fairly developed aspirations whose work-status is nevertheless low. Generally, however, no clear relationship between perceptions of employers and the skill-status of work seems to exist.

What is quite interesting is that there is no consistent relationship at all between job satisfaction and perceptions of employers. We appear to have a free-floating critical "ideology" about employers among the workers which is most pronounced among the core of migrants - those in the middle age and educational categories.

There is a suggestion in the results that the "ideology" is related to political attitudes. Supporters of Inkatha and those sympathetic to the ANC seem to be more likely to be critical than others.

ECONOMIC IDEOLOGIES

Previous research has generally shown that while general samples of blacks are very critical of many aspects of their employment situations, they are not inclined to favour anti-capitalist economic policies. Migrant workers, however, have not previously been tested on such issues directly.

In the results below we compare the reactions of migrants with general samples of urban blacks. The issues were posed hypothetically for an independent black country to avoid the results being influenced by the image of white employers in South Africa.

*"Think of an African country ruled by Africans*

*to the North. What is best for such a country?"*

	Migrants 1982 (n 676)	Urban blacks Natal and Transvaal, 1981 (n 784)
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Businesses owned privately by all races</i>	52	78
<i>Businesses owned by black elected government</i>	48	21
<i>Factories managed by black elected government</i>	32	25
<i>Factories managed by businessmen of any race</i>	38	58
<i>Factories managed by businessmen and employees together</i>	31	17
<i>A government which takes good care of unemployed, poor, old people</i>	59	71
<i>A government which makes businesses grow, so creating many wealthy people but also many jobs</i>	39	28
<i>A government which makes black people as equal as possible in education, wages and housing</i>	74	92
<i>A government which rewards clever, hard-working people, allowing them to become wealthier than others</i>	25	7

A fairly clear pattern emerges. The migrant workers are significantly more inclined than the general sample of urban blacks to support state ownership of businesses and production or joint worker-owner management. At the same time, however, they are significantly less-inclined to support "welfarism" and social security than the urban people. To put it rather oversimply, the urban people are social democrats inclined to private enterprise. The migrant workers are less welfare oriented but also less capitalistically inclined. The lesser degree of support for private ownership of production must to some extent be related to the poor image they have of their own (white) employers, even though we tried to eliminate the effect of race in the questions.

Nevertheless, even the migrant workers contain majorities of 60-75 percent in favour of social security and welfare policies, and they seem more or less equally divided on the issue of state vs private ownership of production.

There is variation in reactions among different social and attitudinal groups of migrants. The groups least supportive of private ownership of production are:

Youth - 18 to 24 years

Skilled and semi-skilled manual workers

Education from std. 3-7

Eastern Cape Xhosa and Cape Town Xhosa

Those indicating sympathy for the ANC



Those with a strong trade-union sympathy and/or those who would favour collective worker action are not less likely to favour private enterprise than others.

#### MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE BALANCE

Taken together, all the results above suggest that migrant contract workers are quite seriously alienated from the private-enterprise system of South Africa. Most marked is their very poor image of employers, but unlike city blacks, they are very divided on the basic issue of ownership of production.

What trends are taking place cannot be discerned from these results representing a point in time. However, the fact that the younger migrants and those above the unskilled level of employment are least supportive of free-enterprise suggests that the trend may be negative in its implications for the South African system of production.



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