

The Conference on the “The Heritage of Migrant Labour in South and Southern Africa”¹ - Johannesburg: A Concept Note

Introduction and background to the 2008 Annual Conference of IALHI

Khanya College was formed in 1986 as part of the struggle against apartheid in general, and against apartheid education in particular. In 1986, when the College was formed, the struggle against apartheid in education was in one of its period of upswing, as can be seen by the activities of a number of national student organisations, and by the formation of the National Education Crisis Committee, an organisation that led the struggle against apartheid education. Over the years, Khanya College has been identified with the struggle against apartheid. In recent times – especially since the end of the 1990s – it has been identified with the struggle against neo-liberalism. An equally important feature of the public profile of the College since the end of the 1990s is that it is now seen as part of the new wave of organising by communities and by the working class: the so-called ‘new social movements’.

Since its inception, Khanya College has always seen the preservation of the historical memory of the working class as an important aspect of its work. The work in this area was consolidated and advanced by the formation of a Khanya Working Class History Programme in the year 2001. In 2003, the College affiliated to the International Association of Labour History Institutions (IALHI), and has been an active member of the IALHI since that time.

In 2005 the Annual meeting of the IALHI in Ghent decided to grant Khanya College the right to host the Annual Conference for 2008². This decision was confirmed in the annual conference of 2006 in Zurich. In line with the hosting of the annual conference of the IALHI, this document seeks to outline the proposed theme and related events. The official and normal programme of the IALHI, which includes the convening of the Annual General Meeting and Project Presentations, is an integral part of the programme (and is not spelt out in this concept note). This concept note only deals with the open session of the conference, which has as its theme ‘the heritage of migrant labour in south and southern Africa’.

Theme: The Heritage of Migrant Labour in South and Southern Africa

Working class heritage in the Southern Africa region cannot be commemorated without acknowledging the enormous significance of migrant labour for the economic, social and political evolution of this entire region. The South African migrant labour system, built by capital and the state along the principles of racial segregation, control, and exploitation of

¹ This concept note deals with the open sessions of the of **IALHI 2008 Annual Conference**. The conference will include a closed session (to members of the association), as well as a reception.

² For more information and motivation for the holding of the annual conference in South Africa, Johannesburg, see the paper entitled, “Taking the 2008 Annual International Association of Labour History Institutions to South Africa, Johannesburg”

Africans, was the core of apartheid economy for more than a hundred years. Until today the heritage of the migrant labour system, as the dominant pattern of workers' employment of the 20th century, has left a lasting impact on contemporary South and southern African society.

Contracted and highly controlled labour migrants provided a flexible work-force that enabled the gold mining industry to make large profits out of an ore that is of particular low-grade. Only the availability of an 'ultra-cheap' black labour from a South and Southern African labour pool made it possible for gold to be mined on a profitable scale. Women played a major role keeping the rural homestead going, which was necessary for the families to survive. At the same time they were also migrants in their own rights. Without male and female migrant workers from the Southern African region, the world's largest supplier of gold and Africa's industrial powerhouse would have been a minor economic player, and South Africa would be a different place.

Beyond South Africa's borders, labour migration impacted on all Southern African Development Countries (SADC) countries, influencing South Africa's economic, political and cultural relations with these labour supplying nations. Workers from Southern African countries that worked in the main industrial cities like Johannesburg were merely seen as labourers with no citizenship rights. Today, in post-apartheid South Africa, these workers are faced with a rising tide of xenophobia and all other forms of racism against them.

The practice of large-scale temporary labour recruitment was not confined to the gold mining industry: other mining businesses, the manufacturing and public sector also adopted it widely. From the outset, all sectors worked hand in hand with the coercive legislation of a racially segregated state. Influx control, pass laws, single-sex compounds, the colour bar, anti-unionism and low wage policies fed into a tight system of control and exploitation. Impoverishment, social and family disintegration, calamitous health problems, racial oppression and segregation were endemic to the migrant labour system.

Conditions only began to improve in the 1980s when the labour movement became more powerful in improving working conditions, and as a result the migrant labour system began to fracture. Nevertheless, migrant labour is still an integral part of the workers' lives in the mining industry in particular, although at a formal or legislative level the practice of male-only migrant labour has been abolished.

Finally, the cultural heritage of migrant workers in South Africa is extremely rich, covering a wide range of intangible heritage forms like music, dance, theatre, and sports. Altogether the patterns of labour migration impacted widely on present day working class and popular culture.

Given the centrality of migrant labour for the heritage of the working class in Southern Africa, Khanya College chose to focus on "The Heritage of Migrant Labour in South and southern Africa" as the focus for the IALHI Annual conference in 2008. Khanya College

aims to invite a wide audience to the conference in order to encourage debates and promote ongoing work on preserving the historical memory of the working class. In this way the College also hopes to contribute to addressing the lack of recognition that the topic has in the official national heritage discourse of South Africa. A cultural programme covering site and museum tours as well as music, films and an exhibition will add to the conference experience. The Workers Museum, based in the cultural precinct of Johannesburg in a former migrant workers' compound, will provide the optimal venue for the event³. Its history and present condition, as well as the struggles that have been conducted by Khanya College and other allied organisations to preserve the Compound, are themselves a tangible example for the opportunities and challenges of preserving workers' heritage in South Africa.

Conference Sub-themes and Topics

The heritage of migrant labour for modern South Africa, which will constitute the overarching theme of the conference, will be discussed through a number of themes and topics over a period of two days. The following themes and topics will follow a plenary discussion based on a keynote address that will focus on the 'social and cultural impact of the migrant labour system on modern South Africa':

The political economy of migrant labour in southern and South Africa

On eve of the Durban strikes in 1973, which heralded a new wave of resistance following the crushing of resistance against apartheid in the early 1960s, another new wave unfolded: a new and radical historiography was born, and it placed migrant labour (by black workers) at the heart of understanding the development of capitalism and industrialisation in South Africa. Led by Martin Legassick and Harold Wolpe, among others, this new school of thought foregrounded migrant labour, and the social, economic and political institutions it engendered in its wake, as the key explanatory factor in understanding the making of modern South Africa.

This session of the conference will discuss the role of migrant labour in the development and evolution of the economies of South Africa and the wider southern Africa region. The migrant labour system engendered a whole series of laws and institutions. These laws and institutions, geared toward the control of migrant labourers, were themselves products of a series of class struggles. As part of the session on political economy of migrant labour, the conference will look at the systems of labour control and labour coercion engendered by the migrant labour system, as well as at worker responses to these institutions and forms of control.

As the legal system and the coercive apparatus that had kept migrant labour alive for a century came to an end, migrant workers from South Africa and from across the region came face to face with a new enemy: HIV/AIDS. The persistence of compounds, the continuing dependence – even if partial – of the mines on migrant labour from the region,

³ There are plans to renovate the Workers Compound museum, and subject to the progress in this work, the Conference will be held at the Compound. Alternatively, the conference will be held in Khanya College's House of Movements, in the center of Johannesburg.

has meant living conditions of miners has not undergone any profound change. The concluding paper of this session will look at the interface of migrant labour and HIV/AIDS, and in particular at how the persistence of migrant labour, single-sex compounds, and living conditions in the compounds interface with the pandemic.

Gender, Women and the migrant labour system

In the early years of the migrant labour system, women were relegated to the role of keeping the rural homestead going, of reproducing the future generation of labour powers, and thus underwriting the profitability of capital in the heartland of deep-level and low-grade ore mining in the Witwatersrand. By the middle decades of the 20th century, the labour reserves were in terminal decline, and women began their own journey into the major industrial centers of South Africa. This session of the conference takes a look at the impact of migrant labour on women and on gender relations in South Africa.

As women responded to the migrant labour system, and to the broader development and evolution of capitalism in South Africa, their own movement in and out of the main industrial centers underwent changes. These were due to various factors, and one of the papers will look at the changing patterns of women migrants in 20th century South Africa, and the underlying sources of these changes. As a counter-point, and to get an international perspective on women and migrant labour, the session will also look at forms and dynamics of female migrant labour in 20th century Europe. Like their male counterparts, women workers and migrants were subjected to various forms of control – both institutional and legal. This session will also look at female-only compounds as a form of control, at living conditions of the female inmates, and at the forms of resistance these conditions engendered.

One of the most enduring aspects of migrant labour on South African society is its impact on gender relations – in particular on relations within black South African families. In this session we look at the impact of migrant labour on the evolution of the family in South Africa, its role in the emergence of new family forms within the black working class, and at how in their turn the forms of family emerging within the black working class shaped and influenced the evolution of capitalism itself.

South and southern African working class history as national heritage

The nationalist movements in Africa, including in South Africa, have had a complex and contradictory relationship to the African working class. On the one hand, the weakness of the African middle classes ensured an important if not leading role for the African working class in the struggle against colonialism, and in South Africa's case against apartheid. On the other hand, once independence had been won, the working class receded into obscurity, especially with respect to the national and heritage symbols that were created by the new order.

This session of the conference will discuss the place of the working class in the national heritage symbols and discourse. We take a critical look at the South Africa state's approach

to national heritage policy and symbols, and at how it approaches the place of the working class in its national heritage policy. We also take a look at the experience of the African working class in the southern Africa region, focusing in particular at how nationalist movements and later regimes in the sub-region approached the role and place of the working class in the formulation of national heritage policy and symbols.

Against the background of how the South African state approaches the place of the working class in its national heritage policy, we take a look at a concrete case of a struggle to preserve the place of the South African working class in the national heritage: we look at the struggle to preserve the Workers Compound in Newtown (Johannesburg) as a museum of migrant labour depicting the history and lives of migrant workers from South and southern Africa region.

Working class heritage in a global context

This session of the conference will continue the discussion on the role and place of the working class in national heritage policy and practice. In this session, however, this will be done from the vantage-point of the experience of struggles for the preservation of the (historical) memory of the working class in a neoliberal and globalising world. Within this framework the conference will look at the experience of workers' museums (for example in Sweden), within the context of neoliberal globalisation. Issues of how they are received in the public domain, how they are funded, their relationship to the state and their place in national heritage policy, as well as other aspects of this question will be explored.

Notwithstanding the neoliberal assault on the historical memory of the working class, working classes in many countries set up (especially in the immediate post WW 2 period) and continue to maintain research and archiving institutions that continue the struggle to preserve the historical memory of the proletariat. These institutions, however, have tended to focus on the heritage of working class organisations formed in the inter-war years. The challenges of preserving the memory of new forms of working class organisations, in particular the 'new social movement' associated with the present-day struggles against globalisation, remain largely unexplored and daunting. A paper in this session will look at the challenges of archiving the new social movements.

The historical memory of the working class is preserved in more than just buildings (museums) or documents of its various organisations (archiving). Increasingly, there is recognition that 'intangible' products of working class experience – like music, language, dance, theatre, sports and so on – are as important in the preservation of the historical memory of a social class. In this session we also look at new perspectives on heritage, in particular at how the concepts of 'intangible heritage' can enhance our struggles for preservation of the historical memory of the working class.

Culture and the migrant labour in modern South Africa

Migrant workers in the cities weaved forms of cultures practices which reflected and expressed their lives in pre-capitalist society, as well as the new living conditions under

capitalism in the cities. The type of music, artwork and other forms of cultural expressions in South Africa today has deep roots in the culture of migrant workers. Under this theme the conference will examine the nature and form of migrant labour culture and its impact on South Africa's cultural life today.

The cultural forms created and practiced by black migrant workers were forged in their struggle for survival in the new and hostile industrial and mining environment. Our first paper in this session will look at the interface between cultural expression, control by capitalism, and resistance by migrant workers. We go on to look at the music of migrant workers in South and southern Africa, and at how migrant labour and the music it engendered have shaped popular music in South and southern Africa.

Side by side with music, the legacy of migrant labour is expressed most sharply in South African fiction. The black migrant worker was the quintessential form of existence of the South Africa proletariat, and in this session we look at how the black migrant worker was treated in South African works of fiction, and at the political and philosophical underpinnings of how the migrant labourers are treated in these works of fiction.

While the cultural forms engendered by migrant workers under apartheid struggle to be recognised and incorporated as part of a national heritage discourse, they have however been appropriated by (sections of) capital as part of their strategies of accumulation. In this paper of this session we look at how the symbols and forms of cultural practice created by migrant workers have been appropriated by the tourism industry in South Africa, and contrast this to the struggle for these cultural forms to be incorporated in a national heritage discourse.

History Tour: Migrant workers, working class resistance and hidden histories in South Africa

The conference will end with a tour of sites of historical importance for the formation of the working class and that reflect the resistance of the working class to capitalism and apartheid. The tour will also seek to visit what are without doubt the most important archival documents capturing the formation of the South Africa working class – the archives of the mining houses and the labour recruitment centers.