

Intra-racial inequalities between South Africans and workers from other African countries: a phenomenon with a long history

By Thorsten Löffler

Working in mines has a long history in South Africa. After the gold discovery in Witwatersrand in 1886 a large number of mining workers were required – not only from South Africa, but also from neighbouring countries. Mining workers were recruited by the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) and came especially from Mozambique, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (Fine, 2014). These labourers stayed in so-called labour migrant hostels. On the 1st of August 2018 I had the opportunity to visit the Workers Museum in Newtown together with my fellow students from the Labour Migration Course. The compound was operational from 1913 until the early 1980s. Our guided tour was emotional and thought provoking. We got to know under which circumstances the mining worker lived. They had to obey strict rules otherwise they were put in a “punishment room”. Summarized they lived under slave-like conditions and were exploited.

In contrast to the South African workers, the workers from other countries got only short-term contracts and they could not enter the economic or social mainstream of South Africa. In addition to that, no migrant mining worker got permanent residence in South Africa (Fine, 2014). In my opinion these intra-racial inequalities are still part of the South African society today which means that workers and employees from other African countries are disadvantaged. The BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) is one example for this. Companies are encouraged to hire black workers or employees, but they have to be South African. The consequence is that people from other African countries are often employed in low-skilled professions, earn less money or work in the informal sector with no labour rights. In addition to

that, xenophobia between blacks is a big problem in South Africa. Different Uber drivers (from Malawi and Mozambique) told me that they do not feel totally accepted in South Africa. They came to South Africa to earn money but feel excluded by the South Africans. Furthermore, trade unions like the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) often defend the labour rights primarily for South African workers which also lead to a disadvantage for migrant workers. As a result, the income inequalities remain one of the biggest problems in South Africa although the average interracial income inequality decreased after the end of the apartheid era. But what could help to improve the situation? I suggest to open the BEE for black non-South Africans. The most important thing is that South Africans and non-South Africans get in touch with each other to overcome prejudices. I know that this is very difficult and takes a lot of time. Up to now the Rainbow Nation is not reality in many parts in South Africa. But it is important, never to give up that vision because diversity is an essential driver for a society.

Reference

Fine, J., 2014. 'Migration and Migrant Workers in the Post-Apartheid Era. *Global Labour Journal*, 5(3).