

Saldru Copy

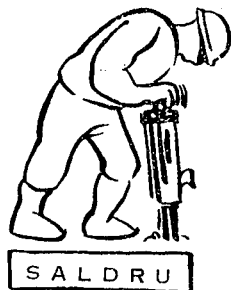
SALDRU FARM LABOUR CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 1976

Paper No. 41

Farm Labour in the Viljoenskroon District

Anthony R. Evans



Preliminary Draft : No portion of this paper
may be quoted without permission of Saldru,
School of Economics, University of Cape Town.

FARM LABOUR IN THE VILJOENSKROON DISTRICT

The Black population of the Viljoenskroon district in the North West Orange Free State, consists mainly of South Sotho speaking people, who have their origins in the Southern Free State and Lesotho, Tswanas from the Northern Cape, and Xhosas. The majority have had no tribal links for at least two generations - the nearest Homeland is 200 miles away.

Farm labourers are employed on an annual contract, and live on the farms with their families. During peak periods casual labour is employed to supplement the "permanent" labour force. This consists mainly of women from the families on the farms. They are employed on a daily basis. In recent years a certain amount of contract labour has been imported from the homelands for harvesting - but still on a very small scale.

THE NATURE OF THE WORK AND LEVEL OF EMPLOYMENT

Viljoenskroon is a medium potential maize producing area with an annual average rainfall of 600 mm. Groundnuts, grain sorghum and, to a lesser extent, wheat and maize seed are the important crops. There is a certain amount of beef cattle production, especially pedigree cattle.

Maize is planted in seven foot rows and weedicides are used on a very limited scale. Tractors in the 50 - 75 H.P. range are used. Harvesting is carried out by tractor drawn, single row combinations and delivered in bulk.

Groundnuts (or peanuts) are more labour intensive since a lot of hand labour is required at harvesting.

A normal rule of thumb is that one tractor and two "permanent" labourers are required per 100 morgen (85 ha) under the plough. One of these la-

bourers would be a tractor driver and the other a second driver or manual labourer.

On farms with 10 - 20% of their area to groundnuts or maize seed, 3- 3,5 labourers per 100 morgen are required.

Thus an average farm of 500 morgen under the plough would require from 10 to 25 permanent Black workers, depending on the crops grown, of whom at least half would be tractor drivers.

Casual labour would be employed to assist at planting time in the handling of fertilizer, seed etc., during the growing season to hand hoe weeds, and at harvesting, since all maize is gleaned by hand during or after combining.

ORGANISATION

Although nearly every farm will have a "Bossboy", he normally has very limited power and is probably used more as a channel for issuing instructions than anything else.

Supervision and control is thus exercised by the farmer himself or on bigger farms by the farm manager.

REMUNERATION

A very low cash wage is paid monthly together with a meal ration (normally one bag of mealie meal per month). The bulk of the wage is paid at the end of the year's contract either in terms of bags of maize or the cash equivalent, or a cash sum, or a combination of these. Workers may run up debts during the year which are deducted from the lump sum payment at

the end of the year. Other benefits normally include grazing rights for cattle; issues of clothing - overalls and overcoats; free fire wood etc.

While traditionally workers built their own mud huts on the farm, during the past 15 years more and more farmers have built brick houses for their employees, and it can now therefore be said that a free house is part of the normal non cash benefits provided.

LABOUR SUPPLY AND TURNOVER

There has always been an ample supply of black farm labour in the area. With a few exceptions therefore, farmers have until recently had no difficulty in obtaining their requirements.

Turnover on established farms is on average low - less than 10%.

Sons of workers are very often employed thus providing continuity.

TRENDS AND PROBLEM AREAS

What follows is a description of the more important problems encountered at present and of the problems that can be forecast for the near future; and further of some attempted solutions to these problems, as implemented on the group of farms which I control.

A. SOCIAL NEEDS AND ENVIRONMENT

1. HOUSING

As mentioned, a large percentage of farmers have over the past 15 years built brick houses for their farm workers. Those who have not are finding it increasingly difficult to keep their labour.

On the farms in my group the houses are of a standard design: steel framed, four rooms, and 630 square feet in area they can be built with unskilled labour at a cost of approximately R2,00 per square foot.

In my group again, we have laid on water so that there is a tap no further than 10 yards from a house.

A recent survey indicated that the average family, including children, consisted of seven people. It is therefore clear that the houses will have to be increased in a size and it is our intention to add on two extra rooms. Water will also have to be provided in the houses.

2. FAMILY LIFE

It has always been our policy to provide employment to extended families where possible. Not only sons, but brothers and uncles are often given preference.

This policy carries with it obvious disadvantages and is being phased out. We want to ensure that we employ the best people available. Nevertheless, it often happens that we lose excellent people when their less productive sons/uncles/brothers are dismissed. Another difficulty we face is the number of pensioners and unmarried relatives that are accommodated on the farm. Apart from adding to overcrowding in the houses, those who are not employed or directly related to employees are supposed to go to their so called homelands. At present we continue to pay these people to enable them to carry on living on the farms.

3. EDUCATION

Each of our farms has on it a farm school and this enables children to go

to Std. 6. More will be heard about farm schools from another speaker at this conference.

It is interesting that while the over 40 years olds amongst our employees have a Std. 1 qualification, or less, the under 40's have at least a Std. 4 education.

4. HEALTH

Through personal choice, our employees use private doctors rather than the district surgeon. They pay their account once per year. We provide free transport to the doctors wherever possible. However, the following problems are becoming critical;

1. Doctors bills are very high.
2. The doctors are often called in either too soon or too late - due either to ignorance or in some cases due to "Shamming".
3. Many of the health problems, especially amongst children have resulted from unhygienic living conditions and bad nutrition.

Our group has now appointed a fully qualified Black nursing sister whose duties cover not only health, but also hygiene and nutrition instruction. In addition she will also administer the Government Family Planning service on our farms. This had been in operation for several years, but has had a disappointing response thus far.

The Sister's services are provided free but, on her advice, a nominal charge will be made to cover the cost of medicines and medical supplies.

5. LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Here there is much room for improvement. Sport is limited to soccer and

otherwise sporadic film shows complete the list. What is lacking on all the farms is a large community hall, which could be used for films, concerts, etc.

B. MOTIVATION

1. REMUNERATION

Wages have been tripled in the last 5 years. Skilled and productive workers earn more than double the minimum wage. A pension scheme is being investigated and will probably be introduced in the next year or two.

The dramatic wage increases have been based on several factors:

- (a) We felt six years back that our labour was grossly underpaid - and that higher wages would result in higher productivity. This has not been accomplished simply because we have not provided the wherewithal - mechanization.
- (b) We are situated next door to the Western Transvaal Goldfields, and felt that we should keep our wages ahead of mine wages.
- (c) We felt that a higher minimum wage would encourage more young men to stay on the farms.

It is arguable that our wage increases have been too rapid. But our labour force has been stable as a result, and in odd cases of high turnover, the reasons are other than wages.

There are no tasks which lend themselves to incentive bonus schemes.

2. RESPONSIBILITY

Our group gives more responsibility than other farmers. We nevertheless

have no blacks qualified to become full farm managers. Tractor drivers are however, rewarded for looking after their tractors: costs are recorded separately on every tractor.

In general it is my feeling that good planning and personal supervision by the manager are most important. A routine must be followed and the labour force must be kept occupied continuously. Bad planning results in stop/start type work - and discontent.

C. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

We have no formal training procedures which undoubtedly is a costly gap. Essentially, our skilled workers learn at our expense.

Nevertheless, we are fortunate in having a pool of outstanding truck and tractor drivers.

Because of our system the younger workers come up "through the ranks" and learn on the job, or during the off seasons.

We make use of the lectures and demonstrations provided by the Mobil Oil Company - these are limited to tractor servicing - and at our suggestion, Massey Ferguson is making a training film which should become available shortly: this will refer specifically to tractor driving.

We also employ Black mechanics, who also lack formal training. There is not, to the best of our knowledge, a training centre for Black mechanics in the country.

Again it is a question of supervision by the farmer or the manager. Apart

from mechanics - and possible lorry drivers - there is no task which requires a high degree of skill, such that the farmer/manager cannot teach it. A formal training course would however, short cut the learning process - and reduce repair bills.

D. COMMUNICATION

The language used by Blacks and Whites in the Northern Free State is Afrikaans. And even where the farmer speaks the African language, good communications and real understanding do not necessarily result.

Decisions regarding employees are generally made by the farmer in consultation with one or two senior men. Very often these senior men are highly conservative and not in touch with (or not in favour of) the views of the younger members of the work force.

In my group, we therefore introduced representative committees on every farm. These committees are elected by the employees, and meet regularly with all the workers they represent and with the relevant farm manager.

These committees have proved invaluable in preventing misunderstanding and in providing timely warning of dissatisfaction with policies that might otherwise have reached flashpoint.

We have perhaps been fortunate in that our committees have come up only with constructive suggestions and reasonable demands, (from our point of view) all of which we have been happy to carry out. At this stage, however, they are playing a vital and useful role in our labour relations.

E. THE FUTURE

As men's wages have increased so has casual labour been more and more scarce.

While three years ago the number of women employed on a casual basis was equivalent to 84% of the number of "permanent employees", that number dropped to 60% in 1976 - despite a 51% increase in their wage over that period. Furthermore, average attendance dropped from 78% to 70% - and it was only 70% because of a bonus paid for full attendance.

Since 1973, the average wage has increased by 129%, whereas the number of employees has only decreased by 22%.

With rapidly increasing product prices, we have been able to absorb these increases in costs so far.

But we are now reaching a turning point - and the scarcity of casual labour accentuates this. The additional profitability of crops such as groundnuts and maize seed (and of pedigree cattle production) will soon be offset by labour costs. The result will be a switch to single cropping and weedicides.

We have calculated that this would without difficulty reduce our present labour force by 2/3. We are not at all sure what the effects of the resultant unemployment would be.

BY ANTHONY R. EVANS

17/9/1976.