Histories and Legacies of
MIGRANT LABOUR
in Namibia and Switzerland

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(Eds.)

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Preface

Lena Bloemertz

This book marks the end of a long journey, one that began in 2019. Histories and Legacies of Migrant Labour in Namibia and Switzerland presents the culmination of three encounters under the Learning for (Ex) Change project. This endeavour brought together students, lecturers, and young professionals from Namibia and Switzerland, inviting them to collaborate on specific topics whose relevance spanned both countries, at the same time introducing their respective home countries, while embarking on intense academic and personal quests.[1] The initiative was dedicated to transforming global cooperation in teaching and learning by facilitating rigorous collaboration based on mutual and balanced exchange. The collaboration between the University of Basel and the University of Namibia has pioneered fresh, more equitable forms of international academic partnerships between universities of the global South and North. During three consecutive summer and winter schools, participants from both Switzerland and Namibia shared experiences of being hosts and guests, insiders and outsiders. All had the opportunity to look behind the scenes, and to travel through a country, not as tourists or strangers, but as guests or even friends. Furthermore, interaction allowed students to gather experiences for potential future endeavours and enabled professionals to pursue academic advancement.

While the flexibility inherent in many university programmes conducted in Switzerland was confronted with a more rigid curriculum imposed by the University of Namibia (UNAM), a situation that did pose some limits on the time available for preparation or participation, the motivation of the people engaged in the exchange went a long way in overcoming these challenges. Content-wise, the summer-winter

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1   In total, the project involved 24 students enrolled at the University of Basel, 25 students enrolled at the University of Namibia, four young professionals and eight lecturers.

schools explored socio-economic, political, and ecological challenges related to post-industrial transformations in cities and towns; agriculture and rural livelihoods, and labour migration. By comparing similar issues relevant to the same topic in two countries, opportunities were created to share knowledge and experiences and to think beyond the confines of specific national settings. It encouraged reflection and discussion on seemingly self-evident realities and assumed differences. As one participant stated:

> *It was interesting to note that regardless of the more than 10,000 kilometres between Namibia and Switzerland, the aspects of migrant labour were the same, all driven by a system of capitalism in which employees were exploited to push maximum profits for the few elites. (Student at the University of Namibia)*

Through mutual exchange, participants developed expertise in their disciplines and immersed themselves in each other's "worlds", fostering entangled learning, cultivating skills for addressing environmental and social challenges collaboratively, and dealing with interrelated global problems.

Participants not only learned about the specific thematic topics. Group dynamics and interpersonal exchanges were pivotal throughout the experience, emphasising the importance of listening to maintain group cohesion and work effectively as a team. During these interactions, we were all reminded that everyone is, in fact, a blend of personal, social, and cultural identities that shape our views on what is desirable, normal or strange. The exchange also involved reflection on societal differences, for example, about relationships based on power (e.g., the relationship between lecturers and students), gender roles, and the willingness to express divergent views publicly.

Reflecting our own expectations and becoming engaged in understanding others can occur in diverse ways. Informal exchanges played a vital role in this regard, moments around fireplaces, along the Rhine River, enjoying a braai, even singing and dancing together. Discussions about what is appropriate food or finding the right recipe for a risotto, did produce engaged discussions and generated quite a lot of fun for the participants. Ask yourself, "What would you prefer: being squeezed with other passengers into a bus without air conditioning travelling a direct route, or indulging in the adventure of reading timetables, chan-

ging trains, trying unforeseen directions, while finding comfortable ways of dragging suitcases packed to prepare for all eventualities, yet mastering the art of traveling light?" It requires patience to regard such challenges as a learning opportunity rather than as a nuisance. Everyone who took part in the exchange experienced and mastered those challenges, often in humorous, yet meaningful ways. Feedback that came from participants was overwhelmingly positive. The experience was referred to as 'life-changing', 'a great platform for experiential learning and exposure', an opportunity to 'understand the world from a different standpoint' or 'to think outside …usual ways of looking at things', 'learning new ways', 'a good platform to make friends'. Exchanges were described as 'very intense on many levels', providing a 'firsthand understanding of working and teaming up with people you didn't know before', 'applying knowledge, insights from the field, and interpersonal development', a lesson on 'being honest, actively listening, and creating contexts to combine learning with practice.'

The concepts and ideas behind the exchanges have demonstrated their merit. Living and working together in a group for a month created bonds and numerous opportunities to learn. The insights gained from these exchanges underscore the importance of collaboration in addressing global challenges.

> *Referring specifically to the migrant working subject, and after reading/ hearing/engaging with the topic, one of the messages that I am left with is that even though we are in different contexts, our feelings, our states, our inequalities, our suffering, manifest similarly. Homesickness, alliance building, the struggle for survival, the pain of discrimination, these are all similar experiences that I would like to understand more closely and the ones touching me the most. (Student at the University of Basel)*

In teaching, there exists a delicate balance between delegating responsibility and living up to one's own expectations of being a teacher. Lecturers have the task to foster active engagement that is essential for effective learning, and not just the passive absorption of information. During the excursion, numerous opportunities for active participation were provided, yet the sense of being part of a structured, organised summer/winter school remained. Coming away from this setting after finalisation of the official exchange, students were encouraged to con-

tinue their research in order to deepen the insights gained. Some students took advantage of this opportunity and met again on joint research trips, focusing on "labour migration", a topic of historical and contemporary relevance. The three lengthy contributions in this volume are the outcome of the learning process that students went through during the summer school and thereafter. The reflections presented should be understood from the perspective of the exchange that made them possible. The student exchange was just one step on the students' academic and personal paths. Many more will surely follow.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Postcolonial Soundings of Xeno-phobia and Racism in Switzerland

Giorgio Miescher

The Black Lives Matter turning point

For years I have contemplated investigating the historical parallels between the contract labour systems in South Africa and Namibia on the one hand and in Switzerland on the other. My attraction to the subject was motivated by several interests I had pursued during a career as an academic historian and my political socialisation and commitments grounded in various Swiss movements on the left. As a historian of twentieth century Southern Africa, I have grounded my understanding of the sub-continent's contract labour system in a rich Namibian labour historiography.[1] My approach to the contract labour system in Switzerland was different and was engendered by its key significance for the first large-scale political confrontations I experienced as a boy and teenager in the 1960s and 1970s. Both systems of institutionalised labour migration reduced human beings to their function as labour force, and both were deeply inhumane and exploitative. The similarities between the two systems seemed obvious to me, but their comparison had not yet been addressed in historical scholarship. Until today, this oversight is hardly surprising as historians of Southern Africa rarely

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1   E.g. for often quoted early research see Moorsom (1995) and Cooper (1999). A seminal work putting the contract labour system in a regional context is Crush et al. (1991). For recent studies see e.g. Likuwa (2020), Ashipala (2021), Nampala (2023), and the special issue of the Journal for African Studies: Moore et al. (2021). For a more detailed discussion of the historiography see the contribution by Saima Nakuti Ndahangwapo in this volume.

engage with Swiss history and vice-versa.[2] A turning point occurred for me with the global rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after the killing of George Floyd in June 2020, which induced me to offer a university course that compared the contract labour systems in South Africa and Switzerland entitled, 'One System – Two Countries'.[3]

Why did the Black Lives Matter movement serve as a watershed moment? As elsewhere, Black Lives Matter acquired unexpected momentum in Switzerland that produced public mass demonstrations and a growing awareness of everyday and structural racism in the country.[4] For the first time, it seemed to me, this rapidly developing public discourse foregrounded experiences of Black People and Persons of Colour in Switzerland. However, what remained marginal in the public debate was the political and analytical potential to understand (and consequently fight) racism in Switzerland against the backdrop of older histories of ethno-nationalism, racism, marginalisation, and exclusion. I argue that only in doing so will the history of the Swiss contract-labour system and its inherent xenophobic character emerge as an integral part of the history of racism in Switzerland. The comparative perspective proposed in the university course was part of a strategy to overcome the widespread narrowness and provincialism of Swiss national historiography.[5] Teaching this course constituted an exceptional opportunity

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2   There are, however, attempts to regard labour histories in a more comparative or global framework. In the field of global labour history, scholars have taken up comparative research in order to place national or regional labour histories into a global context. For South Africa see e.g. Bonner, Hyslop and van der Walt (2016). However, South African historians would rather compare South African labour history with India's or the South Americas' than with Europe's, not to mention Switzerland's. Furthermore, there are a few cases of historians of Southern Africa venturing into Swiss history, either by writing Swiss local history (Birmingham 2000) or by pointing to the entanglement of the two histories (Harries 2007). The latter was part of an attempt to rethink Swiss history in postcolonial terms.

3   The full title of the seminar was 'One System – Two Countries: Migrant Labour in South Africa and Switzerland after the Second World War'. I taught the seminar together with Raffaele Perniola, co-editor of this book, who had then just finished an MA-thesis on labour history in Namibia. For some arguments of the thesis see: Miescher and Perniola (2024). The seminar of 2021 marked the beginning of sustained work with students on the topic, which eventually lead to this volume.

4   For a discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement and its impact on Switzerland, see e.g. Akandji (2024).

5   It is a limitation I often encounter in Namibian historiography, as well. It is

to reflect on my personal involvement in politically leftist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in a scholarly manner. This introduction continues to move between scholarship and personal experience, while proposing anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles in Southern Africa as an analytical lens through which the Swiss contract labour system can be viewed.

Xenophobia and the *Schwarzenbach Initiative* of 1970

In a seminal internet blog published in June 2020, that is, immediately after the murder of George Floyd, Rohit Jain established a direct connection between the Black Lives Matter movement and the persistence of xenophobia in Switzerland.[6] Indeed, it was exactly 50 years before, on 7 June 1970, that Swiss men (women had no right to vote before 1971) voted on a popular initiative to reduce the number of foreigners in Switzerland, from 17 to 10 percent of the population. Eventually, after a heated campaign, the so-called *Schwarzenbach Initiative*, named after its main proponent, James Schwarzenbach, was narrowly defeated by a vote of 54 percent. In his 2020 blog, Jain asked himself what it must have meant at the time for millions of immigrant residents to be forced to wait for the initiative's outcome. A hundred thousand of them did not know whether they would be able to stay or would be forced to leave. The blog thus depicted a peculiar entanglement of fear, caught between:

> *The powerlessness of some because they are existentially at the mercy of the judgement of others… [and] the presumption of these others to be able to make such a judgement.[7]*

Finding myself, as a Swiss national, in the camp of those claiming the right to decide other people's future, that exposure of unquestioned arrogance made me deeply ashamed. Even though the Schwarzenbach initiative was rejected, what was nevertheless reified was the power of some people over others, of nationals over foreigners, of masters

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a similarity that might be based on the countries' shared narrative of being small, and therefore peripheral, in comparison to their powerful neighbours.

6   A revised version of the blog was published in 2022 (Jain 2022).

7   Jain (2022), p. 309 (own translation).

over labourers.[8] I remember the fiercely emotional debates on the initiative with my schoolmates, obviously echoing the discussions we experienced at home. I also recall turning my bicycle into a mobile billboard by attaching handmade placards to it, full with stickers that said 'Schwarzenbach ab' [Schwarzenbach down][9], expressing an eleven-years-old boy's passionate opposition to the initiative. However, thinking back, I am aware of the widely unnoticed absence of those targeted by the xenophobic attack—in my school and in my parents' home. The homogeneity of my family and social environments, and the broader bourgeois liberal milieu in Switzerland at the time, might seem astonishing today. I remember friends from all walks of life and social backgrounds while in primary school, but by the time I transitioned into secondary education and the gymnasium, homogeneity prevailed. Students from the so-called lower social classes were a clear minority, and many teachers considered them out-of-place. Teachers would record the father's profession next to each pupil's name— nothing I noticed at the time, but was later informed of by former classmates. In terms of nationality, almost all my schoolmates in primary school and later at the gymnasium were Swiss. Given that in the 1960s and 1970s, Italians constituted the largest group of immigrants in Switzerland, the absence of Italian children warrants explanation. Obviously perhaps, the answer is to be found in immigration law.

Italian migration to Switzerland played an important role after the late nineteenth century, when Switzerland experienced rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.[10] In a first phase, borders were open and immigrants and their families could easily enter and settle in Switzerland, provided they obeyed the law. Most immigrants settled in urban areas, where the percentage of inhabitants

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8   Jain (2022), p. 310.
9   The slogan, 'Schwarzenbach ab' [Schwarzenbach down] is based on a play of words, as the name Schwarzenbach means 'black river'. Hence the slogan calls for sending the initiative down the river, i.e. to reject it.
10   Bergier (1990), D'Amato (2012).

without Swiss citizenship rapidly grew. In Basel, for instance, the immigrant population reached 38 percent of the population in 1914 and, as in the case of other Swiss cities, entire neighbourhoods were called 'Italian'.[11] The outset of the First World War saw many foreign nationals return home, but it also marked the end of the liberal border regime, which was not restored after the war. At that point economic crises, combined with growing xenophobia, engendered growing political isolationism.[12] During the Second World War, Switzerland did not enter the battlefields and so its infrastructure remained intact. The post-war economy took off quickly and the country experienced an acute shortage of labour, creating the need for immigrants. By that time, however, the legal conditions of immigration had changed dramatically. In 1934 an infamous immigration act (Federal Act on the Residence and Settlement of Foreign Nationals) had been introduced that conjoined the two main features of the Swiss immigration system: residence and permission to work.[13] Henceforth, three primary permit categories determined an immigrant's status: the *seasonal residence permit* (A-permit), the *annual residence permit* (B-permit) and the *permanent residence permit* (C-permit). In 1948 the Swiss and Italian governments co-signed a recruitment agreement meant to benefit both countries. For Switzerland it ensured a supply of sufficient labour for its booming economy, for Italy it lowered social pressure caused by high unemployment and poverty rates, especially in the southern part of the country.[14] The intent of the agreement, however, was to facilitate only temporary immigration to Switzerland. Italian immigrants were either subjected to a seasonal

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11   For the figures represented in this paragraph, see Piguet (2006), pp. 13-22.

12   By 1941 the number of foreign nationals in Switzerland had dropped by almost two-thirds in comparison to 1914, from 600,000 (1914) to 223,000 (1941). See Piguet (2006), p. 15.

13   Bundesgesetz über Aufenthalt und Niederlassung der Ausländer (26 March 1931).

14   On the Italian context, see Meyer-Sabino (2003) and Maiolino (2011), pp. 75-89.

residence permit (A-permit), which required them to leave the country after nine months, or an annual residence permit (B-permit), that had to be renewed every year. In both cases, employment was the prerequisite for approval. Only after 10 years in country, could immigrants apply for a permanent residence permit (C-permit). In other words, Switzerland understood Italian immigration to be a temporary arrangement and reversible (hence the German term *Gastarbeiter,* which means 'guest worker').[15] With this logic, the Swiss government made it very difficult for Italian immigrants to bring their families with them. Those with a seasonal residence permit, notably around 50% of all immigrants,[16] were categorically disqualified, and those with an annual residence permit (B-permit) had to wait 36 months before they could apply to be joined by family, and only providing they could prove access to adequate housing and sufficient financial means. In other words, the majority of half a million Italians in Switzerland in the 1960s,[17] lived without their families, sometimes only temporarily, but often for the entire duration of their stay.[18] Most immigrants accepted the draconian laws, since the length of their sojourn remained uncertain to begin with.[19] An unknown number of immigrants, however, 'illegally' brought their children to Switzerland and hid them away under constant threat of expulsion. As will be discussed later in this introduction, the Italian filmmaker Alvaro Bizzarri denounced the inhumane treatment of illegalised children in his pioneering film, *Lo stagionale* (1970/73), though only recently has their fate received broader attention.[20] In the 1960s, the temporary status

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15   The translation of *Gastarbeiter* as 'guest workers' remains inadequate, but there is no established analogous term in English.

16   Between 1949 and 1963 approximately 50% of the yearly immigrants entered the country with a seasonal residence permit: Piguet (2006), p. 19. I have no specific figures for the ratio of seasonal workers among Italian immigrants.

17   The number of people with Italian citizenship in Switzerland with an A-, B-, or C-permit grew from over 400,000 in the early 1960s to over 500,000 at the end of the decade. (Figures according to Niederberger (2003), p. 107.)

18   According to a survey by the Colonie Libere Italiane in Switzerland in the late 1960s, 73% of Italian women living in Switzerland were holding paid employment; 45% of them were forced to live far away from their children. See: Meyer-Sabino (2003b), pp. 119-120.

19   See, e.g. Meyer-Sabino, (2003c).

20   Formerly hidden children publically spoke about their experiences and formed pressure groups like Tesoro. See also the chapter by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sown and Kavenauarue Tjiuroro.

of Italian migrants in Switzerland attracted significant criticism from multi-national, European institutions and Italian trade unions,[21] and in 1964, the Italian government negotiated better conditions for its citizens. Consequently, the waiting period for family reunion for B-permit holders was reduced from 36 to 18 months.[22] However, economic interests as well encouraged Swiss authorities to compromise, if only slightly, since by the 1960s other European economies were booming and less restrictive immigration laws in neighbouring countries threatened the labour supply to Switzerland. In addition, employers in several sectors of Swiss industry preferred to keep experienced workers rather than train new ones every year. Finally, most Italian immigrants strove for extended or permanent residence in Switzerland, thereby thwarting the rationale of temporal limitation entrenched in the 1948 recruitment agreement between Switzerland and Italy. In fact, official statistics produced in the 1960s confirm a shift from temporary to permanent residence and record an increase of Italian C-permit holders from 20% in 1964 to 55% in 1972.[23] The statistical consolidation of permanent residence was met with public outrage, growing xenophobia and anti-Italian sentiment that eventually culminated in the Schwarzenbach initiative. However, while on the surface the situation of Italian migrant workers and their families might have indeed become more stable in the 1960s, their presence remained marginal in many spheres of social life, and thus outside those of the likes of me.[24]

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21   Such a multi-national institution was the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OECE) founded already in 1949. See: Niederberger (2003). In particular, according to Buomberger (2004, p. 52), Italian trade unions put their government under pressure.

22   Piguet (2015), p. 26. The same agreement prescribed that seasonal residence permit holders could apply for an annual residence permit after five years, provided they had worked for 45 months. In addition, the legal conditions for B-permit holders improved after five years, but they still had to wait ten years before being eligible for a C-permit.

23   Niederberger (2003), p. 107.

24   In fact, most of my age-mates who came from Italian migrant families, and whom I know today, started school in Italy and only joined their parents in Switzerland later, whereas their younger siblings were either born or started school in Switzerland.

Siamo Italiani (1964)

The black-and-white film, *Siamo Italiani* [We are Italians], is one of the most outstanding, aesthetically accomplished oeuvres of Swiss documentary cinema, directed and produced by Alexander Seiler in collaboration with Rob Gnant and June Kovach in 1964. It beautifully portrays the lives of Italian immigrants in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, at the same time that it exposes the ignorance and open hostility they met. Over the years, I have included the film in my classes to introduce Swiss and Namibian students to the debates surrounding Italian immigration to Switzerland in the early 1960s. Because the film was shot in Basel and surrounding villages, an opportunity always afforded itself to take students to various locations featured in Seiler's film.[25] *Siamo Italiani* follows Italian immigrants through the humiliating medical examination at the border and the gruelling interrogation by immigration officers. It accompanies men and women to their work places, makes its way into the private homes of families, and joins cheerful couples and friends for rare leisure activities and evenings out. The film keeps shifting perspective, and close-ups of individuals, who narrate their experiences, transition into scenes where the camera remains a distant observer and off-screen voices can be heard. Yet it is the moments when Italians are seen walking around Basel, shopping and enjoying informal conversations, while we hear members of the Swiss public voice their xenophobic and racist prejudice, that *Siamo Italiani* becomes a haunting study of an extremely unpleasant and ungracious social, political and personal atmosphere. Importantly, Seiler juxtaposes oppressive scenes with moments of assertiveness and pride, such as depicted on a day that a group of young Italian men delights in a newly purchased car. Given its refined narrative, visual beauty and partisan commitment to its Italian protagonists, the film remains exceptionally captivating and it has stimulated generations of film aficionados, scholars, and students in Switzerland and beyond its borders.[26]

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25 During the winter/summer school some Namibian and Swiss students organised a tour for their colleagues, on which at various sites, scenes in the film were discussed and contextualized.

26 Concetto Vecchio, son of Southern Italian immigrants, who returned to Italy when he was a teenager, wrote an exceptional book (Vecchio 2019) about

Seiler's film was released at a time when a growing Swiss public began to understand that Italian immigrants might not only work, but would also settle in Switzerland. On the other hand, most Swiss probably wondered who these Italian men, women and children were. Seiler himself asked that question in the introduction to a book published a year after the film's release under the same title.[27] The huge majority of German-speaking Swiss citizens, including himself, Seiler noted, perceived Italians merely as an anonymous, collective group, defined by their foreign language and alleged different looks. Under this abbreviated identity was how they were depicted in political debates and newspaper articles, became targets of verbal and physical aggression, and the subject of scholarly concern as well. Throughout the narrative of the book, Seiler nearly resembles an anthropologist conducting fieldwork among foreign people, whose life and world had to be mediated by 'native' interlocutors and translators. Thus, the book recounts the film crew's journey of discovery, familiarising itself with Italians, and gradually recognising them to be individuals with their own biographies, views, and desires. Seiler and his crew were introduced by a German-speaking Italian interlocutor to Italian migrants in and around Basel and eventually spent two months with them. After completing the film, Seiler decided to translate and publish the oral testimonies of 47 men and women he had assembled for the project.[28] Their stories reflect their various biographies and provide glimpses into their daily lives, their struggles, and their hopes. While this approach was exceptional at the time, Seiler's desire to let only the voices of the film's main subjects to be heard, seems today somewhat flawed by the fact that the narrators themselves have no names,[29] as Seiler himself was aware. This limita-

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Italians in Switzerland from the 1960s to the 1980s. The narrative ultimately depicted his father's and his mother's experiences. A German edition of the book was also published under a slightly different title (Vecchio 2020). In the epilogue Vecchio writes that he had watched *Siamo Italiani* again and again while working on the book, and notes that Seiler's film should be screened in Italian schools, now that Italy is consumed by resentment towards immigrants. See: Vecchio (2019), pp. 181-184.

27 Seiler (1965), pp. 13-20.

28 Over 200 pages long, these testimonies comprise by far the most voluminous content in the book.

29 Seiler was aware of this problematic, which he partly excused with a deliberate decision to protect the anonymity of the narrators. However, he also revealed that the crew did not bother to write down the names of everyone

tion remains an indication of the deeply felt distance between the film-maker's academic and bourgeois background and the milieu of Italian immigrants documented in his film.[30]

Max Frisch, a leading Swiss writer and intellectual at the time, wrote the preface to the book, *Siamo Italiani*. He began by noting:

> *A small master nation sees itself in danger: workers have been called and human beings are coming.*[31]

Frisch's opening statement, particularly the second part, would become an iconic slogan among opponents of the Schwarzenbach initiative. In his text, Frisch also made a direct comparison between xenophobia in Switzerland and racism in the United States, equating the large numbers of Italians in Switzerland with the African-American population. He critiqued the deeply-rooted sense of superiority and aversion towards foreigners, and especially towards Italian workers, who constituted the largest group of immigrants. However, Frisch's text also adopted an openly patronising tone when he described the stories migrants told (and which were recounted in the book) as the statements of 'simple', even 'childlike minded people'.[32] Frisch's irritating choice of words reflects his privileged social background and limited personal experience, given that he too had encountered Italian migrants only in their roles as waiters, cleaners, and service providers. Indeed, Max Frisch embodied a mindset common among the intellectual elite in Switzerland, one he elaborated in *Überfremdung 2*, a text he wrote in 1966.[33] Claiming that he could not identify a single xenophobic person among his friends and acquaintances, he relegated prejudice towards foreigners to those people he considered backward, narrow-minded, and anti-intellectual.

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they talked to, but rather gave them nicknames based on specific attributes of their personalities (or one might guess, their physiognomy).

30 Almost forty years after the production of *Siamo Italiani*, Seiler directed another documentary, *Il vento di settembre* (2002), dedicated to some of the protagonists he had worked with in the first film, and who in the meantime have returned to their home region, Puglia in southern Italy.

31 Seiler (1965), p. 7. This is my translation of the German original, which reads, 'Ein kleines Herrenvolk sieht sich in Gefahr: man hat Arbeitskräfte gerufen und es kamen Menschen'. The introduction to *Siamo Italiani* was later also published as *Überfremdung 1* in an edited volume (Frisch 1976a).

32 Seiler (1965), pp. 9-10.

33 The text was republished in Frisch (1976b).

Xenophobia in Switzerland, he continued, was not a form of racism, but needed to be understood as the instinct of those who did not know better. Regardless of explicit disdain for xenophobic sentiment, Frisch would ultimately not relinquish Swiss 'exceptionalism', which—he asserted—still made the Swiss superior to anyone else. This is why Rohit Jain's seminal text, referred to earlier, deplores Frisch's refusal to attend to structural segregation in Switzerland and its implicitly racist immigration laws, thus failing to explain sweeping xenophobia and situating Swiss anti-immigration and racist sentiment within broader social mobilisation against South African apartheid, for example, or racial segregation in the USA at the time.[34]

Jain's critical reading of Max Frisch's argument foregrounds a persistent refusal to identify structural xenophobia and racism in Switzerland and their entrenchment in immigration law. Acquiring Swiss citizenship remains extremely difficult to this day, and the dichotomy between 'us' (Swiss citizen) and 'them' (foreigners) constitutive.[35] Public discourse continues to make a disturbing juxtaposition of 'acceptable' or 'good' foreigners versus 'bad' ones, whereby those relegated to the unfavourable category include growing new groups of people. As Seiler's film shows, in the 1960s this rationale produced bizarre arguments supporting reluctant acceptance of northern Italians, while southern Italians were deemed to be essentially problematic and thus unwanted.

Italian immigrants opposing the *Schwarzenbach Initiative*

The intense debates and outbreak of open racism in the run-up to the Schwarzenbach initiative, prompted an increasing number of Italians to actively engage with Swiss society and politics.[36] Various Italian

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34   Jain (2022), pp. 318-320.

35   Furthermore, newly naturalised Swiss citizens might face an overtly natio-
      nalistic blood-and-earth rhetoric, distinguishing between 'real' and 'natura-
      lised' Swiss, the latter referred to as *Papierlischwiizer* [Swiss on paper] only.

36   Of particular importance were the supra-regional and politically left-
      oriented *Colonie Libere Italiane* [Free Italian Colonies] with local sections
      all over Switzerland. At the national level the association was organised as
      Federazione delle Colonie Libere Italiane in Svizzera (FCLIS) [Federation
      of the Free Italian Colonies in Switzerland]. See on the FCLIS: Maiolino
      (2011), pp. 173-200.

cultural, political, and social associations had existed in Switzerland for some time, but it was not until April 1970 that the first national congress of Italian immigrants was held in the country.[37] The congress sent a strong message to both Swiss and Italian authorities, and Italian immigrants broke anonymity and silence by asserting their political significance and independence.[38] The congress explicitly rejected the Schwarzenbach initiative's attempt to divide Swiss and Italian workers and demanded respect for human rights, including children's right to live with their families, and the right for trade union representation. Indeed, Swiss trade unions had shown little interest in protecting the rights of foreign workers and they did not campaign against the Schwarzenbach initiative that eventually won clear majorities in most working-class neighbourhoods.[39]

Self-representation became an important preoccupation in the struggle for political emancipation and social recognition. In the 1970s, this concern received special attention in the films produced by the Italian filmmaker, Alvaro Bizzarri, himself an immigrant. Bizzarri, born in Tuscany, Italy, came to Switzerland as a young man in the mid-1950s, where he was employed in a factory, first as an unskilled labourer and later as a welder.[40] Next to his bread-and-butter job, Bizzarri became a committed cultural and political activist in his local section of the association *Colonie Libere Italiane* (CLI) [Free Italian Colonies] in Biel/ Bienne. The manifold activities of the association included the development of a network of film clubs, where films were screened and discussed. Bizzarri first initiated and ran the CLI film club in Biel/Bienne, but eventually started to direct and produce his own films, notably without any formal training nor financial support. His feature and documentary films of the early 1970s, such as *Il treno del sud* [The Southern Train] (1970), *Lo stagionale* [The Seasonal Worker] (1970/73), and

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37 Organisers of the congress were the two biggest Italian associations, namely the *Federazione delle Colonie Libere Italiane in Svizzera* (FCLIS) [Federation of the Free Italian Colonies in Switzerland], founded in 1943, and the *Associazione Catttolica Lavoratori Italiani* [Catholic Association of Italian Workers] (ACLI), operating in Switzerland since the early 1960s. See Meyer-Sabino (2003b).

38 Maiolo (2011), pp. 204-5.

39 Vecchio (2019), p. 179. On the role of the trade unions, see also the chapter by Niamh Christine O'Neill and Ndapwoshali Ndahafa Ilunga in this volume.

40 On Alvaro Bizzarri, his life and work, see La Barba (2009).

Il rovescio della medaglia [The Other Side of the Coin] (1974), are forthright but sensitive denunciations of the inhumane living conditions of Italian workers, particularly of seasonal workers (A-permit), in Switzerland. In contrast to Seiler's film, Bizzarri developed his cinematic critique from within, given that he was a member of the community he portrayed. Swiss citizens hardly feature in the films, except in their roles as officials, employers, or ignorant passers-by. As he recalled in an interview, Bizzarri screened his films to seasonal workers in workers' barracks, as well as in many small venues in the region of Biel/Bienne.[41] And while those portrayed would experience his films as compassionate views of their worlds to Swiss audiences, now conceived as the outsiders, Bizzarri's work unsparingly exposed the precarious condition of those who built streets, tunnels, and housing for them.[42] However, for all their relentless criticism, what made Bizzarri's films so powerful, was their insistence on worker mobilisation, protest and resistance, and day-by-day resilience.[43]

The political mobilisation against the Schwarzenbach initiative fuelled hope among left-wing and immigrant organisations for a change of Swiss immigration law, and the movement culminated in the so-called *Mitenand Initiative* [Together Initiative] launched in 1974. Its core demand was for an improvement in the legal status of immigrants, which included the right to live with one's family, and the abolition of seasonal work permits (A-permit). The result of the public vote, taken in 1980, was however, very disappointing, with only 16,2% of the votes (now men and women) in favour of the initiative.[44] The devastating result of the Mitenand initiative was undoubtedly attributable to ideological reasons. However, it also reflected a new economic dispensation. In the mid-1970s the so-called 'oil crisis' and the structural turmoil it caused across national economies reached Switzerland, and 340,000 workers lost their jobs between August 1973 and August 1977, amounting to 10% of all jobs in the Swiss economy.[45] Despite the high number of jobs eliminated, unemployment was merely registered at the

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41   La Barba (2009), pp. 86-87.
42   Ibid.
43   A second version of *Lo stagionale* included footage of a large workers' rally in Berne on 28 or 29 November 1970.
44   Buomberger (2004), pp. 196-197.
45   All figures according to Buomberger (2004), pp. 190-193.

level of 21,000 people in 1976, thus concealing the fact that 250,000 immigrants lost their work and had to leave the country. Unemployment was thereby exported and the domestic economy protected against its harmful effects, giving the Swiss electorate in 1980 no reason to change an immigration regime that had just proved to protect its own interests. Taken together, then, the Schwarzenbach and the Mitenand initiatives point out a fundamental characteristic of Switzerland's problematic stance on xenophobia and racism in the 1960s and 1970s: political opinions and values would ultimately always be subjected to economic interest and opportunism.

The 1974 poster of the Erklärung von Bern or post-colonialism *avant la lettre*

Public debate on the Schwarzenbach initiative included Italian immigrant voices, raised against discrimination and exploitation. In some instances, these dissenters were joined by Swiss activists and organisations of the political left. Increasingly, common efforts were linked to broader movements against xenophobia and racism, and addressed international or global agendas. One example that pertains to this new political constellation, is a poster entitled '*Das Fremdarbeiterproblem ist ein Entwicklungsproblem*' ['The foreign worker problem is a developmental problem'] (see Figure 1).[46] The poster was produced, published, and distributed by the *Erklärung von Bern* (EvB) [Bern Declaration] of 1974. The EvB has its origin in 1968, when progressive church activists pledged to donate three percent of their income to the Third World. The declaration was signed by more than a thousand people and submitted to the Swiss government whose capital is Bern, hence the name Bern declaration. The initiative was greeted with great interest and a growing number of supporters led to the establishment of the EvB as an NGO in 1970.[47]

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46   My appreciation goes to Lisa Roulet, archivist at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, for tracing the poster and providing me with an electronic copy. The poster was folded and sent out with the *Rundbrief Nr. 2/1974* to the signatories of the *Erklärung von Bern,* responsible author was Rudolf H. Strahm. The poster is archived in the poster collection of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien under the signature X 7486.

47   On the early history of the *Erklärung von Bern*, see Holenstein, Renschler

Lobbying for international solidarity, global justice, and equal rights, it still exists today, since 2016 under the name, 'Public Eye'.

The poster's title, 'The foreign worker problem is a developmental problem', and its subtitle, 'It is the same system that causes the misery of migrant workers in Europe and the Third World',[48] positioned Switzerland's politics and society in a broader context, one of global inequality, entrenched in a sharp antagonism between Europe (the West) and the Third World (the Global South). Visually, the poster is dominated by three pairs of black-and-white photographs, each of which juxtaposes an 'example from Switzerland' on the left with an 'example from South Africa' on the right. The social and psychological repercussions of migrant labour are visually depicted, each juxtaposition being an illustration of a social problem: alcohol abuse, precarious housing, and horrific labour conditions, thereby foregrounding structural similarities between labour systems in each country. These similarities are reinforced and specified in the detailed captions that accompany the photographs. Finally, the reverse-side of the poster, not depicted here, provides rich contextual information that helps an observer recognise structural parallels between migrant labour and the forms of dependency they sustained: between Switzerland and southern Italy, as a significant dispatcher country for labour migrants on the one hand, and between apartheid South Africa's White areas and Black homelands, the main dispatchers for labour, with neighbouring countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi, on the other. Furthermore, Swiss law regulating seasonal migrant labour is explicitly aligned with apartheid legislation, and the poster substantiates the analogy with South Africa's prime minister, John Vorster's response to a Swiss journalist enquiring about apartheid in 1974. Possibly causing public embarrassment in Switzerland at the time, when asked about apartheid, Vorster replied, 'Do the Italians have political rights with you?'[49]

Production of the poster was in part an attempt to promote the Mitenand initiative and to foreground ways of improving conditions

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and Strahm (2008).

48   In the German original: 'Es ist das gleiche System, das in Europa und in der Dritten Welt Wandarbeiter-Elend entstehen lässt.'

49   Quoted in the aforementioned poster (BAB, X 7486) from an interview in *Weltwoche* (26 June 1974).

Figure 1: Poster published by Erklärung von Bern, 1974 (digital copy of poster held by the Basler Afrika Bibliographien)

for migrant workers in Switzerland. It echoed arguments from Latin American dependency theories formulated after the Second World War, which understood resources, including cheap labour, always flow from impoverished peripheries in the Global South to centres in the Global North, whereby the wealth gap continuously grows wider, and a vicious circle makes the development of the centre dependent on the absence of development at the periphery.[50] Yet, what makes this poster exceptional is indeed its global outlook and its success at transcending limitations of a national political framework by way of equating migrant labour in Switzerland with its South African pendant.[51] Rudolf Strahm, the poster's designer and head of the EvB's office at the time, remembered the poster as a response to frustration caused by Swiss trade unions' failure to firmly stand up against and confront xenophobia.[52] Strahm had acquired intimate knowledge of the South African situation via the anti-apartheid movement founded in francophone Switzerland in 1965.[53] At EvB, Strahm was joined by Anne-Marie Holenstein and Regula Renschler, members of a new generation of well-educated young activists fighting what they perceived as paralysing, self-centred complacency.[54] They wanted their country to acknowledge its exploitative role in the world and advocated for fair and just relations, especially with the Global South. The struggle against apartheid and the racist, minority regime in South Africa played an important role in the political socialisation of these young intellectuals and political agitators. EvB contributed to grassroots mobilisation against the complicity of the Swiss state and economic sector with South Africa.[55] As such, Renschler, Holenstein

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50 A lot of literature has been written on the dependency theory. For a critical overview, see for instance, Gosh (2011). For more recent contributions, see Enuka (2018) and Kvangraven (2023).

51 The poster was sent to all members of the EvB and additional copies could be ordered as is stated on its reverse side.

52 Email correspondence with Rudolf Strahm, 16 May 2023.

53 The *Mouvement Anti-Apartheid de Suisse* (MAAS) was founded in Geneva by church activists in 1965. The anti-apartheid movement in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (Anti-Apartheid Bewegung) emerged from a working group of the EvB and was founded in 1975. See Pfister (2000), p. 3.

54 Holenstein, Renschler, and Strahm (2008).

55 EvB's first public intervention in Swiss politics happened when the organisation released a press statement in 1970 opposing Swiss participation in the construction of the Cabora Basa dam by the South-African, apartheid government in Mozambique under Portuguese fascist rule. Resistance

and Strahm pursued postcolonial politics *avant la lettre*. Renschler, for instance, had spent time in independent Nigeria and had worked in a research project on racism and ethnocentrism in western history books before accepting a job at EvB in 1974.[56] In the following years, she consistently denounced racist stereotypes and insisted on the need to dismantle racism in Switzerland, where people were socialised into a racist mind-set from early childhood.[57] Unfortunately, EvB did not continue its comparative work on racism and exploitative labour in Switzerland and Southern Africa. Renschler, for example, reverted to a more conventional narrative and would henceforth distinguish between racism aimed at People of Colour, with whom Swiss citizen hardly ever interacted anyway, and widespread xenophobia directed against foreign workers, predominantly immigrants from Southern Europe.[58] However, unlike Alvaro Bizzarri, they remained outsiders, and therefore could not attend to the complicated intersections between racism and xenophobia that fed prejudice against people originating from the peripheries of both Europe and the Global South. Yet, what appeared as separate problems—racism and xenophobia—to the members of EvB, was most likely less differentiated, and not a matter of geography to those situated on prejudice's receiving end.

Re-engaging contract labour systems today

In 2021, Raffaele Perniola and myself taught 'One System –Two Countries' at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel. It was received with great interest on the part of students. Consequently, my colleague Luregn Lenggenhager and I decided to pursue a more sustainable teaching agenda in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Namibia. An early highlight was the winter/summer school of 2022 entitled, 'History and Legacy of Migrant Labour in

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against construction of Cabora Basa stood for the fight against racism, imperialism and fascism and brought together many left-wing organisations and activists. See Holenstein (2008), pp. 50-53.

56   See Renschler (2008a), pp. 105-108.
57   See Renschler (2008b). For a fascinating reflection on Swiss racist attitudes towards an African-American who settled in Bern¬in the 1950s, see Carter (2022).
58   Renschler (2008b), pp. 255-256.

Namibia and Switzerland'.[59] In its course we took students from Basel and Windhoek on a journey along former migrant routes: first from Northern Namibia to the country's central regions, and later from Italy to Switzerland. Afterwards, students collaborated writing reports about their shared experience and produced a small mobile exhibition that was displayed in both countries. Furthermore, a Visual History Lab entitled, 'Cinematic Representations of Migrant Labour in Switzerland and Apartheid South Africa' provided an opportunity for students to engage and rearrange historical film material, including Seiler's *Siamo Italiani*, and present their experimental videos at public screenings.[60]

Reconnecting with critical debates and activism of the 1970s and early 1980s and expanding these older comparisons of systems of migrant labour by way of attending to important differences in both the historical experience of racism and xenophobia and their expression through institutionalisation in Switzerland and South Africa respectively, took place in a transformed political and institutional environment. A trans-continental joint university course was not possible fifty years ago, as the University of Namibia did not exist at that time and enrolment in South African universities was an unlikely option for most Black Namibians.[61] Likewise, the University of Basel hardly offered any courses on African history and society then, let alone courses in English medium, today the main language of instruction at the Centre for African Studies. And finally, the demographics of the student body have changed significantly, and histories of migrant labour resonate through the families of students, from both Windhoek and Basel. The multiple forms of engagement with these histories in all courses we offered, spoke to the students in meaningful ways, and as this volume attests to, they made experiences of former migrant labourers in Namibia and Italian migrants in Switzerland speak to contemporary

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59   The winter/summer school held in 2022 was offered in collaboration with Luregn Lenggenhager, Raffaele Perniola, and Wanda Rutishauser of the University of Basel and with Martha Akawa, Romie Nghitevelekwa, and Arthur Kambambi of the University of Namibia.

60   The Visual History Lab was offered together with Kadiatou Diallo and Lorena Rizzo at the University of Basel.

61   The University of Namibia was founded in 1992, two years after the country's independence. South African universities were racially segregated. For the history of the University of the Western Cape, the former Coloured university that was established in the late 1950s, see Lalu and Murray (2012).

forms of xenophobia and racism, and a globally entrenched culture of discrimination.[62]

The edited volume

The volume opens with the chapter, *A Short History of the Migrant Labour System in Namibia* by Saima Nakuti Ndahangwapo[63] (University of the Free State). Ndahangwapo documents how the contract labour system emerged during the German colonial occupation (1884-1915), in the course of which the colony was divided into two distinct areas: the central north, on one hand, became a dispatching area for migrant labour needed by the colonial economy in the central and southern regions, on the other hand. Ndahangwapo recounts and analyses how under South African rule (1915-1990) the contract labour system was institutionalised and controlled through specific legal mechanisms. During the second half of the twentieth century, the chapter continues to argue, the contract labour system was increasingly challenged by worker resistance, culminating in a general strike in 1971 and 1972. However, it was not until Namibian independence in 1990 that the system was ultimately abolished.

In the chapter, *The Seasonal Migrant in Twentieth-Century Switzerland: The Harm to Foreigners and to the International Reputation of the Swiss Confederation,* Sandro Rinauro (University of Milan) discusses changing Swiss immigration policies over the course of the previous century and compares them with those of North America and other countries in Europe. Whereas parallels existed during the first half of the century, Rinauro shows that since the 1960s Switzerland has become increasingly unique in Europe due to persistent inhumane treatment of seasonal workers and explicit xenophobia with regard to Italians, by then the largest immigrant group by far. The memory of inhumane treatment and xenophobia directed at Italians and other seasonal workers experienced in Switzerland is still in place, though in the meantime the attitude has been levelled at new groups of migrants

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62   Some of the students in Basel continued their engagements with the topic in their MA, Bucher (2024), or in seminar papers, e.g. Baldé (2023) and Akandji (2025).

63   The author formerly published under the name Seima Nakuti Ashipala.

as well. This unique history, and the persistence of open xenophobia, that is deeply ingrained through discourse and practice, Rinauro argues, continues to damage Switzerland's reputation in Italy and beyond.

In contrast with those two chapters, the authors of the chapters that follow were, at the time of writing, MA students who participated in the winter/summer school, and were taught at the University of Basel in collaboration with the University of Namibia. In the meantime, most of them have successfully completed their MA degrees and have pursued careers elsewhere.

The chapter, *Trade Unions and the Reform of the Migrant Labour Systems in Namibia and Switzerland, 1970–2007,* by Niamh Christine O'Neill (University of Basel) and Ndapewoshali Ndahafa Ilunga (University of Namibia), offers a detailed comparative analysis of the complex relationships that play out between migrant labourers and the trade unions in the two countries. O'Neill and Ilunga begin by out-lining the historical role of migrant labourers within trade unions in Switzerland and Namibia and then examine the position of the two main trade union federations embedded in the political structures of each country. They move on to explore the three turning points in trade-union action and policies towards migrant labour before embarking on direct comparisons that reveal differences as well as similarities between Namibia and Switzerland.

In the chapter, *Public Remembrance of Contract Labour Systems in Namibia and Switzerland,* Corina Bucher and Ellen Sow (University of Basel), and Kavenauarue Tjiuoro (University of Namibia), embark on a comparative exploration of different forms of memory and commem-oration in Namibia's and Switzerland's public spheres. The authors refer to museums and monuments as indicators of public remembrance and discuss their role in the respective national narratives. They further trace and interview activists, who advocate for a more accurate rep-resentation of the experiences and perspectives of contract labourers. Finally, the authors explore the potential of storytelling as an alternative form of public memory.

Storytelling is also foregrounded in the chapter, *Feeding Narratives: The Politics of Storytelling in the Context of Contract Labour Migration,* by Raluca-Maria Marcu (University of Basel). Based on an analysis of personal memories, autobiographical accounts, poems, and films, Marcu challenges the conventional portrayal of labour migration and

underscores the importance of considering diverse individual experiences. She emphasises the significance of food, home and contentment for a sophisticated comprehension of contract-labour migration and insists that entangled human experiences need to be taken into account in order to make accurate assessments.

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Chapter 1

A Short History of the Migrant Labour System in Namibia

Saima Nakuti Ndahangwapo

Introduction

In the late 19th century German colonial authority was established in the then South West Africa (now Namibia), when land was acquired through a series of dubious contracts. The question of labour, and particularly the labour required in order for the colony to be able to turn a profit, was an immediate concern of the colonial authorities. Cynthia Cohen, for instance, cites a German settler farmer who stated that

> *the land at present available in our colony (excluding Ovamboland) is suitable for European settlement. We cannot carry out this settlement, however, without additional labour. This must be provided by the natives…[1]*

Resistance to German rule, and the genocide of thousands of Herero and Nama at the turn of the 20th century exacerbated a crisis in the provision of sufficient labour for the settler society and the nascent colonial economy. The colonial economy had its foundations in three main spheres: settler agriculture, a mining industry (established through the convergence of international capital), and the fishing sector. These areas of economic activity, along with infrastructural projects facilitated by the colonial administration, represented both the demand and competition for labour in the colony. The primary competition for the

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1   Cohen (1993), p. 118.

acquisition of labour was between agriculture and mining, each sector alternately leading the other throughout various periods in the colonial era. Ironically, German colonial authorities' challenge to find sufficient labour was a problem largely of their own making.

In the early 20th century, South West Africa (Namibia) was passed to South African colonial rule, after Germany was defeated in the First World War. To inherit the land was to inherit its wealth, so the new colonial masters revived the economy and particularly the mining industry, again with international capital at its helm. It was during South African colonial rule that the migrant labour system became 'institutionalised'.[2] The colonial administration sought to replicate the labour recruitment system that was in place in South Africa under the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA). Established in 1905, WNLA was the recruiting agency that supplied migrant labour for South Africa's gold mines. Migrant workers from all over the Southern African region, including the former German South West Africa, were recruited to work in the South African mines by WNLA. The process of institutionalising the migrant labour system in Namibia was thus inspired by WNLA and it did so by establishing two labour organisations in the 1920s, namely the Southern Labour Organisation (SLO) and the Northern Labour Organisation (NLO). Eventually, these two organisations were succeeded by the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA) following the Second World War. SWANLA itself was later replaced, at least in name, by what became known as the Labour Bureaux in the 1970s. The work of these successive organisations came to define the parameters within which labour, and particularly migrant labour, was organised and controlled by the South African colonial administration over a period of 70 years, ending with Namibian independence in 1990. What follows is a brief history of the migrant labour system created in Namibia, highlighting aspects of the migrant labour system under the German and South African colonial periods. This review illustrates how the history of migrant labour in Namibia is intricately linked to the history of colonisation in the territory.

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2   Cooper (1999), p. 129.

Literature Review

The following literature review is by no means extensive. It merely introduces some of the lenses through which the migrant labour system in Namibia has been viewed. The existent literature on the history of the migrant labour system in Namibia (also known as the contract labour system) can be divided into five main categories. The first category is historical literature that traces the origins of contract labour in the German colonial period and highlights its continuity in the South African colonial period, viewing the system in Namibia in a regional context. Helmuth Bley's book on *Namibia Under German Rule*, is an example.[3]

The second category is comprised of autobiographies and biographies written about or by migrant workers, documenting their personal experiences under the German and South African colonial authorities. Included among these is Vinnia Ndadi's *Breaking Contract: The Story of Helao Vinnia Ndadi*, which documents Ndadi's journey into the contract labour system and his astonishing experiences, which include being recruited as a clerk for SWANLA because of the rudimentary education he had received at the mission school in Engela.[4] Also written on the experiences of migrant workers include Ndeutala Selma Hishongwa's book on *The Contract Labour System and Its Effects on Family and Social Life in Namibia: A Historical Perspective*[5] and Kletus Likuwa's *Voices from the Kavango: A Study of the Contract Labour System in Namibia, 1925–1972*[6], which documents the experiences of migrant workers through a regional perspective.

In the third category are studies that chronologically document the history of the contract labour system, tracing its origins from the German colonial period into the South African colonial period, highlighting the role of the respective labour recruitment organisations.[7] Allan D. Cooper's article on *The Institutionalization of Contract Labour*

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3   Bley (1996).
4   Mercer (1974), p. 52.
5   Hishongwa (1992).
6   Likuwa (2020).
7   Cooper (1999) highlights the transition from NLO and SLO to SWANLA, depicting the centrality of the mining industry, in the creation of labour recruitment organisations.

in Namibia, for instance, is noteworthy in that the author highlights the transition from the Northern Labour Organisation (NLO) and Southern Labour Organisation (SLO) into SWANLA, depicting the centrality of the mining industry, and specifically the diamond mines, in the creation of labour recruitment organisations.[8] John Kane-Berman's *Contract Labour in South West Africa*, on the other hand, highlights the centrality of migrant workers and the 1971-1972 general strike to the contract labour system's transition from SWANLA to the Labour Bureaux.[9]

The fourth category of literature on Namibia's migrant labour system pertains to thematic studies that focus on areas such as the colonial economy, colonial boundary making, the mining industry, labour unrest and subversion, trade and commerce. These studies examine the migrant labour system through various lenses such as the colonial economy, the mining industry, commercial aspects such as trade, the partition of the territory with the infamous Red Line as well as through labour unrest and subversion. Key examples of these are Richard Moorsom's *Underdevelopment and Class-Formation: The Origins of Migrant Labour in Namibia, 1850-1915*[10] and Giorgio Miescher's, *Namibia's Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border*[11], both of which are cited in foregoing sections of this chapter.

The fifth category draws direct links between the migrant labour system and the onset of nationalism and Namibia's liberation struggle. A 'seamless transition' from 'labour activism to political activism' has however been challenged in the special issue on *Namibian Labour History* published by the Journal of Southern African Studies in February 2021. Therein editors, Moore et al., aim to 'de-centre' Namibian nationalism from the migrant labour system and in so doing, 're-centre' the labour process, labour policy and the lived history of labourers themselves.[12] In their quest to re-centre Namibia's labour history, the editors provide a detailed literature review beginning with the German and South African colonial periods and concluding with the literature produced in post-independent Namibia, which is worth reading. An

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8   Cooper (1999), p. 121.
9   Kane-Berman (1972).
10   Moorsom (1977). http://www.jstor.org/stable/2636587
11   Miescher (2012).
12   Moore et al. (2021).

interesting observation on the reviewed literature for this chapter has been its focus on the migrant labour system until the 1971/1972 general strike. John Kane-Berman's Contract Labour in South West Africa is the only one among these publications that provides information on how the system changed in the period immediately after the general strike. Very little is written, however, on how the contract labour system continued to operate during the eighteen years leading up to Namibian independence in 1990.

Against the backdrop of the literature on the migrant labour system in Namibia, this chapter identifies three distinct periods in which migrant labour history in Namibia can be studied, namely, the German colonial period, (particularly after 1908), the inter-war period or transition from German to South African colonial rule and lastly, post-Second-World War up to the advent of the apartheid regime and eventual independence of Namibia. What follows is a general discussion on the history of the migrant labour system in Namibia, with a focus on Ovamboland as the sending area, during these three distinct periods.[13] The memorialization and consequences of the migrant labour system on contemporary Namibian society, is dealt with in other chapters in this volume. This chapter endeavours to provide an overview of the various aspects and processes of the migrant labour system within the aforementioned periods, including a discussion on the changes in the migrant labour system in the post-general-strike period of the 1970s and 1980s.

German Colonial Period: Establishing a Sending Area

Steven Press argues that mineral discoveries, particularly the discovery of diamonds, lay at the heart of the motivation to establish a German colony in South West Africa. The aim was to exploit the colony's resources in order to turn a profit that would ensure a self-sustaining colony. To accomplish this end the German colonial authority required labour, and needed to divert the attention of local populations, particularly young males, from their existing economic circumstances to the

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13 For discussion on the Kavango sending area, see Likuwa (2015). https://repository.unam.edu.na/bitstream/handle/11070/1806/Likuwa_Colonialism_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllow

colonial economy.[14] The initial focus of this effort was people, namely the Herero and Nama, living in what became known as the Police Zone, 'the area of German South West Africa [which was] placed under governmental police protection' and to which European settlement was confined.[15] Resistance to German colonialism from the Herero and the Nama resulted in the 1904-1908 'German military's genocidal campaign in Southwest [which in turn] incalculably exacerbated' the labour deficit in the colony.[16]

The demand for labour was stimulated by the discovery of diamonds in 1908, which taught the Germans about the 'unintended consequence of what historians called "the peace of the graveyard".'[17] Although the challenge to German colonial rule by the Herero and Nama was silenced in a barrage of gunfire, these military actions led to a dearth of labour needed to extract the mineral wealth that had motivated colonisation of the territory. To alleviate this problem several plans were activated, including the forceful exploitation of captured Herero and Nama, held in concentration camps, to work on farms, infrastructural projects and mines. Men, women and children were forced to work under such harsh conditions that historians have labelled the policy of concentration camps in South West Africa as an extension of the German genocide. Other solutions to the labour question included the recruitment of workers from external areas such as the Cape colony, West African territories like Liberia, as well as imperial Germany itself.[18] However, these options were deemed too costly and therefore unsustainable in the long run.

Desperate for a solution to the labour question, the German colonial authority turned its attention to the northern regions of the colony, particularly to Ovamboland, 'a region inside the nominal borders of German Southwest Africa but outside the de facto control of the German colonial state'.[19] Ovamboland was not deemed worthy of German occupation. This unworthiness was generated by both the lack of mineral

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14   Likuwa and Shiweda (2017), p. 27.
15   For a detailed study on the Police Zone and the Red Line that established its boundaries, see: Miescher (2012), p. 44ff.
16   Press (2021), p. 114.
17   Ibid.
18   Ibid., p. 115.
19   Ibid., p. 117.

resources as well as the costs that would be associated with military occupation of the region, especially after the war against the Herero and Nama people. Ovamboland's 'human material' was, however, considered of 'capital value' to the budding colonial economy.[20] To this end, according to Gregor Dobler, an administrative act was adopted to regulate the movement of workers from Ovamboland into the Police Zone, requiring all migrants to be registered and issued with passes.[21] The seasonal migration southwards was, however, not a new phenomenon as the Aawambo had engaged in various economic activities in central Namibia such as the trading of cattle, trading in copper and in temporary work for the German colonial authorities such as the construction of Swakopmund harbour. The administrative act, however, formalised the seasonal migration by setting into motion 'the pattern of organised migration that would more or less remain in place until Namibian independence in 1990'.[22] The administrative act was adopted after the German colonial authorities had negotiated with the rulers of the different Aawambo polities to grant permission for labour recruiters to operate in the region and mobilise labour especially for the diamond fields. The response from these rulers was motivated by crippling ecological conditions and changing social and political relations. These agreements more or less led to the creation of a sending area for the migrant labour system in colonial Namibia. The initial recruitment of workers from the sending area was thus a collaborative act between labour recruiters and local leadership.[23]

The German colonial authority and the employers it represented, viewed Ovambo labour as a favourable solution for several reasons. Firstly, the cost of employment, which included housing, transportation and wages, was far below that which had been paid to immigrant workers from locations like the Cape colony. Secondly, the sending area would always remain home for the Aawambo who would 'theoretically leave German-controlled areas when their contracts ended…'[24] The motivation to return to the sending area at the end of the contract,

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20   Hayes (1993), p 45. https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/4235/
21   Dobler (2014), p. 16.
22   Ibid.
23   Hayes (1993), p. 58.
24   Press (2021), p. 118.

beyond family and familial relations, could be found in the conditions that workers had to endure. Press, for instance, documents harrowing tales of starved, overworked, poorly clothed, ill-housed workers exposed to unfamiliar coastal conditions, the resultant disease and subjected to the mercy of 'masters' who cared little for their wellbeing.[25]

Why those who survived these conditions would return again to engage in migrant labour has been the subject of many studies that point to the conditions (ecological and socio-economic) in the sending area itself as key among the reasons.[26] Tony Emmett, however, argues that while the ecological conditions such as drought and famine laid the foundations for the migrant labour system in colonial Namibia, 'colonial policies reshaped these ecological responses into a comprehensive system of labour control and exploitation'.[27] This was especially evident under the South African colonial period, which at the onset of its establishment gained control over Ovamboland primarily because of the ecological conditions that prevailed in the region at the time.

The Inter-War Period: Institutionalising the Contract Labour System

In 1914 South African expedition forces attacked German South West Africa on behalf of the British. Following the surrender of German colonial forces in 1915, the territory was placed under military rule. As early as 1915 the military administration sent a delegation to the royal houses of the different polities in Ovamboland with the aim of not only establishing contact and introducing the administration as the new rulers of the colony, but also to renew the labour agreements that were disrupted by the outbreak of war. Interestingly, the delegation's visit to the region was facilitated by missionaries who acted both as guides and translators for the colonial administration.[28] The establishment of relations between the new rulers and local royalty culminated in the appointment of a Native Commissioner who would represent the interests of the administration and act as a regional administrator in Ovamboland.

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25   Press (2021), p. 120.
26   Hayes (1993), p. 57. Shiweda (2017), p. 22.
27   Emmett (1999).
28   Peltola (2002).

Patricia Hayes writes that the South African 'colonial administration at its inception depended on existing mechanisms of labour organization', mechanisms that had been established during the German colonial period.[29] To this end Gregor Dobler urges us to consider 'the establishment of an administration in Ovamboland after 1915… in the context of the labour shortage the new South West Africa government had inherited from the Germans'.[30]

The new South African administration, according to Allan D. Cooper, adopted 'a policy early in its occupation of Namibia of concentrating Ovambos on the diamond mines or in work on the railways and harbours, leaving other Namibians in central and southern areas to be employed locally on farms or in domestic service'.[31] From as early as 1918 the flow of migrant labour from Ovamboland to the southern diamond mines was facilitated through Ondangwa where migrant workers were first issued a registration number and given a pass to proceed to Tsumeb or Grootfontein from where they would board trains to central and southern Namibia.[32] Up until the granting of independence to the territory in 1990, the colonial administration's investments in the rail network, connecting the north and south of the territory, only went as far as Tsumeb and Grootfontein in the north-east.

In 1920 the Union of South Africa gained mandatory powers over the then South West Africa, bringing an end to the military administration that had been in place since 1915. The granting of the mandate motivated the civilian administration to increase 'efforts to tighten procedures and recruitment' so as to turn labour recruitment into a nationally regulated institution.[33] The aim was to integrate indigenous labour, particularly male labour from the northern regions, into the colonial economy.[34] Until 1925, labour recruitment in Ovamboland was carried out by government officials through the Office of Native Affairs.[35] This system of recruitment was reorganised in 1926 when the Northern Labour Organization (NLO) and Southern Labour Organization (SLO)

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29   Hayes (1993), p. 60.
30   Dobler (2014), p. 25.
31   Cooper (1999), p. 124.
32   Dobler (2014), p. 26.
33   Hayes (1993), p. 60. Wood (1988).
34   Silvester et al. (1998), p. 33.
35   Dobler (2014), p. 26. Gewald (2003), p. 44.

were established and mandated with the responsibility of recruiting workers for the colonial economy. The creation of two distinct labour organisations was necessitated by the competition for labour between the different sectors of the colonial economy, particularly between the agricultural and mining sectors. Competition stemmed from the priority given to the mining sector, specifically to the diamond mines, because of their perceived 'superior' contribution to the GDP of the colony.

The NLO was responsible for providing the northern copper mines and the farmers in the central region with labourers.[36] These labourers were drawn predominantly from the Okavango region and from within the police-zone. The SLO, on the other hand, was established to supply labourers to the southern diamond mines and to harbour works. These workers were recruited predominantly from Ovamboland and the areas in southern Angola. Cooper writes that 'the SLO began as the institutionalisation of a labour recruitment process that had already been operating under the control of the Lüderitz Chamber of Mines'.[37] The Lüderitz Chamber of Mines was the institution through which the various diamond mines that operated during the German colonial period received their workers. The SLO, however, only had to provide workers to the Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM), the company in which all the diamond mines that operated during the German colonial period were amalgamated after the South African acquisition of the colony. These two organisations became the official channels through which labour in the colony was channelled to the various sectors. The South African administration had purposed not to recognise unofficial recruiters from the outset, charging potential employers a recruiting fee in exchange for the supply of migrant workers.[38]

The process of recruiting was done under the supervision of a state medical officer based in the main sending areas of Ovamboland and Kavango by way of a medical exam. The purpose of the medical exam was not only to determine the state of health of those who sought contract work, but also to allocate labourers to different sectors of the colonial economy by classification. Following the medical examination, potential recruits were divided into four main categories, classified as

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36   On the NLO's provision of farm workers see Moore (2021).
37   Cooper (1999) p. 129.
38   Gewald (2003), p. 233.

A, B, C or D class.[39] The Class A category was reserved for recruits considered fit for heavy work such as in the mining sector. Class B workers were considered fit for surface work and industry, in sectors such as rail and road construction and harbour work. The Class C category, on the other hand was for general and farm labour, a category predominantly reserved for under-age males.[40] The fourth category, Class D, was reserved for those deemed unfit and therefore unworthy of placement in the colonial economy.

Labour classification was eerily reminiscent of the territorial classification under the League of Nations' mandate system that classified Namibia as a C-mandate, that is, unfit to self-govern. The territory's classification was thus followed by a classification of its inhabitants, the goal of which was 'to guarantee that the strongest and healthiest workers were reserved for the exclusive use' of multinational corporations, particularly in the mining industry, aggressively exploiting the territory's mineral and human resources.[41] The classification of migrant workers was not set in stone, however, as migrant workers could move from Class C to Class A or B over time. The renumeration of migrant workers, however, was fixed at unskilled and semi-skilled levels of employment, that black workers could not exceed due to the colour-bar policies of the apartheid regime. Richard Moorsom, for instance, writes that 'all but a fraction of the work is unskilled, but some categories, particularly on the big mines, develop marketable skills through experience…'[42]

The medical examination and the process of classification was followed by the transportation of migrant workers to their places of employment. Most men would have walked for days through dense bush to get to the recruitment centre and onwards to the rail network for further transportation. Hayes writes that the German colonial authorities, and later the South African administration, had not provided rail or road infrastructure to transport workers from the northern sending areas to the Police Zone. The colonial administrations' unwillingness to invest in a rail infrastructure of northern Namibia was also echoed by the mining

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39   Grotpeter (1994).
40   Totemeyer (1978), p. 271.
41   Cooper (1999), p. 125.
42   Moorsom (1977), p. 73.

companies, who in the 1920s, had refused to invest in the provision of dependable motor transport for migrants from Ovamboland.[43] The result was that migrant workers had to travel on foot and 'the seven day journey by foot from Ondangwa to Tsumeb was almost waterless; wild animals remained a real danger'.[44] Things changed in the 1930s when the South African administration 'commissioned two private transport companies… to assist in conveying mine workers along the Namutoni route'.[45] The provision of transportation made the journeys of migrant workers less precarious. The real beneficiaries of the transport arrangement, however, were the employers and the colonial administration. The mining companies, for instance, were able to attract more workers to the mine, thereby enabling them to sign on a full complement of workers. For the benefit of the colonial administration, on the other hand, the transportation arrangement ensured that migrant workers would return to their respective sending areas at the end of their contract period.[46]

Although transportation to the recruitment centres and through the rail network meant shorter, safer trips for migrant workers, it did not necessarily translate into smoother, more comfortable travel for them.[47] In the late-1930s and the early 1940s the colonial administration decommissioned the private transport companies and introduced the 'Road Motor Services' (RMS), which provided a 'scheduled bus service along the route from Tsumeb to Oshikango via Namutoni and Ondangua'.[48] The colonial administration also invested in the improvement of the roads on this route, which led to quicker, but also costlier, journeys for the migrant workers as the cost of the RMS bus service was 'deducted in advance from the contract workers' wages.'[49]

Uncomfortable travel continued in the onward journey to places of employment. Migrant workers recruited for the diamond mines in the southern region, for instance, had to travel by rail transportation for days on end while those recruited for work on farms where dropped

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43   Dobler (2014), p. 26.
44   Hayes (1993), p. 60.
45   Miescher (2012), p. 188.
46   Ibid.
47   Ibid.
48   Ibid., p. 189.
49   Ibid.

off at railway sidings, from which they had to find their own way on foot. These means of transportation, by rail or road and, later by air for migrant workers who worked on the diamond fields of Oranjemund, also interestingly constituted potential employment for those workers who were classified under B class and were deemed fit for construction work. Indigenous labour was thus not only used to build the colonial economy but also the colony's infrastructure. The cost of transporting workers to their places of employment 'including the provision of amenities such as food and sundries, a medical exam and a recruiting fee was passed on to the employer'.[50]

Employment was provided to migrant labourers on the basis of a contract. In the early days the contracts would be established for six months, but with institutionalisation of the migrant labour system, contracts were written for periods between twelve and eighteen months. Wages paid to migrant labourers starkly differed depending on where they were employed. The mines, for example, though labour intensive, paid more for their workers than did farms. This contributed to unwillingness among Aawambo workers to accept labour contracts for farms. As Hayes notes 'greatest efforts went into avoiding farm labour', a reluctance that contributed to ongoing labour shortages on farms.[51] Moreover, migrant workers were only paid upon completion of their contract. Wages would be transferred by an employer through the Native Administration Division, that 'would administer and pay migrants upon completion of their contracts'.[52] This arrangement provided a means of ensuring that workers would not defect from their employer; it also served as a means to control the outflow of migrant labourers from the Police Zone (also referred to as influx-control).[53]

In the mid-1920s the colonial administration devised another strategy for ensuring a steady flow of migrant workers from the sending area. This strategy was devised in partnership with the diamond mining industry whose administrators 'felt that without any possibility to spend earnings at home, the incentive for men to look for wage labour was

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50   Cooper (1999), p. 122.
51   Hayes (1999) p. 60.
52   Gewald (2003), p. 233.
53   On influx control see Quinn (2021).

too weak'.[54] Migrant workers were earning wages and returning to a sending area whose economy operated on a barter system and not on a monetary system. Hayes writes that under the Germans, 'no traders were allowed into Ovamboland', and all 'commodity exchange took place internally and in kind'.[55] This practice was continued under South African martial law during which trade with the northern regions was prohibited. The new strategy for maintaining a steady flow of migrants came in the form trading stores, established in the late 1920s by the Chamber of Mines of Lüderitz. The stores would not only display modern wares aimed at enticing potential migrant workers, they would also enable returning migrant workers to exchange cash earned in the south for goods that would otherwise only be available for purchase in the central and southern regions. In the absence of rail and road infrastructure from Tsumeb to the northern regions, migrants on foot either had to carry their wares or buy donkeys for the long trek home.

Establishing trading stores also served the purpose of controlling the availability of money in the sending area. Dobler writes that not only did the trading stores charge higher prices for goods, compared to trading stores south of the sending area, but 'a good part of the shop's profit was transferred to the Chamber of Mines in Lüderitz, disguised as necessary expenses'.[56] More importantly, the outflow of revenue contributed to the stated aim of 'stimulating recruiting… by steadily draining the country of … surplus cash and thereby indirectly benefiting the labour market'.[57] Trading stores provided migrant workers with an avenue through which they could spend what would otherwise have been 'useless' earnings in the absence of a cash economy. But this very avenue would then lock them into a continuous cycle of migrant work as the only source through which they could access money. The first such stores were opened in Ovamboland in 1925, soon after which the SLO and NLO were established as labour recruitment became institutionalised.[58]

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54   Dobler (2014), p. 26.
55   Hayes (1999), p. 59.
56   Dobler (2014), p. 33.
57   Ibid., p. 35.
58   Ibid., p. 28.

Legal Mechanism for Controlling Labour

A key strategy in the colonial administration's control over labour, however, was the legal acts that were adopted especially under the South African colonial administration. These acts began with the 'Masters and Servants Act', drafted in November 1915, and signed into law in January 1916. The Masters and Servants Act 'sought to centralise and structure labour relations in the territory'.[59] The Act, which was passed under martial law, was aimed at ensuring a steady supply of workers to the colonial economy while South Africa awaited the outcome of the First World War. Once the immediate labour shortages had been dealt with, the focus of the South African administration moved to the control of the movement of migrant workers. To this end various proclamations granting employers coercive rights over their workers ensured that failure to integrate into the economy became a punishable crime.

Among these proclamations were the Mines and Works Act of 1917, the Vagrancy Proclamation No. 25 of 1920, and the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1924. Defined as 'wandering abroad with no visible means, or 'insufficient lawful means' of support' vagrancy exposed the homeless and jobless to imprisonment and fines under criminal law.[60] By 'sufficient means of support' was meant a certain amount of livestock that the colonial administration deemed sufficient enough to support the livelihood of an unemployed individual. Failure to work thus became an offence called vagrancy, one that was punishable either by imprisonment or forced labour at a wage determined by the court. Labour control thus became a centrepiece of South African colonial rule, with population influx control measures as its main feature.[61] Grotpeter concludes that 'only a job from a white employer could make an African reasonably secure from prosecution'.[62] Forced labour with public works, for instance, was a punishment reserved for first-time offenders, something the Native Administrators could determine on the basis of the possession of a pass. The pass was a form of identification,

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59   Gewald (2003), p. 231.
60   Ibid.
61   First (1963), p. 136.
62   Hishongwa (1992).

which was provided either by the recruitment officials or the employer and workers were required to carry their passes at all times.

Defined as 'a series of laws, but primarily the Native Administration Proclamation of 1922', pass laws not only regulated the movement of indigenous populations in and out of the Police Zone but also within the Zone.[63] The pass laws were, according to Grotpeter, 'a maze of official permits that were required of all male Blacks, especially the workers who wished to work and live in the Police Zone'.[64] Those not in possession of an appropriate pass were either arrested, fined, or forced to work, and as a last resort deported back to the sending area. Pass laws and vagrancy laws were thus complementary and were aimed at ensuring that migrants engaged in gainful employment with white employers. The gravity of such a control mechanism is invoked in a description submitted by Ruth First that is worth quoting in full.

> *Men are "handcuffed" by slips of paper. They must have permits to seek work, permits to be in the area for any purpose other than to seek work, service contracts to prove that they are working… Passes constitute their licence to live… No African in the Police Zone may buy a railway ticket without a pass issued by his employer or an authorised official. No African in a Reserve may leave it except by permit or in order to work for a White employer. Men have been reduced to mere labour units.[65]*

Hayes notes that by 1918, the 'slips of paper' issued to migrant workers, which had been used since the German colonial period, were replaced by metal disks producing the Oshiwambo colloquial terms odalate (a corruption of the Afrikaans word "draad", meaning wire[66]) or okaholo.[67] The term odalate stemmed from the view that the contract system was not an 'agreement between an employer and the employee' but rather 'between SWANLA and the employer'.[68] The SWANLA-

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63   Grotpeter (1994), p. 270.
64   Ibid., p. 401.
65   First (1963), p. 136.
66   Dekker et al. (1974), p. 230.
67   Hayes (1993), p. 60.
68   Kane-Berman (1972), Appendix III: The Mass Meeting of Ovambos held to Discuss the Contract System at Oluno – Ondangwa on the January, 1972, p. xi.

employer arrangement further led to the view that the Aawambo had become 'slaves of SWANLA and the employer, and because of this wrong and bad system this agreement has been changed into wire [oda-late] instead of the contract'.[69]

SWANLA and the General Strike of 1971–72

In the early 1940s, at the height of the Second World War, troubles began to emerge in the labour recruitment system in Namibia. Until this time the mining industry, especially diamond mines, had enjoyed priority in terms of labour distribution because of their contribution to the colony's GDP. The economic depression of the late 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War, however, brought the mining industry, including diamond mining to a standstill.[70] During the same period the agricultural sector began to thrive with Karakul farming becoming 'the new mainstay of the territory's economy'.[71] This change in fortunes led to plans for the creation of a recruiting organisation that would prioritise the farming community. With the mining industry in a standstill, the creation of a Farmers' Recruiting Organisation would have been achieved had it not been for the colonial administration's vested interest in maintaining control over the supply of labour to the colonial economy. In 1942, the colonial administration called for a meeting with the Southern and Northern Labour Organisations to review the future of the migrant labour system in the territory. A key outcome of this meeting was the decision to merge the Northern Labour Organisation and Southern Labour Organisation. The merger led to the formation of the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA), aimed at maintaining the interests of the South African administration and particularly the administration's control over the distribution of labour in the territory.[72]

The establishment of SWANLA initiated what can be identified as the third period in the history of the migrant labour system in Namibia.

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69   Kane-Berman (1972), Appendix III, p. xi
70   Silvester (1993) notes that the contributions of the agricultural sector to the GDP far exceeded those of the mining sector in the period 1936-1945.
71   Dobler (2014), p. 58.
72   Silvester (1993).

SWANLA, according to Cooper, 'inherited the responsibility of maintaining control over the supply of African labour, as well as maintaining the dominance of the diamond industry in Namibia'.[73] The aim was to ensure that when the war was over the diamond industry would be able to enjoy priority in the distribution of labour. Dobler, however, posits that SWANLA differed from the SLO and the NLO in that it 'represented the entirety of white employers' including those from the farming, fishing, construction and mining sectors and not just the diamond mines as had been the case with the SLO.[74] As did its predecessors, SWANLA operated recruitment offices in the main sending areas of Ovamboland and Kavango where the classification and medical examinations of workers continued. Migrant workers from southern Angola were also recruited at these recruitment offices. In differentiating Angolans from Namibians, the South African administration referred to migrant workers from Angola as Extra-Territorial Natives (ET Natives), as opposed to migrant workers from the Northern Native Territories (NNT).[75]

SWANLA's task of recruiting workers also came with the responsibility of enticing new workers and ensuring a continuous flow of workers to the colonial economy. In 1943, the trading stores that were established in Ovamboland by the Chamber of Mines of Lüderitz and operated through the SLO were taken over by SWANLA, who according to Moorsom 'had a retail monopoly in Ovamboland until the 1950s and a wholesale monopoly until the late 1960s'.[76] Through this monopoly and the control of the trading stores, SWANLA 'was able not only to recover the high costs of transport to Ovamboland but also to extract super-profits from local consumers to subsidise recruiting operations'.[77] These trading stores were located near SWANLA's recruitment offices where potential migrants and returning migrants would begin and end their journey. This proximity confirms Dobler's assertion that the stores were 'directly linked to recruiting'.[78] The trading stores thus served the purpose of enticing workers into the contract labour system and of pro-

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73   Cooper (1999), p. 137.
74   Dobler (2014), p. 58.
75   Miescher (2012), p. 130.
76   See Moorsom (1977), p. 65. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2636587
77   Moorsom (1977), p. 65.
78   Dobler (2014), p. 55.

viding the labour-recruitment agency with a means of securing profits from its operations.

The contract labour recruitment system under SWANLA remained in operation until the 1970s. Unlike the merger of the 1940s, SWANLA's demise was associated with workers' demands that culminated in an unprecedented general strike. The general strike, according to Kane-Berman, 'began on 13 December 1971 with some 6,000 Ovambos in the compound in the township of Katutura outside Windhoek' and by 'mid-January [1972] about 13,500 workers at some 23 centres were on strike, bringing seven or eight mines to a standstill'.[79] The general strike was organised under the slogan 'Odalate naiteke' (the wire must break).[80] In referring to the contract labour system as odalate, migrant workers 'talked in terms of being handcuffed by the contracts, whose terms were established unilaterally by the employers' agency, SWANLA'.[81] The process of recruitment under SWANLA and especially the dehumanising methods of classification for work placements, coupled with the overall working conditions for migrant workers in the colonial economy, were all factors that contributed to the outbreak of the general strike. Migrant workers were also dissatisfied with the low wages paid by employers and their inability to freely choose an employer. Other grievances included opposition to the pass laws, which prohibited free movement to and from the sending areas into the police zone as well the 'compulsor[y] repatriat[ion] to Ovambo when their contracts expired instead of being allowed to stay in 'white' areas to look for new employment.[82]

According to Kane-Berman 'the catalyst [for the strike] was … the remark of the Commissioner-General, De Wet, that the system could not be described as slavery because the Ovambos entered freely into their contracts'.[83] De Wet's statement was contradicted by the workers who began their strike by 'handing in their contracts' to show that they rejected the system.[84] The general strike, according to LaRRI 'brought the mining industry to a halt and seriously affected farming and com-

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79   Kane-Berman (1972), pp. 5-6.
80   Labour Resource and Research Institute (2010), pp. 14-15.
81   Dekker et al. (1974), p. 230.
82   Ibid.
83   Kane-Berman (1972), p. 23.
84   Ibid.

merce as well as communications and transport systems' as workers broke contract and returned to their respective sending areas.[85] The colonial administration pleaded with the workers in centres like Windhoek and Walvis Bay to go back to work but most, if not all, the workers demanded to be repatriated to Ovamboland. Dekker et al. write that 'nearly all the strikers were repatriated [and] the economy was severely affected; while … employers made largely fruitless attempts to recruit other contract labour from places as far away as Lesotho and the North Western Cape'.[86] At the end of the strike the repatriated workers formed a committee to present their grievances to the colonial administration and to represent them in negotiations with the administration and representatives of the employers.[87]

Unsurprisingly, the main demand of the striking workers was for the abolishment of the contract labour system that had been in operation under SWANLA for close to three decades. Dekker et al. write that 'resentment against the contract system and pass laws [was] a major potential source of African collective action in… South West Africa… and provides grounds for industrial-cum-political action among migrant workers…'[88] It was this resentment that led to the demand for the abolishment of the migrant labour system. Other worker demands included:

The ability to choose their own employment without police interference; the right to live with their families; payment of salaries according to merit and according to the work done, regardless of the person's colour; the abolition of the pass law system; [sufficient payment] to buy their own food and pay for their own transport (instead of being dependent on employer's hand-outs); [the] establishment of employment bureaux in the 'homelands' and in all towns, with free advertising of vacancies to enable workers to look for jobs of their choice; and lastly the creation of new jobs by the government.[89]

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85   Labour Resource and Research Institute (2010), p. 14.
86   Dekker et al. (1974) p. 230.
87   For a detailed report on the formation of the workers' committee and the outcomes of their meetings see Kane-Berman (1972).
88   Dekker et al. (1974), p. 209.
89   Labour Research and Resource Institute (2010), p. 16.

Simply put, the underlying demand was for freedom, 'freedom of movement (for themselves and their families) and a free labour market' none of which could conceivably be granted by the regime.[90] Still, the representatives of the striking workers met with members of the colonial administration in early 1972. Dekker et al., write that 'just what occurred at [these meetings in] Grootfontein is not entirely clear, but it appears that minor concessions were hammered out between white employers and the South African Department of Bantu Development, and that the revised contract terms were then submitted to' and approved by the representatives of the striking workers, where after 'a revised contract system was introduced [which] differed little in essentials from the previous one'.[91] The more things change, the more they stay the same is an expression that comes to mind in the context of these events of 1972.[92]

It is, however, noteworthy that the general strike took place at the end of 1971, a year after the United Nations Security Council declared that the South African regime's continued presence in Namibia was illegal and sought an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice to this effect. The timing of the strike attests to Dekker et al.'s observations on the 'industrial-cum-political action' that emerges from the resentment of workers.[93] South Africa's mandate to administer Namibia, which was granted in 1920, was revoked by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, which resulted in the Security Council's declaration that 'all acts taken by the Government of South Africa on behalf of or concerning Namibia after the termination of the Mandate [in 1966] are illegal and invalid'.[94] A countrywide workers' strike thus served to confirm for the international community that South African rule in Namibia was oppressive to the very people it had been entrusted to prepare for independence, thereby justifying the decision to revoke

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90   Dekker et al. (1974), p. 231.
91   Ibid.
92   "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster.
93   United Nations Security Council Resolution 276 (1970, January). www.digitallibrary.un.org.
94   Ibid. Also see: United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2145 (XXI) Question of South West Africa, (27 October 1966). http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/UNGA/1966/13.pdf. Accessed 28 May 2020.

the South African mandate and to declare South African rule illegal.[95] Writing in 1972, for instance, Barbara Rogers asserts that the general strike 'was clearly a political strike, directed against the whole system built on contract labour' and against South Africa's continued occupation of Namibia.[96]

The Labour Bureaux 1972–1990

In accordance with the migrant workers' demands, SWANLA was abolished and 'replaced by the Bantustan [homeland] authorities, which [had] to provide labour bureaux'.[97] SWANLA's responsibility to recruit workers for the colonial economy would from then on be facilitated through the labour bureaux. Stephanie Quinn, however, points out that although 'the historiography of Namibia has asserted a causal relationship between the 1971-72 general strike' and the abolishment of SWANLA, the South African colonial authorities 'had already been debating SWANLA's abolition for some 15 years'.[98] Discussions on the abolishment of SWANLA centred around questions of 'rising urban influx control violations by northern contract labourers and Police Zone residents alike. When the Minister of Native Affairs, Verwoerd, first proposed replacing SWANLA with a territory-wide system of labour bureaux in the mid-1950s, he envisaged the plan as a solution for problems of labour supply and distribution'.[99] When the plan of establishing labour bureaux was finally implemented in 1969 and presented as a solution to the demands of the workers in 1972, it became evident that the control over labour and its distribution within the colonial economy remained the prerogative of the colonial authorities despite changes to the organisations through which such labour was facilitated.

Needless to say that SWANLA might have been abolished but the migrant labour system and its control mechanisms remained in place. The pass system, for instance, remained in place until 1977 when the

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95   Labour Research and Resource Institute (2010), p. 15.
96   Rogers. (1972), p. 5.
97   Kane-Berman (1972), p. 7. According to Kane-Berman (1972, p. 11) 'there [were] seven labour bureaux in Ovamboland (Ondangwa being the main one) and five in Kavango'.
98   Quinn (2021).
99   Ibid., p. 60.

South African administration 'repealed some of the most hated sections of the Namibian pass laws [and] Africans were no longer required to carry passes and could remain in an urban area for more than 72 hours without a permit'.[100] Moreover, even though migrant workers could choose their employers, the employers were still legally obligated to report to the colonial administration on their recruits and the contract periods granted to each migrant worker. The colonial administration was thus able to record the movement of migrant workers from the sending areas to the police zone and vice versa. Migrant workers were also obligated to live 'in the closed, barrack-like bachelor compounds appended to most mines and municipalities' and could thus not take their families with them.[101] Freedom of movement for migrant workers and their families had in the end not been achieved.

Despite the fact that circumstances remained the same, there were some noteworthy changes in the migrant labour system after 1972. In the revised contract, for instance, 'the terms "master" and "servant" [were] replaced by "employer" and "employee" in response to the demand for a more equitable contract.[102] Another major change was that migrant workers could 'enter into a new contract with the same or another employer when the original one expires, instead of being compulsorily repatriated to the reserve, as was the case before'.[103] This, however, meant working for longer contract periods albeit with the option of 'unpaid home leave during [the] period of service' under the revised contract labour system.[104] The colonial administration encouraged employers to allow migrant workers to take unpaid leave, arguing that 'the fact that leave during the period of services was unpaid and that the man would have to pay his own transport home would … prevent the abuse of this practice'.[105] Migrant workers could also 'terminate their contracts by submitting notice and then looking for other jobs in the same area without being compulsorily repatriated, as [it occurred] under the SWANLA

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100   See Green (1987), p. 4. https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record-Files/210-849-30357/al.sff.document.af000042.pdf
101   Moorsom (1977), p. 79.
102   Kane-Berman (1972), p. 7.
103   Ibid., p. 8.
104   Ibid.
105   Ibid.

system'.[106] The termination of work contracts was, however, contingent upon conditions stipulated in 'the Employment Bureaux Regulations of 30 March 1972' which required migrant workers to report to the labour bureaux located in their area of employment and only avail their labour to another employer through the labour bureaux.[107]

Other changes included the establishment of trade unions that would represent migrant workers in industrial relations with their employers. Unionisation was previously banned for black workers in Namibia and indeed South Africa. Dekker et al. write that:

> *The cornerstone of the South African [and by extension Namibia] industrial relations system is the Industrial Conciliation Act, which bestows statutory recognition on trade unions, affords them recourse to conciliation and arbitration machinery at their request, and provides for the setting up of statutory collective bargaining institutions termed industrial councils. From this system, Africans are explicitly excluded.[108]*

In Namibia, the exclusion from organised industrial relations persisted into the 1970s and the early 1980s. Indeed, the general strike of 1971-1972 was not organised by a trade union representing black migrant workers. Change, however, came in the late 1970s when the South African colonial administration began to recognise and register trade unions representing migrant workers in Namibia. Pippa Green writes that '1978 saw changes in Namibian labour legislation which allowed African trade unions to register for the first time'.[109] The new labour legislation, however, included a 'clause prohibiting affiliation of unions to political parties [which served to exclude] a national union formed some eight years earlier', [namely] 'the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) [which] was formed by SWAPO in 1970, but operated quietly until the labour reforms were announced'.[110] Following the amendments to the labour legislation in 1978 'NUNW began mobilizing on a national scale, establishing a head office in Windhoek and

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106 Dekker et al. (1974), p. 231.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., p. 209.
109 Green (1987), p. 4.
110 Ibid.

hiring several full time organizers'.[111] This hype of activity only lasted until 1980 when the colonial administration made the decision to close the offices of the NUNW, along with those of SWAPO, thus enforcing the clause prohibiting the operation of politically affiliated trade unions.

The doors to unionisation had, however, already been opened to Namibian workers and in November 1986 the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) was established. Prior to MUN, industrial relations on the mines were addressed through 'workers' committees' and it was these committees that came together in 1986 to form MUN.[112] Between 1986 and 1988 MUN gained representation in all the mines operating during that period. Some of MUN's aims were 'to campaign for higher wages, better living and working conditions'.[113] The union also concerned itself with the health and wellbeing of mineworkers, as was the case at the Rössing Uranium mine.[114] Other unions established around the same time included the 'Namibia Food and Allied Union (NAFAU), which … was launched in September 1986', 'the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU) which was established in May 1987' and 'the Namibian Public Workers' Union (NAPWU)', established in December 1987. The establishment of these trade unions in the 1980s and the industrial action that arose from their activities was a notable change to the migrant labour system of the foregoing decades. The final notable change in the migrant labour system came with the granting of Namibian independence in 1990, namely, the abolishment of the migrant labour system and of labour hire practices by the government of an independent Namibia.[115]

Conclusion

This chapter provides a historical overview of the introduction of the migrant labour system in colonial Namibia and the creation of the sending area of Ovamboland. It posits that these events in the migrant labour history of Namibia can be studied under three main periods: one, the

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111   Ibid.
112   Ibid., p. 5.
113   Ibid.
114   Ndahangwapo (2025).
115   See Botes (2013). https://www.ajol.info/index.php/pelj/article/view/88760

German colonial period, and its demand for labour following the 1904-1908 genocide against the Herero and Nama; two, the interwar period, or post-First-World-War period, when the territory was governed under martial law when a South African military government endeavoured to revive the nascent colonial economy by institutionalising the migrant labour system in territory; and lastly, the post-Second-World-War period that witnessed the merger between the processes of recruitment so as to represent the interests of the wider colonial economy. Duncan Ines argues that 'the contract labour system was developed in Namibia to govern the supply of labour to the centres of capitalist production.'[116] Governing supply entailed ensuring that the colonial economy's labour needs were met, whether on farms, mines, or colonial infrastructural projects. Governing supply also meant controlling supply, especially the movement of migrants who were registered, medically examined and issued a pass that would allow them to travel to their places of employment. Governance also entailed enticing prospective workers to enlist for migrant work and for returning workers to accept a new contract period. Strategies like the establishment of trading shops in the sending area were used to both entice and restrict the availability of cash in the sending area. To purchase goods migrant workers needed cash and cash could only be accessed through migrant work in the colonial economy. Colonial policies such as these were thus utilised to ensure a system of labour supply, control and exploitation. These systems were challenged by those they sought to restrict. Events in the 1970s not only proclaimed the views of the oppressed, they also led to limited changes in the existent system. Actual change for migrant workers, as for the territory, eventually came in the 1980s and 1990s.

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116   Ines (1977), p. 47.

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Chapter 2

The Seasonal Migrant in Twentieth-Century Switzerland: The Harm to Foreigners and to the International Reputation of the Swiss Confederation

Sandro Rinauro

For decades, the condition of seasonal labour migrants in Switzerland has fuelled a negative image of the Swiss Confederation amongst both the foreign workers themselves and their countries of origin.[1] Indeed, alongside the clichés of a country of banks, watches, chocolate and high wages, the circumstances suffered by seasonal workers are probably the one issue that has most influenced the very image of Switzerland abroad. Given that, from 1941 to the end of the 1980s, Italy was by far the largest reservoir of migrant labour for the Swiss Confederation, the seasonal worker statute affecting and disrupting the lives of most Italian immigrants. It is therefore not surprising that a work such as *Pane e Cioccolata* [Bread and Chocolate], Franco Brusati's well known film released in 1973, that depicts the misfortunes of seasonal worker Nino Garofoli, has long tarnished Switzerland's reputation in Italy. Parallel to seasonal workers' conditions, are associated horrific memories of immigrants' shacks, of the precariousness and uncertainty of their existence, of the thousands of clandestine children of seasonal workers and the memory of the Mattmark disaster that occurred in 1965 in the Swiss Alps—one of the most serious accidents suffered by Italian emi-

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1   The terms 'Switzerland' and 'Swiss Confederation' are used interchangeably in this text. The latter term is the official name of the country, that gives rise to the abbreviation 'CH' (from Latin Confoederatio Helvetica) for Switzerland.

grants in the post-war period.[2] Beyond these damning conditions and occurrences, the Swiss Confederation was the only country, among the many inhabited by workers from Southern Europe, to have gone so far as to hold popular referendums to drive out foreigners, especially focusing on Italians.[3]

In the 1970s, migrant workers, together with a more progressive segment of Swiss society, mobilised to abolish the seasonal workers' statute, but in 1981, most of the citizens who voted at the referendums rejected this movement towards more humane treatment. The comparison with the countries of the European Economic Community (EEC), which had already granted free movement to workers from the EEC since 1961 and shortly afterwards, liberalised their policies allowing family reunification for these workers, further worsened Switzerland's international image. When the Swiss Confederation finally abolished the seasonal worker statute in 2002, following the free-movement agreement with the European Union, a considerable number of Italian and EU immigrants had already been granted residence permits due to the duration of their presence and, therefore, the statute's abolition—unbelievably late and no longer crucial to the lives of EU migrants as it was—could not rehabilitate the image of the Swiss Confederation in the eyes of the many Nino Garofolis, the main protagonist in *Pane e Cioccolata,* who had lived through Mattmark or the Schwarzenbach Initiative years and those of the now adult 'clandestine' (or hidden) children.[4] The seasonal workers' statute, was therefore not only a regulatory product of a very Swiss way of conceptualising foreign presence, it was also a factor that did damage to the Swiss government's international image.

The adoption of the seasonal workers' statute in 1931 was not an isolated and therefore peculiar phenomenon, though. In fact, it was a testament to how Switzerland, too, was part of an international trend to increase restrictions on foreign migration that had begun in the aftermath of the First World War. In 1917, still during the war, the United States had, for example, adopted the literacy test, a brief examination administered to foreigners upon their arrival, aimed at singling out

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2   In August 1965, a glacier collapsed near the Mattmark Dam construction site that claimed the lives of 88 workers, 56 of whom were Italian nationals.

3   For more on the so-called 'Schwarzenbach Inititiative', see the introduction to this volume.

4   On the 'hidden' children, see Chapter 4 of this volume.

and repatriating illiterate individuals, who at that time arrived from the Mediterranean and Balkan areas of Europe. On several occasions, starting in 1921, the United States adopted quota acts that imposed an overall annual entry quota of foreigners within which further quotas were allocated to different nationalities on the basis of their presumed degree of assimilability. The most generous quotas were allocated to workers from northwestern European nations, the smallest quotas to those from Mediterranean countries and Eastern Europe. These restrictions had obviously been inspired by an ethnic hierarchy that distinguished between desirable and undesirable people, like the one that had fueled the U.S. nativist movement for decades by that point. In any case, this scenario had marked the first implementation of an annual entry-quota system, which—whether justified by ethnic discrimination or market reasons—has remained a constant in Western countries until the immigration policies of the present day. The U.S. quota system was immediately adopted by Canada, which from 1922, restricted immigration almost exclusively to Commonwealth citizens and from 1931 almost exclusively to British and U.S. citizens. From 1934, Brazil had also adopted annual entry quotas.[5]

With quotas, another restriction that became common in the years immediately following the First World War, was possession of the so-called 'preventive-labour contract' upon entry, meaning that people could only legally enter (western) countries if they carried a contract or a had proof of a reliable guarantee of employment before arrival. This restriction was also a precaution recommended by some of the countries of origin of migrants. In the case of the Italian state, for example, as early as 1910, the possession of a work contract prior to expatriation became one of the criteria for distinguishing between legal and illegal emigrants. The Swiss Confederation adopted this requirement of a preventive-labor contract upon entry for foreigners seeking a (temporary) residence permit in 1921. During the same period, Switzerland implemented some of the guidelines for foreigners that would remain in force during the post-war years. In 1917, the foreigners' police

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5   For restrictive U.S. immigration policy and the nativist movement see: Sori (1979), pp. 419-422; Martellone (1980); Higam (1965); Divine (1957); Hutchinson (1981); Tichenor (2003); De Clementi (2002), pp. 428-430; Audenino & Tirabassi (2008), pp. 79-83; Luconi & Pretelli (2008), pp. 95-99, 111-115.

[*Fremdenpolizei*] was established. In 1919, the entry and residence of migrants became subject to controls by this foreigners' police, and in 1925, the power over entry, exit, residence and domicile were delegated by the cantons (the regions of Switzerland) to the federal government.[6]

Another parallel between a Swiss and an internationally imposed rise in restrictions was the intensification of xenophobia, which was, after all, one of the first causes for restrictions. In the case of the U.S., xenophobia and nativist movements, hostile especially to Asians and new migration from southern and eastern Europe, had already been present for decades. The Chinese Exclusion Act, that ensured the radical reduction of Chinese immigration, came in 1882; The agreement with Japan, for the radical restriction of Japanese immigration, was in 1907. But it was only in the 1920s that increasing labor productivity through the spread of the assembly line, finally allowed for the implementation of long-rumored policies limiting arrivals (in the form of the aforementioned quota acts). Similarly, in the case of Switzerland, xenophobia had been widespread for decades. For example, in 1896 popular uprisings in Zurich, Bern and Basel led to the expulsion of numerous Italians. However, the public debate on *Überfremdung* (roughly translated: over-foreignisation)—the fear of a dilution of Swiss identity aroused by the abundance of immigrants—only really took off in 1912, i.e., on the eve of the aforementioned restrictions.[7]

It was, however, the Great Depression that unleashed in the West, not only the most intense years of xenophobic sentiments, but also led to the most radical immigration policy restrictions, that remained in force even after the Second World War. Mass layoffs of citizens would be detrimental to electoral politics, and as a result, in the 1930s, the trend to lay off foreigners before citizens, began. For example, France imposed massive layoffs and forced repatriation of Polish miners[8]. Meanwhile, maximum percentages of foreigners permissible per economic sector and per enterprise were adopted, and the right of first-refusal of job offers on the part of citizens introduced, again in France, for example,

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6   Ricciardi (2018), pp. 44-45; Arlettaz, G. & Arlettaz, S. (2004).
7   Bory-Lungon (1987); Arlettaz, G. & Arlettaz, S. (2004), pp. 88-94; Ricciardi (2018), p. 45.
8   Ponty (2005); Noiriel (2007), pp. 400-401.

with the law of August 10, 1932.[9] Finally, an effort to make foreigners' presence as precarious as possible, introducing a seasonal-worker system that overwhelmingly relied on fixed-term employment contracts and linking them to short-term—seasonal and annual—residence permits was made. It was especially in the context of economic crisis that Switzerland adopted the seasonal workers' statute in 1931, in combination with adoption of the act on residence and settlement, whose purpose was to impede foreigners' transition from temporary residential status to permanent status as much as possible.[10]

In the years between the world wars, the adoption of restrictions by the main countries of destination among Italian emigrants, was relatively insignificant, as first and foremost, the very bad economic situation hindered departures. In fact, between 1900 and 1914 the exodus of Italians had numbered almost 600,000 expatriates per year, in the 1930s this number plummeted to 70,000![11] Also contributing to the sharp reduction in expatriations was the Italian government's change in attitude towards emigration. From the 1890s onward the ruling class had urged mass emigration, both to mitigate class conflict and to increase financial and currency revenues from emigration remittances. In the 1930s the fascist regime had opposed mass exodus both for reasons of national prestige and to promote growth of the Italian population that would serve colonial and military enterprises. To these ends, the fascist regime allowed short-term emigration of single adults, while hindering permanent emigration and that of couples and families.[12] From this point of view, then, the years of the Great Depression produced an implicit convergence between the migration policy of the Italian government and that of the main destination countries, since the purpose of both was to limit permanent migration, especially of families.

Between the Great Depression and after the Second World War, however, the status of the seasonal worker partially changed its purpose. In the 1930s the main motive was freedom to lay off surplus labor as soon as the supply fell to create so-called 'buffer immigration'. A

9   Singer-Kerel (1989); Noiriel (2007), pp. 361-370.
10   Cerutti (1994), pp. 15-20; Piguet and Mahnig (2000); Arlettaz, G. & Arlettaz, S. (2004), pp. 100, 119.
11   Rosoli (1978), pp. 26-28; Istat (1968), p. 28.
12   Franzina & Sanfilippo (2003); Bertonha (2001), pp. 38-60.

lot of foreigners would be hired in economically stabile times, but on precarious terms, so that they could immediately be laid off during economic decline. This scenario, next to protecting the employment of citizens, secured electoral support during mass layoffs and, since precarious foreigners were not allowed to be accompanied by their families, lowered welfare costs and improved the employment rate of citizens. Moreover, in crisis years this system facilitated export of domestic unemployment by passing responsibility for the unemployed on the welfare systems of migrants' home countries. In contrast to the 1930s, in the years of reconstruction and the so-called 'economic miracle' of post-war Western Europe, the demand for a foreign workforce, grew steadily for a long time. Thus, from an economic point of view, the destabilisation of the status of foreigners was no longer justified as it had been previously. To retain their precarious status, indeed to expand it after the war, was no longer driven by the above-mentioned economic and political goals, it was mainly to prevent foreigners from integrating with the citizenry. Until the mid-1960s, and for large segments of the Swiss population, the number of foreigners was of no concern, as long as they did not become 'rooted', that is, as long as they would not alter the imagined traditional cultural Swiss identity by way of a more permanent presence. To achieve this goal, the seasonal worker statute was the perfect tool, i.e. a foreign worker stayed for nine months out of the year and, in most cases, maintained residence for two or three years in a row at most, after which he repatriated permanently (or emigrated to other countries) and was replaced by new immigrants who took temporary residency in the Swiss Confederation. The same was applicable to a good portion of annual immigrants, since just when they were about to reach the number of consecutive years of presence in Switzerland required to obtain full domicile, they were dismissed by their companies under pressure from the foreigners' police. The seasonal status, in short, elicited a huge turn-over of foreigners thus realising the goal of making Switzerland a country of immigration but not of immigrants. The seasonal workers' statute was the main instrument for creating *Gastarbeiter*, or 'guest workers', who, to the people of post-war Switzerland, would constitute the majority of foreigners.

The 1948 emigration treaty with Italy fully exemplified the objective of precarious immigration, specifying that immigration should be

almost exclusively temporary.[13] To that end, that same treaty was later applied to subsequent immigrant groups from Spain, Portugal, Greece and Yugoslavia. Even general language conventions reveal a Swiss intent to prevent the permanent status and integration of immigrants. On construction sites and in factories, foreigners were not induced to learn French or German. On the contrary, Swiss technical managers and entrepreneurs learned Italian in order to communicate with workers who, for the most part, would leave after a few months or years anyway. This was such an ingrained Swiss conception of foreign presence that Italian became the lingua franca at the workplaces for all foreign nationalities and was used to communicate with subsequent waves of Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and Yugoslav migrant workers.[14] The price, in human terms, demanded of foreigners in order to achieve the desired turn-over aimed at avoiding *Überfremdung* was, however, extremely high. Namely, in order to prevent the permanent residence status and entrenchment of foreigners, seasonal workers had no right to have their families live with them, nor did they have the opportunity to get emotionally involved with the Swiss population. Furthermore, spatial segregation was imposed by forcing most foreign workers to live in company housing (that were often shacks), located on the fringes of urban peripheries, or often in total isolation around construction sites in the high mountains. In this way spatial segregation was imposed whose aim was to prevent contact with native Swiss. Once the short period of a work contract had expired, nothing else bound the foreigner to Switzerland and above all, the impossibility of being joined by family forced the seasonal worker to return home, often permanently.

Those who could not bear separation from their loved ones, and those who tried to extend their residence in the hope of obtaining permanent status, circumvented the prohibition by being joined by spouses on an unofficial, or undeclared basis. Wives obtained employment in Switzerland, but did not declare conjugal ties with their husbands who were already in the country. When the spouses met, the foreigners' police, unaware of the conjugal ties, suspected mere concubinage, which was tolerated, unlike conjugal cohabitation.[15] When, on the other

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13   Castro (2008).
14   Schmid (1994).
15   The fact that women in Italy retained their surnames after marriage eased the

hand, seasonal workers arranged to have their children join them, these would arrive clandestinely, often crossing the border hidden in the boots of cars. In order to prevent being discovered, they lived in hiding and did not venture beyond their homes, could not attend public schools or socialise with other children, constantly in fear of repatriation or that of at least one of the parents. The consequences for their existence, prevented from socialising with peers or attending school, would be severe, not to mention the lingering psychological trauma, caused by fear of deportation or separation from their parents.[16]

During the 1950s and 1960s this attitude towards migrants became only more radical in Switzerland. In other primary destinations of Mediterranean and Balkan migrants, the restrictions of the inter-war years and the immediate post-Second World War period were instead weakened. In 1965 the United States, in the midst of the civil rights movement and on the eve of the 1967–1968 protests, abolished the Quota Acts of the 1920s, now considered an anachronistic xenophobic legacy. Since 1951 Canada had put an end to the almost exclusive limitation to Anglo-Saxon immigrants, while in the same year Australia signed an immigration treaty with Italy. Beyond these changes, in 1961 the EEC adopted its code of free movement of community workers and from 1964 removed almost entirely the limits on family reunification of EEC migrants. In 1961, the European Social Charter had already recognised the right of EEC migrants to family reunification, a right that was also endorsed by the 1977 European Convention on Migrant Workers. West-Germany, which from the 1960s had become a main destination of European migrants alongside Switzerland and France, also had pursued the creation of *Gastarbeiter*, but was forced to formally renounce it due to the advent of the EEC code of free movement. France, on the other hand, had been pursuing the objective of predominantly definitive European immigration since 1945, especially favouring family reunions, both to counter demographic decline after the war and as a deterrent to North African immigration. Finally, in Belgium the increasing closure of mines and the consequent depopulation of mining

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circumstances for separated couples.

16   Frigerio & Burgher (1992); Frigerio (2012). For the poor housing and living conditions of Italian seasonal and annual workers, see Castelnuovo Frigessi (1977); Niederberger (2004), pp. 93-95; Favero & Rosoli (1975); Ricciardi (2018), pp. 187-206. See also Marcu in this volume.

regions led Brussels to favour the permanent settlement of European immigrants from the 1960s onwards.[17]

Amongst other things, these advances in stability and freedom of movement that had been achieved elsewhere, urged post-Second World War Italian governments to request Switzerland for a profound modification of the 1948 emigration treaty that would guarantee more stability, permanence and affectivity for Italians in the Confederation. This leaning also stemmed from the fact that, since the immediate post-war period, Italian migration policy had abandoned earlier fascist distrust and restrictions regarding emigration and had reverted to the radical acceptance of mass exodus typical of the pre-fascist, liberal, monarchic Italy. This orientation was aimed to mitigate the class conflict that radicalised competition between moderate governments and the Communist Party, and to offload the unemployed masses aroused by the restructuring of the Italian production system abroad. Post-war Italian governments realised that precarious emigration, such as that to Switzerland and the great deterrent to definitive expatriation represented by Swiss restrictions on family reunions, hindered the objective of maximising emigration, not to mention the blow to national pride caused by the humiliating conditions of Italians in Switzerland.[18] It was therefore that, in 1964, Italy, largely supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), managed to wrest from Switzerland a new emigration treaty that shortened the length of time required to pass from seasonal to annual status and from annual status to permanent residence with the right to family reunion. This concession was a worrying precedent for many Swiss citizens, since

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17   For these relaxations of previous restrictions on immigrants, see Rinauro (2024), as well as Fibbi & Wanner (Eds.) (2020), p. 33. Switzerland, like other Western European countries, also tried for a long time to give preference to Western European immigrants in order to avoid national groups (originating especially from former European colonies) that were considered more culturally distant. At least in the case of France, it was evident how the fear of the gradual arrival of North Africans fuelled a preference for Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese, which helped to mitigate the deep-rooted and traditional prejudices against southern Europeans and especially Italians. See Rinauro (2009), pp. 163, 188-190, and Pereira (2012), pp. 226, 237-238.

18   For the radical pro-mass emigration policy of the governments of post-fascist Italy see Rinauro (2009), pp. 27-53, and Colucci (2008).

rights won by Italians were soon demanded by other communities of Western Europe, who ultimately obtained them in 1967.[19]

Given the Swiss predilection for Gastarbeiter, what on paper seemed to be a success for the countries of origin, instead triggered the most hostile xenophobic phase in Swiss public opinion. As I mentioned above regarding pre-1965, the significant presence of foreigners did not worry the Swiss particularly because, in most cases, immigrants did not stay long. The easier transition from seasonal to permanent status and the more liberal stance regarding family reunification, however, increased the percentage of foreigners with permanent residence. This shift unleashed the never-quenched fear of *Überfremdung*. Xenophobic movements began organizing and, under the leadership of former Nazi sympathiser and publisher, James Schwarzenbach, launched no less than three referendums calling for the radical reduction of foreigners. The referendums were intended to limit the presence of all foreigners, but since Italians accounted for about 70 per cent of foreigners in Switzerland at that time, and thus a xenophobic reaction was especially stimulated in contact with Italians, those referendums were perceived by the Italian public and the immigrants from Italy as especially 'anti-Italian'. The Federal Council, Switzerland's highest executive authority, succeeded in having two of these referendums withdrawn, but the one that was actually put to the vote in 1970, only narrowly recorded the defeat of the xenophobes.[20] For its part, the Federal Council pursued a strategy of compromise between business circles (which rejected quantitative limits on immigration), xenophobic public opinion (that aspired to a drastic reduction of foreigners) and immigrants, the Italian state and the OECD (which demanded more stability and the right to family reunification). On the one hand, the Federal Council put a ceiling on the number of arrivals and presence of foreigners, while on the other, it pandered to the demand for a stable workforce by favouring integration in the realms of labour and education for the most entrenched group of foreigners. This position formed the so-called 'stabilisation' policy that partly repudiated the traditional model of the *Gastarbeiter*.

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19   Arlettaz, G. & Arlettaz, S. (2004), p.128. For Spain's pressure to obtain the same treatment won by the Italians with the Rome-Berne Treaty of 1964, see Calvo Salgados (2008), pp. 306-315.

20   Piguet (2009), pp. 19-32; Ricciardi (2018), pp. 179-187. See also Giorgio Miescher in this volume.

Interestingly, however, not even the Federal Council questioned preservation of the seasonal worker statute, and, as already mentioned, the Swiss public rejected its abolition in 1981 by popular referendum.[21]

When the seasonal worker statute was finally abolished in 1999 (enforced in 2002) only for workers from the EU and the European Free Trade Association, this outcome was more a consequence of the progressive economic integration between the Confederation and the European Union. Since the early 1990s, the Federal Council had supported Switzerland's accession to the European Economic Area (EEA), which automatically led to an integration of the respective labour markets through free movement. In 1992, Swiss voters had rejected accession to the EEA by referendum. Nevertheless, the process continued by way of bilateral and sectoral agreements that propelled economic integration. This process also led to the agreement on the free movement of EU/EFTA workers, an agreement that automatically abolished the status of seasonal workers. The free movement of European workers, it was feared, would excessively increase overall immigration into the Confederation and, therefore, was compensated at first by the adoption of the 'three circles'-policy, namely, free movement for EU Europeans, restricted access for other Europeans, and access for only a limited number of highly qualified workers for the rest of the world. Accused of ethnic discrimination, the 'three circles' system was eventually replaced by the simple policy of admission on a supposedly 'qualitative' basis for all non-EU workers.[22] In any case, the abolition of the seasonal worker statute came too late to benefit Italian immigrants. By 1976, the large number of layoffs and repatriations caused by the economic crisis and the enduring presence of the Italians' had caused their numbers to plunge among seasonal workers, and by then, 70% of the remaining Italians had become residents.[23]

The rest of the narrative is recent history. What the xenophobes did not accomplish during the 'Schwarzenbach years', they later achieved with a narrow victory of 'yes' votes in the 2014 referendum 'Against Mass Immigration'.[24] This referendum prescribed the adoption of caps

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21   Piguet (2009), p. 37; Ricciardi (2018), pp. 219-224.
22   Fibbi & Wanner (2020), pp. 31-34.
23   Ricciardi (2018), pp. 208-209.
24   Swiss Confederation (2017).

and quotas on annual entry applicable for all foreigners, including international commuters and asylum seekers. In the case of EU immigrants, the 'yes' vote also mandated the restrictive revision of the 2002 free movement agreement. Moreover, exactly as in Great-Depression Europe, in conjunction with entry quotas, the 2014 referendum also demanded the right of first refusal of jobs by citizens (a right that likewise applies in several EU countries to non-EU foreigners, including Italy). Finally, the promoters of the referendum also proposed the reintroduction of the seasonal worker statute as a compromise to reconcile any decrease in 'stable' foreigners with the Swiss economy's need for manual workforce and 'brain gain'. However, just as the case in the 1960s, the Federal Council initially sought a compromise not only to accommodate the economy's demand for foreigners, but also to prevent jeopardizing its other economic, political and cultural relations with the EU. It therefore avoided passing the law that would have implemented the referendum's prescriptions. In response, the xenophobic right wing launched a new referendum in 2020, but on this occasion it was solidly defeated at the ballots, fulfilling hopes of the Federal Council.[25]

Finally, in the spring of 2024, a new referendum was launched that, on one hand, called for preventing the continuous increase of foreigners in order to prevent passing the 10 million mark of total residents, and on the other, called for the abolition of the 2002 agreement on the free movement of EU citizens. Additionally, in 2016, 58% of the voters in the border-canton Ticino, voted in favour of the '*Prima i nostri*' [ours first] referendum, in order to reduce the number of Italian commuters in the region.[26] In conclusion, all the signs point to a mounting reemergence of a past that does not want to pass!

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25   Swiss Confederation (2020).
26   Mariani (2016).

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Chapter 3

Trade Unions and the Reform of the Migrant Labour Systems in Namibia and Switzerland, 1970–2007

Niamh Christine O'Neill and Ndapewoshali Ndahafa Ilunga

Introduction

The historical migrant labour systems of Switzerland and Namibia have had a profound impact on the economic and social context of both countries; indeed, the role of migrant labourers in constructing, both literally and figuratively, the modern Namibian and Swiss nations is rarely acknowledged in either scholarship or the wider labour movements of the respective societies. Particularly interesting in this regard is the trade unions' representation of migrant labourers (or the striking lack thereof) and their involvement in bringing about reform of the exploitative systems that so repressed them. Thus, this chapter aims to evaluate how and to what extent trade unions influenced labour reform at three significant turning points in both countries, namely in the early 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. These parallel histories showcase some trends shared by two economies that were both heavily reliant on systematised migrant labour. Furthermore, the comparison helps us understand the role of unions by virtue of the very different backgrounds of trade unionism in the two countries and their resulting different stances towards migrant labour.

This chapter is therefore an attempt to highlight trade union history in two countries where, we argue, trade unionism has not received

enough attention in historiography.[1] It also represents a first attempt at comparing these histories. As such, the focus of the research was broad, but limited to perhaps the most obvious repositories of sources. For the analysis of the Swiss case, the archival visits were restricted to the archives of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions [*Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund*, SGB], housed at the Swiss Social Archives [*Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv*] in Zürich. The material surveyed (mostly memos, press releases, communications with the government and public statements) was that filed under certain keywords such as '*Saisonnierstatut*', '*Flankierende Massnahmen*' [accompanying measures, FLaM], '*Ausländergesetzgebung*' [legislation concerning foreigners], with a particular focus on the late 1980s to 2002, i.e. the period leading up to the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut*. It is thus not possible to gain a sense of what proportion of overall SGB output these documents represent for the period in question, i.e., how much emphasis was put on the FlaM, immigration issues, *Saisonnierstatut* etc. relative to other areas of union activity. In Namibia, archival visits were limited to the National Archives of Namibia (NAN) and the archives of the Labour Resource and Research Institute Namibia (LaRRI). As in Switzerland, the material surveyed included memos and public statements, as well as Namibian legislature as published in the Government Gazette of Namibia, and before 1990, of South West Africa. The LaRRI archives provided material such as journals and reports published mainly after 1990, while the NAN provided in-depth analyses of the state of labour relations, and the roles and operations of trade unions before 1990. The keywords that informed the identification of archival material surveyed in Namibia included 'contract labour', 'trade unions', 'migrant labour' and the 'liberation movement'.

This chapter consists of three main sections, with six sub-chapters. The first section provides some background for the paper by outlining the historical role of migrant workers within trade unions in Switzerland and Namibia, leading up to the time period covered by this chapter. This is developed in a further sub-chapter examining the positionality of the

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1   E.g. Bauer (1997) and Likuwa and Shiweda (2017), for Namibia. For Switzerland, see the overview on recent trends in the historiography of Swiss unions by Koller (2023). See also the two previous chapters in this volume by Ndahangwapo and Rinauro.

two main trade union federations within the political structures of both countries. The second section explores the three turning points in trade union action and policies towards migrant labour in each of the two countries, keeping the analysis of the respective systems separate. The final section, then, brings the comparison of the two countries together and draws conclusions for both Namibia and Switzerland.

The historical role of migrant workers within trade unions in Switzerland and Namibia

Trade unions present a particularly interesting lens through which to analyse the role of foreign-citizen workers in Swiss labour history. While Switzerland is celebrated for its system of direct democracy which allows the public a high degree of influence over political and constitutional matters in the country, those without a Swiss passport are precluded from voting in both referenda and elections and cannot participate in the direct democratic processes on municipal, cantonal or federal levels.[2] When the high percentage of residents without Swiss citizenship is taken into account—in 2022, 24.9% of the population over 15 years of age did not possess Swiss citizenship—this means that a significant proportion of the adult population does not have the opportunity to shape politics through the usual democratic channels.[3] Thus, trade unions offer one of the most important platforms for workers without Swiss citizenship to engage politically and have their voices heard on issues which directly affect them.[4]

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2   Only since the early 2000s have some cantons and municipalities allowed foreigners with permanent residency in Switzerland to vote on cantonal or municipal level.

3   Figures according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Retrieved from: https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/migration-integration/by-migration-status.html, accessed 3 September 2024.

4   Rechsteiner (2014); Ar SGB G 472/8 (1995): Ausländerkommission: Ausländer/innen-Tagung des Schweizerischen Gewerkschaftsbundes (SGB) vom 16. September 1995 «Für eine Schweiz in Europa ohne Saisonnierstatut—nein zum Etikettenschwindel».—This chapter uses the terms 'workers with Swiss citizenship' and 'workers without Swiss citizenship' rather than 'Swiss workers' and 'foreign workers' when referring to the context of the Swiss migrant labour system. This choice stems from the assertion that 'Swissness' should not be solely associated with citizenship, and to avoid the alienating connotations of the term 'foreign'. While ack-

Founded in 1880, the SGB is the largest and most important umbrella organisation of labour in Switzerland. It is made up of 15 unions and represents an estimated 370,000 workers.[5] The SGB plays a particularly important role in championing the rights of foreign citizens living and working in Switzerland, for example through government lobbying and the instruments of direct democracy. Historically speaking, however, this has not always been the case. Until the late 1960s, the Swiss trade unions harboured many of the xenophobic attitudes common in wider society at the time, citing supposed cultural differences (solidified in the fear of so-called *Überfremdung*[6]) and a fear of leftist ideology as the primary grounds for their rejection of seasonal contract workers in their ranks.[7] The widespread perception was that supposedly radical 'communist' *Saisonniers*[8] would disturb the industrial peace, or *Arbeitsfrieden*, by launching 'wild strikes'.[9] *Arbeitsfrieden* is the freedom from industrial disputes which had persisted and been carefully upheld by unions and employers in Switzerland for decades. It was a result of and reaction to the violent clashes during the general strike of 1918, which led to a rhetoric of spontaneous and non-formalised labour action being seen as un-Swiss and unwanted.[10] These fears provided the justification for discrimination against migrants and their exclusion from the organised labour movement.[11] Following the

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nowledging that this terminology might differ from that used in other contributions to the volume, the intention is to encourage reflection, especially in light of the overarching lessons drawn from the histories and legacies of these exploitative and dehumanising systems in both countries.

5   Ackermann (2011).

6   The term *Überfremdung* is challenging to translate directly into English, and thus the German term will be used throughout. It translates literally as 'over-foreignisation' and can be loosely taken to mean 'mass foreign infiltration'. The concept was applied in a wide range of contexts throughout the twentieth century to convey the fear that Swiss values and culture (indeed, for some on the right, the very fabric of Swiss society) were under threat by a supposedly excessive influx of 'foreigners'.

7   Fasel (2021); Steinauer and von Allmen (2000).

8   In French- and German-speaking Switzerland, seasonal contract workers were called Saisonniers. This Swiss naming is used throughout the volume.

9   Tanner (2015), p. 339. This and subsequent quotations from German-language sources are translated by Niamh Christine O'Neill.

10 See, for instance, the SGB resource https://www.generalstreik.ch. Accessed 3 September 2024.

11 Tanner (2015); Pedrina (2018).

Second World War, the unions enjoyed relatively high membership figures compared to today.[12] Swiss citizens made up the majority of the membership, and *Saisonniers* had little incentive to join due to scepticism and xenophobic rhetoric among the wider membership base as well as the active pursuit of anti-immigrant policies by the unions in the early post-war period. For example, the SGB's work programme (*Arbeitsprogramm*) for the 1960s stated the following: 'In order to preserve Switzerland's political, cultural and linguistic uniqueness and to prevent *Überfremdung*, the influx of foreign workers must be subject to controls' and emphasised the need to safeguard the jobs of workers with Swiss citizenship above all.[13] Exclusionary policies built into the union structures further discouraged *Saisonniers* from joining and kept their figures in union ranks low.[14] Further challenges to integrating *Saisonniers* into the unions included linguistic barriers, as well as simply the seasonal nature of their residence in Switzerland.

Furthermore, the high rate of labour immigration to Switzerland during the post-war period was viewed by both employers and unions as a temporary phenomenon until well into the 1960s. It was expected that the influx of *Saisonniers* would decrease as economic growth slowed and more jobs, such as in factory production, became automated and modernised.[15] There was thus a lack of urgency and interest in addressing the *Saisonniers'* concerns, and no proper attempts were made to integrate them into either union ranks or society more generally.[16] Moreover, the steady flow of immigration throughout the post-war decades raised fears of a lack of job security for workers with Swiss citizenship and of increased wage pressure in the country; two issues which persisted into the 1990s in the discussions on the free movement

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12   Steinauer and von Allmen (2000).

13   Ar SGB G250/6 (1960–1961) Statutenrevision und Arbeitsprogramm 1960–1961.

14   Steinauer and von Allmen (2000, p. 61) reveal that the construction workers' union, *Gewerkschaft Bau und Holz* (GBH; after the merging with the textile, chemistry, and paper industry workers' union in 1993, GBI (*Gewerkschaft Bau und Industrie)*), considered a frontrunner in more progressive policy regarding workers without Swiss citizenship, only changed its statutes in 1971 to allow for non-Swiss citizens to take up positions in the central executive committee.

15   Fasel (2021).

16   Degen (2012); Pedrina (2018).

of workers in Europe, as outlined below.[17] Wage dumping became a key concern, with some employers taking advantage of the seasonal worker system by paying *Saisonniers* lower wages, thereby threatening to bring down wages across the board.[18] Competitive attitudes thus arose among the workers with Swiss citizenship towards the ever-increasing number of foreign citizens working in Switzerland, and the unions engaged themselves for the rights of the former ahead of the latter.[19] In any case, it was not until the mid-1980s that the SGB took a clear stance in favour of the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut*, and, as will be explored below, their motivations for this change in position are perhaps not as clear-cut as might be perceived in hindsight.[20]

In contrast, the emergence of trade unions in Namibia was directly linked to the issue of migrant labourers' rights. Modern Namibian trade unionism was a response by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO)—the largest liberation struggle movement at the time and now ruling party—to the treatment of workers employed in the migrant labour system in South West Africa (now Namibia). It should be noted at this stage that there had indeed been South African trade unions active in South West Africa during the apartheid period, however these solely represented white workers. Given the focus of this contribution, we conceptualise modern Namibian trade unionism as the labour movement that shaped the struggle for independence and became the central protagonist in independent Namibia, and therefore exclude South African white unions, supported by the apartheid political system, from this analysis altogether.

The first trade union that represented the interests of migrant labourers, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) was established by SWAPO in April 1970, as a department within the party intended to focus on labour relations.[21] The NUNW's fundamental purpose was to act as a voice for Namibian workers on international platforms such as

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17   Steinauer and von Allmen (2000).
18   In 1996, *Saisonniers* still earned nearly 14% less than local workers with the same qualifications. In the 70s and 80s, this difference was significantly greater (Pedrina, 2018: p. 23).
19   G 250/6; Pedrina (2018).
20   Pedrina (2018); Keller and Rieger (2018); Steinauer and von Allmen (2000).
21   However, the NUNW was not formally constituted as a federation until a Consolidation Congress was held in Windhoek in June 1989 (Bauer, 1997).

the International Labour Organization (ILO) and to train trade unionists in exile in the Soviet Union and Angola.[22] After the formation of the NUNW, more trade unions began to be established, such as the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) and the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) in 1986, the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU) and the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) in 1987, the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union (NATAU) in 1988, and the Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU) in 1989. The majority of the trade unions formed before the independence of Namibia in 1990 were under the umbrella of the NUNW and, by extension, the SWAPO liberation movement. Jauch highlights that, by 1990, the unions under the NUNW umbrella had become a 'formidable force' in comparison to other unions.[23]

Independence also saw the emergence of unions that refused to align with the NUNW, due not to disagreement with the liberation struggle, but the specific politics of SWAPO as ruling party. The establishment of non-SWAPO-aligned unions saw a steady increase after 1990 with the creation of trade unions such as the Namibia Christian Social Trade Unions (NCSTU) which in 1992 made provision for its non-Christian members and rebranded itself to become the Namibia People's Social Movement (NPSM). Nevertheless, the NUNW continues to be the largest trade union federation in the country to date and remains affiliated with SWAPO.

Taking a comparative look at the relationship between migrant workers and trade unions in both Switzerland and Namibia thus provides an interesting point of departure for research on the countries' respective historic migrant labour systems. Both SGB and NUNW, as the largest and historically most important umbrella bodies for trade unions, played important roles in the abolition of the oppressive systems. The very different inceptions of these two bodies and the particularities of the political frameworks under which they operate warrant closer examination. In both cases, unions created a platform for migrant labourers to engage politically and have their voices heard in arenas to which they would otherwise have little to no access, albeit with different degrees of resistance. As was shown, in the Swiss case, unions at first did not

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22   Jauch (2018).
23   Ibid., p. 10.

respond to the particular challenges faced by migrant labourers, whereas in the Namibian case, this was the opposite.

The position of the SGB and NUNW in political structures

Not least due to the distinct political systems and history of Namibia and Switzerland, trade unions occupy different positions in society and vary in their ability to influence policy, i.e., their relative bargaining power vis-à-vis both the state and capital. In the following, the socio-political positions of the two national umbrella organisations will be elaborated by first focusing on Namibia and then turning to Switzerland.

In Namibia, the relationship between labour organisations and the state is characterised by two main aspects: a historically strong labour movement, and the intertwined relationship between most trade unions and the ruling political party, whose government became the country's largest employer after independence. It can be argued that this resulted in blurred lines—and perhaps even what some would consider a conflict of interest. Such a relationship between labour movements and the state is not unique to Namibia. On the contrary, it is the norm in Southern Africa, as the formation of labour movements in the region was typically a response by liberation movements to colonial activity which was, amongst other things, characterised by oppressive and repressive employment conditions, including migrant labour systems.[24] The other regional liberation movements had similar trajectories to SWAPO, becoming the first ruling political parties in the respective independent states.

In the 1960s, the Southern African countries Botswana, Lesotho, Tanzania, Zambia (and Mozambique and Angola from 1975) came together to form the Frontline States (FLS), a coalition dedicated to ending apartheid in South Africa and Namibia and white minority rule in Zimbabwe. The FLS was disbanded in the early 1990s, once South Africa attained its independence. Shortly thereafter, the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa (FLMSA) was founded.[25] The FLMSA is an association of seven mainly socialist or socialist-leaning political parties which were at the forefront of the struggles against

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24   Southall (2013).
25   Cheeseman, Bertrand & Husaini (2019).

colonialism and exploitation of Africans in the region.[26] The seven founding parties were South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), Mozambique's Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), Angola's Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), Zimbabwe's African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) and Namibia's SWAPO. In 2019, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), the then ruling party of Botswana, joined FLMSA. Unsurprisingly, each of these liberation movements created a wing or department which, like the NUNW, was tasked to focus on labour relations and act as a representative body for workers, including migrant labourers.

During the struggle for independence, these proto-trade unions were successful in amassing power and influence in policymaking for the benefit of workers—and thus ultimately for liberation-aligned goals of bettering the situation of Africans—which is visible in the numerous achievements of the NUNW before 1990. Louw-Vaudran, however, argues that once in power, former freedom fighters often struggle with the reality of governing nations and fail to deliver the economic development and quality-of-life that African citizens had hoped for.[27] This sentiment is shared by Henning Melber, who refers to Namibia as a 'rich country with poor people'.[28] Contrary to the endeavours of SWAPO and the NUNW, which sought during the liberation struggle to facilitate the equality of all Namibian workers and people, Melber argues that the redistribution of wealth in post-independence Namibia is limited to the new 'black elite' which consists of office bearers, party stalwarts and those with close ties to the new inner circles of governance.

Despite criticisms of the NUNW, the union federation continues to defend its position. It not only refutes the claims that its affiliation to SWAPO compromises its ability to influence policy for the benefit of workers, but indeed argues that said affiliation better positions it to do so. In 2013, for instance, the then Acting Secretary-General of NUNW, Alfred Angula, defended NUNW's affiliation with SWAPO as a stra-

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26   Mataire (2015).
27   Louw-Vaudran (2017).
28   Melber (2017).

tegy to exert greater influence.[29] He is quoted as having stated the following during a panel discussion on 7 August 2013:

> *The role of the federation is to address policy matters, be it economic, be it environmental, be it general politics. Now, if a federation does not address policies, it doesn't address the matter; if it shies away from this role, you are not a federation. ... Now you want to be a spectator outside the field and you want to score goals, you can't! ... You have to be in the field to score that goal. That's why it's important for us to deal with politics, and you mustn't shy away from that.[30]*

In contrast to Angula's purported statement, we argue in this chapter that such close government ties have weakened the NUNW's ability to independently fight for the rights of workers, a sentiment shared by other critics.

In Switzerland, on the other hand, the relationship between labour organisations and the state is differently characterised: The labour movement is historically weak, and the country has a strong tradition of corporatism. While some literature suggests these factors are the cause of a longer history of inclusion and democratic processes leading to weaker class patterns,[31] Switzerland does, in fact, have a long history of workers' movements. Not only did first unions emerge relatively early, but Switzerland was, for a time, at the forefront of international proto-socialist and socialist movements, for example hosting the fourth General Congress of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA)—commonly known as the First Internationale—in Basel in 1869. However, it is also true that Swiss labour movements were politically divided into more radical socialist wings and more reformist and nationalist wings, such as the prominent *Grütlivereine*.[32] The aforementioned general strike of 1918 was in many respects atypical and

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29   Angula was arrested by the Namibian Police on 16 October 2013 on charges of defrauding the union of more than N$ 1.2 million in donor funds, leading to his suspension from the position. However, in May 2020, the Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment Creation appointed Angula as Personal Assistant to the Deputy Minister.
30   Jauch (2018), p. 10.
31   Trampusch (2010).
32   Arbeitsgruppe für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (1975), pp. 61–65.

resulted in an even stronger movement towards diplomatic solutions for labour disputes. More recent literature argues that the strike emerged both from longer-standing disputes, while also relativising its immediate effect on the creation of the Swiss social welfare state.[33] It would be wrong, however, to say that Switzerland had no prior experiences of large strikes, as large cities like Geneva and Basel experienced strikes as far back as the late 1860s.[34] Immediately after the Second World War, trade unions grew in influence through structural transformations in the Swiss system, which strengthened their relative power position through corporatist processes such as the so-called 'consultation procedure' [*Vernehmlassungsverfahren*], which was enshrined in the Constitution in 1947.[35] This procedure offers interested parties, including unions and business organisations, information on proposals for policy reform and gives them an opportunity to introduce their own positions before the parliamentary discussion phase begins.[36] These negotiations thus grant the social partners privileged access to decision-making and allow them to directly influence government policy, particularly on social issues. However, despite this direct access to the halls of power, the Swiss trade unions, particularly within the SGB, were often challenged by the prospect of presenting a united front on social and economic issues, due to their fragmented nature.[37]

The influence of the social partners on the executive in Switzerland should therefore not be underestimated, though this is also not unproblematic, as it enables them to set the agenda and essentially limit the executive's ability to assert its own interests in the area of economic policy.[38] Moreover, it is essential to highlight the unequal degree of influence of the different umbrella organisations on state actors. In

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33   See Koller (2019).

34   Arbeitsgruppe für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (1975).

35   Art. 32 Abs. 3 BV 1874 required the state to incorporate "relevant organisations of the economy" (i.e., umbrella organisations of capital and labour) into the consultation process for new federal laws, as they might otherwise call a referendum. Marti (2013); Trampusch (2010).

36   Trampusch (2010).

37   Socio-structural divisions in terms of the different industry sectors represented are just one of a number of factors which continue to make unification of diverse interests within the SGB's membership hugely challenging (Linder, 2017).

38   Marti (2013).

general, business interests (as represented formally within the framework of social partnership by employers' organisations) are a powerful source of political influence in any state, if not arguably the dominant power in capitalist economies. Furthermore, they tend to have greater resources at their disposal, making the representatives of capital able to influence policy much more decisively than those of labour.[39] Even the threat of a referendum, in many ways a cornerstone of Swiss decision-making, is not equally viable to both sides of the social partnership. On the one hand, the high cost of calling a referendum (campaign costs, advertisement and mobilisation to garner the needed amount of signatures, etc.) can be prohibitive for the less-well-funded labour organisations. On the other, the political make-up of Switzerland has long seen right-wing economically liberal parties in the majority, giving employer-friendly policies a higher likelihood of success.[40] The fact that trade unions represent many foreign citizens who have no vote is also important to highlight.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the relationship between trade unions and the state is so different in Namibia and Switzerland, given the countries' different histories and political contexts. Namibian unions are comparatively strong, stemming from the NUNW's roots in the liberation struggle and its close ties to SWAPO—though this relationship is criticised for potentially compromising union independence, as will be discussed further in the conclusion. In Switzerland, meanwhile, trade unions were historically weaker, though they have gained influence through corporatist processes, allowing participation in policy-making. Nevertheless, challenges, such as the dominance of business interests and the lack of political capital available to their membership without Swiss citizenship, remain. Having thus introduced the trade union landscape in both countries and the involvement of migrant workers in the respective labour movements, this chapter will now turn to the examination of three significant historical turning points in Namibia and Switzerland.

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39   'The director of the Swiss Federation of Commerce and Industry (Vorort, now economiesuisse) was generally seen as the eighth federal councillor.' Eichenberger and Mach, 2011, p. 63, quoted in Marti (2013), p. 66.

40   Marti (2013); Linder (2017).

Turning points: 1970s, 1990s, 2000s

The NUNW and SGB both played a significant role in the reform and abolition of the migrant labour systems which so shaped Namibia and Switzerland in the second half of the twentieth century. They differed in that the *Saisonnierstatut* was relevant to non-Swiss citizens, while the migrant labour system in Namibia was applicable to indigenous Namibians who migrated from the so-called 'reserves' or 'homelands' into areas of white settlement, also referred to as the Police Zone.[41] Both systems saw the exploitation of labourers in similar industries, in particular in construction and agriculture, as well as mining in Namibia. Furthermore, the migrant labour systems of the two countries share similarities with regard to the poor working conditions of the labourers, the lack of rights afforded them, and the nature of employee-employer relations. In both contexts, the trade unions played a significant role— albeit of varying effectiveness and decisiveness—in bringing about reform of the migrant labourers' position. As both systems share a common timeframe, significant events or 'turning points' to this end can be identified, namely in the early 1970s, early 1990s and the 2000s. The following sections discuss these turning points in greater detail.

1970s: Schwarzenbach Initiative and General Workers' Strike

In Switzerland, the early 1970s marked a clear shift in trade union policy in favour of migrant workers, particularly those employed on seasonal permits. The Schwarzenbach Initiative (1970) triggered a national debate on the perceived dangers of *Überfremdung* or mass immigration to Switzerland, as it proposed much stricter regulation of the numbers of foreign citizens allowed to enter the country and would have resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of migrant workers allowed to remain in Switzerland. While the unions opposed the initiative, many of their rank-and-file members were in favour of the proposed policy changes and indeed harboured xenophobic attitudes towards workers without Swiss citizenship, as illustrated by the slim margin of the referendum's rejection. During this period, the unions for the first time also rallied behind calls to abolish the *Saisonnierstatut* and introduce fairer

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41   Miescher (2012).

working conditions for all employees, regardless of the colour of their passport. In the following we detail how and why this shift in union policy took place, after decades of failing to address adequately the situation of migrant workers in Switzerland.

The Schwarzenbach Initiative of 1970—officially '*Initiative Gegen die Überfremdung*' [Initiative against *Überfremdung*], but popularly named after its primary author and proponent, right-wing politician James Schwarzenbach—can be regarded as the first significant turning point in the development of the Swiss unions' attitudes towards workers without Swiss citizenship. The popular initiative proposed to combat what its authors framed as a danger of *Überfremdung* in Switzerland by reducing the number of foreign citizens in each canton to 10% of the population within four years,[42] and would have introduced federal regulations to ensure workers without Swiss citizenship were dismissed before Swiss citizens in case of rationalisation within a given company.[43] These draconian measures would have resulted in a massive reduction in the number of foreign nationals, *Saisonniers* in particular, allowed to remain in the country. The government opposed the initiative, citing concerns over the proposals' compatibility with Switzerland's human rights obligations as well as fears for the economic implications of the mass exodus of foreign citizens on Swiss industry and economy.[44] And yet, a striking 46% of Swiss voters nevertheless supported the initiative on the day of the popular vote, forcing the Federal Council to implement a series of new measures in its aftermath.

The SGB also decided to oppose the Schwarzenbach Initiative in its official stance. The reasons for this are not immediately clear. Given that the unions of the SGB had continued to pursue anti-immigrant policies throughout the 1960s, indeed sometimes taking a more hardline position than the authorities,[45] their rejection of the proposed initiative represents a turn in their attitudes towards migration and wor-

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42   Geneva was an exception; the proportion of foreigners was to be capped at 25% of the canton's population.

43   Bundeskanzlei (2023); Mahnig and Piguet (2003); Eidgenössische Migrationskommission (EKM) (2020).

44   Mahnig and Piguet (2003); EKM (2020); Wottreng (2000).

45   For example, Wottreng (2000, p. 160) writes that a few years earlier, in the context of the 1964 bilateral agreement on migration policy with Italy (*Italienerabkommen*), the SGB categorically demanded a reduction in the number of foreign workers from 720,000 to 500,000 within five years.

kers without Swiss citizenship. Union sources claim that the so-called '1968ers'[46] played a key role within the unions in highlighting the inequalities in Swiss migratory policy, appealing for solidarity and thus a rejection of the Schwarzenbach Initiative.[47] Other authors, however, highlight more pragmatic concerns which may have motivated the trade unions to oppose the initiative, for instance out of a fear that a reduction in the labour force would accelerate the structural change of the economy and ultimately also affect Swiss citizens.[48]

In response to the relatively narrow rejection of the initiative, the Federal Council introduced a range of new measures aimed at balancing the demands of both sides of the referendum debate.[49] From the 1960s onwards, and mainly at the behest of the trade unions, the authorities had introduced a series of quotas, termed 'plafonds', intended to limit and ultimately reduce the proportion of migrant workers in the labour force in individual cantons.[50] They were initially only applied to individual companies and were not necessarily conceived as an effective tool for limiting immigration: Switzerland thus maintained its liberal admission policy throughout the 1960s, as the country continued to experience strong economic growth, for which the foreign labour force was indispensable.[51] Following the Schwarzenbach referendum, however, the existing plafonds system was expanded to a nationwide quota system for migrant workers, so-called '*Globalplafonierung*', whereby limits were set on the number of work permits issued in each canton annually, established on the basis of the estimated number of departing foreign workers each year.[52] These new quotas simultaneously entailed the expansion of a body of tripartite commissions, originally established

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46   The so-called *Achtundsechziger* [Sixtyeighters] refers to the somewhat broad spectrum of leftist activists and ideologies emerging at the end of the 1960s in many parts of the world, but the term is mostly used in western continental Europe, especially in France and in German-speaking areas. In this context the term more specifically encompasses those embracing new strands of communist and other leftist ideologies, becoming especially prominent in the student protests of 1968 (hence the term).

47   Pedrina (2018); Rechsteiner (2014).

48   Wottreng (2000).

49   Mahnig and Piguet (2003).

50   Fasel (2021); EKM (2020).

51   Rechsteiner (2014); Gees (2006).

52   Lampart et al. (2016).

in a number of cantons in the 1960s, which consisted of representatives of the authorities, the employers and the unions and which were responsible for allocating the workers to the respective employers.[53] Furthermore, the basis on which the quotas were calculated required the creation, in 1973, of a new centralised instrument for recording and monitoring the data of all foreigners resident in Switzerland, the Central Registry of Foreigners [*Zentrales Ausländerregister*, ZAR]. Needless to say, a comparable registry for Swiss workers did not exist, as the authorities would have lacked the legal basis to do so.

Accompanying the new quota system was a range of controls over wage and working conditions, which had been lobbied for by the unions, in particular. These controls stipulated, among other things, that workers without Swiss citizenship were to be employed in line with the conditions of Swiss citizens, but also that the provision of work permits be bound to a written employment contract.[54] However, no inspection mechanism to control whether these conditions were effectively being upheld by employers was set up in practice. The issue of this lack of controls would later become an important element of the negotiations on both Swiss membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) and the bilateral agreements with the European Union (EU) in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite the restrictive nature of the new quotas, immigration numbers were ultimately affected more by the economic cycle rather than the adjusting of the annual caps.[55] In practice, the quota system also allowed for workers without Swiss citizenship to be treated as so-called 'economic buffers' [*Konjunkturpuffer*]:[56] As the maximum number of permits available was determined on an annual basis, the authorities could simply refuse to renew permits during periods of economic difficulty, forcing *Saisonniers* to leave the country and thereby ensuring that 'Swiss' jobs were protected and unemployment was kept at a minimum.[57] For example, during the so-called Oil Crisis of the mid-1970s,

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53   Pedrina (2018); Gigase and Schubert (2022); Fasel (2021).
54   Art. 9, para. 3 BVO. Also Pedrina (2018).
55   Pedrina (2018).
56   This remains the case in the present day, as quotas still exist for so-called 'third-country nationals' seeking employment in Switzerland, meaning workers from countries who do not have a bilateral agreement with Switzerland.
57   Lampart et al. (2016); Degen (2012). Needless to say, workers without Swiss

over 10% of jobs were lost in Switzerland, and yet no mass unemployment was recorded due to the fact that by 1977, almost 250,000 workers without Swiss citizenship or permanent residence rights had been forced to return to their countries of origin.[58] Within the SGB, the construction workers' union [*Gewerkschaft Bau und Holz*, GBH] was particularly opposed to this treatment of *Saisonniers* as a disposable source of labour, appealing from the mid-70s for a less 'quantitative' and more humane approach to immigration policy.[59]

While the decision to oppose the Schwarzenbach Initiative certainly marks a milestone in Swiss trade union attitudes toward foreign workers, the SGB's change of position on migration policy overall came about more slowly. While individual unions, most notably the GBH, were more progressive in taking up the cause of the *Saisonniers* and their rights, the SGB spent much of the 1970s continuing to demand a 'stabilisation' of the number of immigrants, arguing that the quotas were consistently too high.[60] Furthermore, they claimed loopholes in the labour regulations were being exploited to the detriment of Swiss citizens: Employers would resort to recruiting *Saisonniers* illegally once their quota had been reached, or circumvent the system entirely by abusing short-stay permits [*Kurzaufenthalterbewilligungen*], which, unlike the seasonal permits, were not subject to quotas.[61] Steinauer and von Allmen summarise the union federation's attitude during the 1970s as follows:

> *The more foreign workers the employers demand[ed], the fewer the SGB want[ed] to let into the country. But qualitative aspects gradually gain[ed] the upper hand. No longer content with protesting against the abuse of the Saisonnierstatut, the SGB finally [began] to call the statute itself into question.[62]*

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citizenship and without permanent residence were in most cases denied or had only very limited access to unemployment insurance or any other social security measures. Lampart et al. (2016); Ar SGB G 491/3 (1974–1981), Ausländerfragen.

58   Degen (2012).
59   G 491/3.
60   Steinauer and von Allmen (2000), p. 15.
61   Pedrina (2018).
62   Steinauer and von Allmen (2000), p. 15.

The position taken by Steinauer and von Allmen here is part of Swiss union historiography which implies that the SGB's decision to support the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut* from the 1980s onwards may have been motivated more by a desire to protect local workers and the Swiss economy, rather than necessarily to improve the rights and protections afforded to workers without Swiss citizenship employed under precarious conditions. Thus, the unions' increased support for the *Saisonniers* a decade earlier may have been more of a pragmatic decision with gradual repercussions, rather than a clear and radical shift in policy.

There is no doubt, however, that the generational shift initiated by the 1968ers contributed significantly to revitalising Swiss trade unionism, starting within the GBH and gradually spreading to other unions and the SGB itself. Building on the internationalist tradition of the labour movement, the SGB in the 1980s began to advocate for the free movement of workers and increased solidarity, fighting for better salaries, working conditions and rights for all. In other words, the SGB started to actively advocating for pro-migrant policies rather than only opposing anti-migrant policies and initiatives.[63] Moreover, a change of leadership in various unions also shifted the direction of their politics, with many of the new leading figures being migrants themselves who had initially had to fight for recognition within the organisation.[64] However, union sources quoted by Pedrina, Keller and Rieger also state that the two key external factors of the 1990s, the referendum on EEA membership and negotiations for the package of contracts with other European countries which came to be known as the *Bilateralen I*, were the decisive triggers which ultimately forced them to reconsider their stances on immigration policy and the position in society of workers without Swiss citizenship.[65]

In Namibia, the establishment of the Northern and Extra-Territorial Native Control (NETNC) in 1935 by the South African colonial administration, under Proclamation No. 29, capitalised on the pre-existing Red Line to impose stringent movement restrictions reminiscent of

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63   For example, in the 1981 "Mitenand-Initiative", see Pedrina (2018); Mahnig and Piguet (2003); Keller and Rieger (2018).
64   Keller and Rieger (2018).
65   Pedrina (2018); Keller and Rieger (2018).

Switzerland's seasonal permits for migrant workers.[66] The Red Line, a veterinary cordon fence, initially conceptualised by the German colonial government in 1896 to control the spread of rinderpest, had evolved into a Police Zone Border as early as 1907.[67] This demarcation strictly regulated the movement of people, animals and goods, delineating an inner Namibian border between northern and central Namibia. South of the Red Line, in the so-called Police Zone, only the white population could own property and move about freely.[68] Furthermore, the Red Line facilitated contract labour in Namibia as Africans living north of the Red Line, i.e. the majority of the Namibian population, needed a permit when entering the Police Zone, where they could only stay as temporary workers for a limited period of time.[69] In other words, the Red Line divided the African population into two groups, one that was allowed to live permanently in the Police Zone, although in designated rural reserves or urban neighbourhoods, and one whose presence in the Police Zone was limited for the purpose of strictly regulated temporary labour provision for the colonial economy.

In 1943, the Southern Labour Organisation (SLO) and Northern Labour Organisation (NLO) merged and became the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA), the primary labour contracting organisation in the territory. SWANLA is considered by some to be an organisation that capitalised on the workers' desperation and vulnerability to benefit employers.[70] The living and working conditions of migrant workers from north of the Red Line remained deplorable. The migrant workers had attempted to organise large strikes in Lüderitz in 1952 and Walvis Bay in 1953.[71] However, both attempts were mercilessly and violently put down by the colonial authorities, with multiple workers being shot dead in 1953.[72] By the late 1950s, migrant labourers from northern Namibia were organising within and outside of South West Africa. Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, who became a member of the ANC while working as a migrant labourer in Cape Town and was

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66   Miescher (2012), p. 3.
67   Ibid.
68   Legal Assistance Centre (n.d.).
69   Miescher (2012).
70   Botes (2013), p. 6.
71   Dierks (2005).
72   Ibid.

an active trade unionist, founded the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC) together with other Namibians while in South Africa in 1957, to address the plight of South West African migrant labourers. Meanwhile, within the country, the canning factories in Walvis Bay had become central spaces for workers' opposition to the system. It was in this context that Sam Nujoma, who was working in Walvis Bay, joined forces with ya Toivo's organisation, bringing the OPC (renamed Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO) and then SWAPO in 1959) inside the country's borders.[73] Indeed, Jauch highlights the essential role played by the contract labour system, which concentrated large numbers of workers in hostels, in bringing about the broader organisation and politicisation of Namibian workers:

> *Political and class consciousness thus was highest in places where workers were concentrated in hostels which extended their interdependence beyond the point of production. This explains why the first and strongest unions emerged in the mining and fishing industries.[74]*

However, organisation into trade unions was not a legal option for black workers in Namibia at this time. Bauer explains that the 1952 Wage and Industrial Conciliation Ordinance provided for the organisation of trade unions in the territory but excluded black workers from the definition of 'employee' and therefore precluded their effective participation in trade unions.[75] This is a reference to the so-called 'master and servant' laws, which governed the relationship between employers and employees under the colonial administration. It was not until 1978 that the definition of 'employees' was expanded to include black workers, thereby providing the first legal basis for black Namibian workers to form and join trade unions.[76]

After years of organisation and planning, a General Workers' Strike was held in 1971–1972 to protest against the inhumane working conditions that migrant workers were subjected to throughout Namibia. Scholars, politicians and authors such as Peter Katjavivi and Klaus

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73   Likuwa and Shiweda (2017).
74   Jauch (2002), pp. 29–30.
75   Bauer (1997), p. 68.
76   Jauch (2018).

Dierks agree that the final straw that led to the strike was a comment by the South African Commissioner for Indigenous People in South West Africa, Jannie de Wet.[77] He was quoted responding to the increasing criticism of the migrant labour system by stating that the system was not a form of slavery because workers signed their contracts voluntarily. He further argued that the Ovawambo migrant workers are happy with the system as it was. As Katjavivi explains, '[de Wet] touched the nerve of people already full of anger at the way their lives were brutalised by this system.'[78]

According to Dierks, the main objective of the strike was to abolish both SWANLA and the migrant labour system.[79] Workers believed that the abolition of these two structures would facilitate the freedom of workers to choose for themselves the type of employment they would engage in, make it possible for the workers to bring their families along with them to their places of employment and provide a platform for them to negotiate better wages and living conditions. Ultimately, over twenty thousand migrant workers participated. Within the first month of the strike, the operations of eleven mines and twenty-three other workplaces had shut down. The strike was the largest and most successful on Namibian soil to date and represents a significant turning point in the history of the migrant labour system in South West Africa. It shook the foundations of both the economic and political establishments in South West Africa; indeed, Bauer claims it can be considered 'the seminal event in Namibian labour history.'[80]

The strike resulted in a number of reforms to labour relations in Namibia, as captured in a new labour agreement issued in January 1972.[81] SWANLA was abolished, with the recruitment process being taken over by labour bureaus in the homelands of the Ovawambo and VaKavango. The contracts were issued to individual workers (as opposed to four per form, which had been the case before the strike) and were written in Oshiwambo instead of Afrikaans, English and/or German with the terms 'employer' and 'employee' replacing 'master'

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77   Katjavivi (1988); Dierks (2005).
78   Katjavivi (1988), p. 67.
79   Dierks (2005).
80   Bauer (1997), p. 64.
81   Bauer (1997).

and 'servant'.[82] The contract could now be terminated by either party, and breach of contract was no longer a criminal offence. However, very little changed in practice, with the overall structure of the contract labour system ultimately remaining untouched: The workers continued to report at central recruitment stations such as Grootfontein, their mobility in urban areas was limited, they were paid very low wages and generally continued to live in compounds without the right to bring along their families.[83]

Nevertheless, the strike was one of the greatest turning points for labour relations in Namibia. Because of the crippling effects the strike had on the colonial economy, the workers, following decades of suppression, now had concrete evidence of how powerful they could be when they unionised and rallied behind a common cause. In the same vein, the strike also demonstrated to the colonial administration the power of the unionised workers. It in fact prompted the first public acknowledgement of the potential utility of allowing trade unions for black workers in Namibia. As Bauer explains, the Windhoek Chamber of Commerce president, Enno Harms, made a plea in June 1972 for the organisation of workers into trade unions. With workers not organised in representative unions, Harms noted, there was nobody with whom an employers' organisation could negotiate.[84]

The General Strike of 1971–1972 thus arguably served as a catalyst for Namibia's independence from colonial rule. By destabilising the migrant labour system, which was integral to the colonial economy, the strike demonstrated the effectiveness of mass political mobilisation by black movements. It also provided a platform for the emergence of influential trade unions, SWAPO, and other key political forces that played a crucial role in Namibia's liberation.

The above two cases of fundamental shifts in the migrant labour systems of South West Africa and Switzerland in the 1970s showcase certain parallels. Both stand for the mounting discontent with migrant labour systems decades after their introduction, culminating in organised political action, which alleviated the situation somewhat, but ultimately did not succeed in bringing about large-scale positive changes

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82   Bauer (1997).
83   Kane-Berman (1972).
84   Bauer (1997), p. 66.

for workers. In Switzerland, the political action was initially taken up by those opposing the system, not because of its inhumane treatment of workers, but because of xenophobic resentment of the influx of foreign labour. This, however, led to a more concerted and organised effort by movements such as the 1968ers and the migrant labourers themselves to stand up for the rights of workers without Swiss citizenship, ultimately leading to transformative—albeit gradual and pragmatic—policy shifts within the unions. In Namibia, the General Strike was initiated by trade unionists (even in the absence of a trade union) and liberation movements influenced by changing socialist ideologies. It was also, in some respects, a reactionary event—to e.g. provocations by the government—but can overall be considered a direct response to the plight of migrant labourers. Furthermore, both events took place on the eve of global economic crises and can be seen as motivated, to a certain extent, by mounting economic concerns on the world stage.

Both examples also stand for the contradictions created by migrant labour in two fundamentally neoliberal and socially conservative political spheres—as different as they were—stuck between a need for the exploitation of cheap labour and a general fear of the workers one wanted to attract (manifested in Switzerland in the large scale-appeal of xenophobic policies, while in Namibia this was a fundamental tenet of apartheid oppression).

The mixed successes of both the Namibian General Strike and the Swiss opposition to the Schwarzenbach Initiative, however, also showcase the chokehold that the migrant labour systems had over the respective economies. As will be shown in the next section, radical changes to the migrant labour systems only came about after fundamental political transformation, in the case of Namibia by liberation from colonialism, and in Switzerland by external political and economic pressures on the European level. However, the trajectories of the two systems also diverged more significantly here, as the political action was not successful in both cases.

1990s: EEA Referendum and Namibian Independence

The second turning point to be analysed in the Swiss system is the 1992 referendum on membership of the European Economic Area. Although EEA membership would have had a wide range of implica-

tions for Switzerland and its economy, much of the debate surrounding the referendum focused on immigration policy, as this was the first significant attempt by the state to introduce free movement of workers in Switzerland (and, in turn, granting Swiss citizens the freedom to work and reside elsewhere in the EEA). In the following, we examine what EEA membership would have meant for migrant workers in Switzerland at the time, as well as the arguments of the trade unions and the extent to which the failure of the referendum to ratify EEA membership can be attributed to their engagement (or lack thereof) in the membership negotiations and the Yes campaign.

By the late 1980s, Switzerland was actively pursuing greater economic integration with its European neighbours, but remained reluctant to compromise on autonomy and sovereignty and therefore repeatedly had to seek out complicated and unique solutions.[85] The central aspect of the EEA deal was provision for the introduction in Switzerland of the so-called 'four economic freedoms', namely the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital, which would have entailed significant changes to Swiss legislation in order to align with European standards, as well as the recognition that European law would take precedence over Swiss law.[86] Ultimately, however, the EEA referendum was treated by many as a general vote on whether Switzerland was 'for or against' Europe—in many ways, EEA membership was not perceived as an end in and of itself; rather, it was seen as simply an initial step towards membership in the European Community (EC, later EU).[87] The referendum held in December 1992 was narrowly defeated, with 50.3% of the voting public rejecting EEA membership, in a historically high turnout of 79%.[88]

Among the changes EEA membership would have entailed for Switzerland, freedom of movement for workers (also known as 'free movement of persons', FMP) was undoubtedly the most disputed among the Swiss voting public. The principle of FMP grants citizens of signatory states the right to freely choose their country of residence and employment within the European signatory states and affords them the

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85   Heer (2022).
86   Pedrina (2018); Kreis (2009).
87   Kreis (2013), p. 24.
88   EKM (2020).

same labour rights and treatment in the labour market as local citizens.[89] Needless to say, Switzerland's migration policy, the *Saisonnierstatut* in particular, massively violated these principles. The Swiss delegation thus took a defensive and critical position on FMP during the negotiations on the EEA deal and sought concessions from their European counterparts to both retain the *Saisonnierstatut* and continue to impose quotas on the number of permits issued to migrant workers.[90] However, these were not granted, as they contradicted the anti-discrimination norm, which lies at the heart of the principle of FMP for European citizens and abolishes any discrimination in employment or working conditions on the basis of nationality.[91] For Switzerland, which had for decades pursued a protectionist and discriminatory migration and labour policy, the introduction of free movement and the principle of non-discrimination would therefore entail an about-turn in how foreign workers were treated: preferential treatment for Swiss citizens would be replaced by equal treatment for all workers, regardless of the colour of their passport—and thus bring about the abolition of both the *Saisonnierstatut* and the quota system.[92]

The significant changes which EEA membership would have entailed for Switzerland also caused division within the member unions of the SGB. Perceived risks for Swiss workers from the perspective of the unions included relocation of production, rationalisation on a wider scale and a worsening of regional imbalances within Switzerland.[93] Wage and social dumping, however, remained their primary concern. The SGB feared that EEA membership, and the introduction of FMP in particular, would entail a loss of internal control over the labour market in Switzerland, most notably through the abolition of the controls over wage and working conditions that had been introduced in the aftermath of the Schwarzenbach Initiative.[94] As these checks were bound to

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89   Koller (2022); Heer (2022).
90   Heer (2022).
91   Pedrina (2018).
92   Ar SGB G 721/3 (2000–2001): AG Flankierende Massnahmen: Umsetzung der flankierenden Massnahmen zum freien Personenverkehr = Application des mesures d'accompagnement à la libre circulation des personnes.
93   Pedrina (2018).
94   Ibid.; Ar SGB G 491/9 (1981–1994): Ausländerpolitik: Interventionen des SGB; Saisonniers.

the permit system, they would have been incompatible with European policy, and thus an alternative was sought. This led to the development of the first elements of what would later become the so-called 'accompanying measures' or FlaM. However, these became a topic of discussion too late in the process to have a meaningful impact on the negotiations, or on the outcome of the referendum.[95] Thus, the failure of the EEA referendum meant that abolition of the migrant labour system through large scale political change was delayed once more in Switzerland.

Political change in Namibia, on the other hand, was in full swing. The last few years before Namibia attained independence in 1990 saw increased military action by SWAPO's military arm, PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia), and, in tandem, increased industrial action by the NUNW and its affiliated unions. In June 1988, the NUNW called for a three-day general strike in support of the school boycott which was organised by the Namibia National Students Organisation (NANSO). More than 60,000 workers in Namibia supported the strike.[96] Shortly thereafter, in 1989, the Namibian National Teachers Union, NANTU, was formed, which was also and still is tied to SWAPO.

Shortly after its formation, in collaboration with NAPWU (also affiliated with SWAPO), the NANTU Regional Committee in the then Kavango Region[97] organised a series of strikes which saw, amongst other actions, the closure of the Rundu Technical Institute, in support of seven teachers who had been suspended from the Teachers' Training College by the colonial regime.[98] The strike was called off only after NANTU and NAPWU reached an agreement with the Administrator-General of the colonial administration, Louis Pienaar, to reinstate the teachers. At this point, the negotiating power in the context of labour relations of both the liberation movement and its affiliated unions was undeniable.

When Namibia achieved its independence from colonial rule in 1990, the contract labour system was swiftly abolished under the new

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95   Pedrina (2018).
96   Dierks (2005).
97   Since 2013, the Kavango Region has been divided into two regions, namely the Kavango East and Kavango West Regions.
98   Kantema (2016). The teachers had been suspended and fired after being accused of being political activists whom the administration argued intended to influence learners in anticipation of the upcoming elections, which were scheduled for November 1989.

SWAPO-led government. Namibians had been oppressed and deprived of even the most basic of human rights such as the right to dignity, education, fair trial, freedom of speech, liberty, freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention, owning property etc. under the apartheid system.[99] As a consequence, the new Namibian Constitution was founded on the principles of constitutional democracy and emphasises the equal rights of all Namibian citizens.[100] Given the central role of the exploitative contract labour system in the oppressive colonial rule of Namibia, not to mention that the majority of SWAPO's support, particularly in the early years of the struggle, was based among the migrant labour force, it is not surprising that one of the first stated priorities of the inaugural SWAPO government was a new labour dispensation.[101] In the following we examine these initial efforts as well as the first failures by the new government in fully addressing the inequalities suffered by the now former migrant labourers.

At independence, there was a widespread expectation among workers that the SWAPO government would be a workers' government, not least due to the structural links between the NUNW unions and the prominent role of union leaders within SWAPO.[102] Two years after Namibia attained its independence, the Namibian Labour Act No. 6 of 1992 was gazetted. It contained extensive and detailed provisions relating to the basic conditions of employment, rules concerning termination of service, the dismissal of workers, and disciplinary action. The aims of the Act are set out as follows:

> *[T]o make provision for the regulation of the conditions of employment; to prevent and remedy unfair dismissals and unfair disciplinary actions; to regulate the termination of employment contracts; to provide for the registration of unions and employers' organisations and to define the rights and obligations of each; to provide for the settlement of labour disputes; to provide for a Labour Commissioner and inspectors; to establish a Labour Advisory Council, a Labour Court, district labour courts and a*

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99   Silvester (2016).
100   Nakuta (2016).
101   Bauer (1997).
102   Jauch (2002).

Wages Commission; and to provide for the health, safety, and wel-fare of employees at work.[103]

Southall argues that the 1992 Labour Act created significant and necessary changes to the living and working conditions of Namibian workers.[104] And yet, the most notable omission from the Act was provision for minimum wages.[105] Indeed, although the ruling party maintained that its role in the consultative process for the drafting of the Labour Act was that of a 'referee', trying to create a level playing field for collective bargaining between capital and labour, Jauch claims that the government was ultimately the dominant actor.[106] It thereby limited the scope of the consultations and reserved the right to make decisions without consensus from the social partners.

When SWAPO came to power, the focus of the party-affiliated trade unions shifted. Many of the trade unionists from pre-independent Namibia became part of SWAPO's leadership in the new dispensation. This meant that the SWAPO government played both the role of arbitrator in labour disputes while simultaneously being the country's biggest employer.[107] As Jauch further explains, '[a]gainst the background of huge imbalances in terms of economic power between capital and labour, the state's chosen role as "neutral referee" [...] effectively benefitted business interests', leading to accusations of behind-the-scenes lobbying by employers.[108] Thus, despite the closeness of NUNW trade unionists to SWAPO, there is little evidence that this has effectively influenced government policy in favour of workers; in other words, the gains to workers of their federation's close affiliation to the ruling party remains ambiguous.[109]

However, the significant role played by the NUNW in this major turning point in the history of Namibian labour relations cannot be negated. Its strategic leadership and active participation in mobilising workers were instrumental in challenging the colonial labour system,

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103   Namibian Labour Act No. 6, (1992), p. 1.
104   Southall (2013).
105   Dierks (2005).
106   Jauch (2002).
107   LaRRI (2006).
108   Jauch (2002), p. 33.
109   Southall (2013); Jauch (2002).

demonstrating the power of collective action. This not only solidi-
fied the union's influence but also paved the way for future organised
labour movements, strengthening the broader liberation struggle. The
NUNW's efforts helped lay a foundation for a more equitable labour
landscape post-independence, showcasing the potential of trade unions
to effect meaningful socio-political change.

The two examples of the 1990s show the ultimate need for large-
scale political change as a prerequisite for the complete abolition of the
two migrant labour systems as they had, over the decades since their
institution, become so entrenched in both countries' economies. In both
cases, trade unions took an important but also somewhat subjugated
role. In the case of Switzerland, internal lack of consensus over the
EEA and belated organisation behind unified demands can be seen as a
reason for the failure of the EEA referendum and the attendant abolition
of the *Saisonnierstatut*. In Namibia, the trade unions had, at first, a great
influence due to their pivotal role in the country's liberation. Ultimately,
however, they failed to come out as a strong individual force, merging
instead into new government structures.

In Switzerland, divisions within the SGB over the EEA were fuelled
by genuinely labour-centric concerns over issues such as wage-dum-
ping, but once again failed to directly address the plight of *Saisonniers*
and other workers without Swiss citizenship. Similarly, in Namibia, the
restructuring of unions and transfer of leadership to government posi-
tions led to large efforts in addressing certain issues of inequality but
failed to tackle specifically the situation of former migrant labourers,
whose position in the past system had them inherit particularly harsh
conditions.

Finally, both examples stand in some ways for the increasing esta-
blishment of modern neo-liberalism in the 1990s, as both Switzerland
and Namibia had to (re-)position themselves. The economically strong
and socially conservative Swiss state and its voting majority could
leverage said strength into an attempt to participate in open markets
without giving up national policies, especially in regard to migration.
The newly established Namibian state also stood before the choice
of attempting more centralised socialist-leaning policies to address
inequality or to open up to global markets and, for instance, refuse to
completely nationalise sectors such as mining or redistribute land, thus
making it more difficult to immediately address the material situation

of those now officially called 'formerly' disadvantaged. The examples are somewhat opposed yet still closely related and ultimately mark a divergence in the timelines of migrant labour systems in Namibia and Switzerland.

2000s: Bilateral Agreements with the EU and 2007 Namibian Labour Act

We now turn to our two final examples, the debates over the package of bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the European Union passed in 2002, and the second Namibian Labour Act of 2007. These, in many ways, lead on directly from the previous turning points and illustrate the role of unions in economies which continued to be marked by large-scale migrant labour systems—even if these had in fact already been abolished, as was the case in Namibia.

In 2002, the first package of bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU (*Bilateralen I*) came into force, containing the so-called '*Freizügigkeitsabkommen*' [agreement on freedom of movement, FZA], through which Switzerland successfully signed up to the free movement of workers in Europe and abolished the *Saisonnierstatut*. Again, the FZA and immigration questions were the focus of much of the public discussion in the lead-up to the vote. However, the state took a different approach to that of the EEA vote a decade earlier and worked closely with the unions to develop a solution that would be palatable to both the conservative Swiss voters and European authorities who pushed for more liberalisation.[110] This led to the introduction of the FlaM, as developed by a tripartite commission of state actors and social partners. This section will highlight the importance of the FlaM as a significant achievement by the unions in bringing about labour reform for workers without Swiss citizenship, while examining the extent to which concerns over the position of migrant workers in Switzerland influenced the decision-making process in drawing up the FlaM, both within the unions and their umbrella organisations, and within the wider tripartite taskforce.

Following the rejection of the EEA referendum in 1992, Switzerland commenced negotiations with the European authorities to develop a

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110   Wyler (2015); Rieger (2014).

package of bilateral agreements, which would include a much-debated agreement on freedom of movement for workers. As had been the case during the EEA referendum, the question of FMP would once more prove to be the most controversial aspect of the bilateral deal, at least as far as the popular vote was concerned.[111] Faced with this challenge and in an attempt to avoid another rejected referendum at all costs, the government took a series of steps: they reimagined the negotiation strategy to include tripartite bodies, thereby ensuring the support of the social partners; and devised a range of safety measures that would hopefully be acceptable both to the European authorities and the majority conservative Swiss voting public. These measures included extended transition periods, the retention of quotas for third-country nationals, and the possibility to terminate the FZA, as well as the package of FlaM, by referendum after a seven-year period.[112]

Heer claims the single greatest challenge for the Swiss government was to get the trade unions to side in favour of the *Bilateralen I*.[113] While the tripartite bodies also involved the Swiss Employers' Association [*Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband*, SAV] as the most influential organisation of capital, the employers' support for the bilateral deal was never really questioned, as, overall, they stood to benefit greatly from closer integration with the rest of Europe. The trade unions, on the other hand, were more sceptical, and the Federal Council was thus convinced that an enthusiastic yes-campaign from the SGB would grant the state more legitimacy in attempting to introduce the FZA and convey its benefits to the population.[114] As a result, the SGB quickly established a key role for itself in these negotiations, emerging as a kind of 'veto-player', i.e., a political actor whose support was considered indispensable to achieve a popular majority in favour of the bilateral agreements.[115] Having clearly set out its demands, the SGB made its support of the FZA contingent upon effective and conclusive FlaM.[116] Given the usual dominance of the Federal Council and business interests in

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111 Heer (2022).
112 Freiburghaus (2015).
113 Heer (2022).
114 For example, the GBI position paper "Kritisches Ja zum Bilateralen Abkommen EU-Schweiz" (G 721/3).
115 Heer (2022), p. 61.
116 G 721/3.

Swiss decision-making, Fischer et al. argue that the SGB's strategic use of their bargaining power 'put the domestic power configuration on its head and resulted in several legislative innovations' in the FlaM.[117]

The introduction of the FlaM constituted an unusually deep intervention by the state into the labour market by Swiss standards. They consisted of three elements: facilitating the process for making collective labour agreements generally binding; the possibility to introduce mandatory minimum wages in sectors not bound by collective agreements; and the so-called '*Entsendegesetz*' [Posted Workers Act, EntsG], which guarantees Swiss minimum standards of working and wage conditions for employees posted to Switzerland from abroad, and vice versa.[118] As had been the case in the EEA vote a few years earlier, the SGB was again primarily fearful that the controls over wage and working conditions contained in the existing immigration law (Art. 9 BVO) would fall away with the introduction of FMP and not be replaced by equivalent and effective measures.[119] The FlaM were therefore regarded as necessary to protect 'all workers based in Switzerland' from wage and social dumping.[120] This is perhaps most evident in the EntsG, which, although it is a law pertaining to employees based abroad—whether Swiss citizens working elsewhere in Europe, or non-Swiss citizens working in Switzerland—, contains provisions which also have a significant impact on workers with Swiss citizenship employed in Switzerland. By guaranteeing certain minimum standards for posted workers in Switzerland, the law ensures that foreign employers do not exploit FMP to continue paying their workers lower wages while profiting off the high returns in Switzerland. In this way, the EntsG protects employees posted in Switzerland and ensures they receive the same treatment as locally-employed workers. At the same time, however, the law by extension also benefits Swiss employers and employees by combatting wage and social dumping, as it prevents foreign providers of labour from being awarded contracts in Switzerland through offering more favourable bids due to lower personnel costs.[121]

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117   Fischer et al. (2002), p. 159.
118   State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (Seco) (2023); Gaillard and Trunz (2005).
119   Ar SGB G 561/6 (1997–1999): Bilaterale Abkommen 1997–1999; G 721/3.
120   G 561/6.
121   Ibid.

Indeed, the SGB's primary concern in considering which position to take on the entire bilateral deal was dependent on whether the FlaM contained sufficient means to prevent wage and social dumping. A 1999 position paper on the FlaM stated the unions' goals as threefold: firstly, preventing a deterioration in wage and working conditions as a result of FMP; secondly, protecting local business from unfair competition with foreign companies using posted workers to work longer hours and/or for lower wages; and thirdly, preventing increased unemployment in Switzerland.[122] The implications of FMP for workers without Swiss citizenship are notably absent from this list of concerns, though this might be justified by the fact that the European authorities and individual EU governments had already been putting pressure on Switzerland to improve the status of these workers, and the SGB therefore took the opportunity to focus on other priorities during the negotiations for 'tactical' reasons.[123] The emphasis on the benefits of the FlaM to Swiss citizens can be further justified by the fact that a majority of the voting public would only be won over on the basis of economic arguments, rather than appeals to equality and social justice.[124] Other archival documents, such as a petition submitted by the SGB to the Federal Council in September 1994, demonstrate that the SGB nevertheless continued to thematise the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut*, demanding that this be dealt with independently from the bilateral negotiations with the EU, i.e., making it a priority outside of the slow and complex negotiations.[125]

As we have seen in relation to the divisions ahead of the EEA referendum discussed in the previous section, the fact that the SGB managed to unite behind the FlaM was, in itself, also a significant achievement. Pedrina emphasises that the unions of the SGB were unanimous in their recognition of the FlaM as necessary if the FZA was to be approved.[126]

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122 Ibid.
123 G 491/9.
124 G 472/8.
125 G 491/9. Indeed, the prospect of 'a Switzerland in Europe without a Saisonnierstatut' was the subject of a congress organised by the SGB in September 1995. "Ausländer/innen Tagung" des SGB, 16.09.1995 – Für eine Schweiz in Europa ohne Saisonnierstatut – nein zum Etikettenschwindel! (öffentliche Diskussions- und Protestversammlung), G 472/8.
126 Pedrina (2018).

Indeed, SGB Executive Secretary Serge Gaillard stated at the time that it would be impossible for the trade unions to agree to FMP without effective FlaM, and that the majority of the voting population would probably follow the SGB's line in rejecting the *Bilateralen I* in a referendum campaign.[127] However, hefty internal divisions remained over what exactly the protective measures should entail, how they should be prioritised, and what constituted the unions' 'pain thresholds' in the negotiations.[128]

Among the other social partners, there was little serious opposition to the FlaM. While representatives from the SAV were somewhat wary of the measures given Switzerland's tradition of liberal labour market policy, they recognised that they stood to profit greatly from the *Bilateralen I* more generally, and were therefore willing to concede the FlaM so as not to risk collapsing the entire bilateral deal.[129] Similarly, the state's willingness to accept the proposals despite their far-reaching effects is reflective of the unusually strong bargaining position of the unions in the specific set of conditions within which the FlaM were agreed. Supporting the wage protection measures, in particular, entailed a certain degree of risk for the Federal Council, as this signalled an implicit recognition by the state that FMP could indeed result in pressure on wages. This admission was justified, however, by the argument that FMP had not resulted in a levelling of wages in other EU member states, but that given Switzerland's high wage level, there was nevertheless a certain risk which needed to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the integration of the social partners into decision-making on the *Bilateralen I* to this extent represents a significant deviation from the usual negotiation process for international-level agreements and highlights the Federal Council's view that the opinions of the social partners were considered essential in these negotiations. While the Swiss system of decision-making is shaped by corporatism, as outlined above, this is highly unusual on the international level, which typically sees the executive strengthened at the expense of both the parliament and private actors.[130]

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127   G 561/6.
128   Pedrina (2018), p. 52.
129   Fischer et al. (2002).
130   Marti (2013); Fischer et al. (2002).

In Namibia, the final turning point be examined is the gazetting of the Namibian Labour Act No. 11 of 2007 which came into force in 2008. Preceded by the Labour Act No. 15 of 2004, which was never fully implemented, the Act officially replaced the 1992 Labour Act and attempted to facilitate, insofar as possible, a meeting of the minds of the different stakeholders, namely the state, capital and labour. Importantly, despite the two Acts that preceded it, the 2007 Labour Act was the first to make provision for minimum wages.[131]

As time progressed after independence, tensions in Namibia continued to rise. LaRRI argues that there was a widespread expectation among workers for the SWAPO regime, given the liberation movement's supposedly socialist origins, to be a government which put the interests of the workers at the fore.[132] However, with many union leaders playing a prominent role in the new government, workers felt that the introduction of social partnership by the party was too easily accepted by the NUNW. This caused them to lose faith in the union which once fought for radical changes on behalf of workers. Unsurprisingly, then, by 2002, the Namibia Federation of Trade Unions (NAFTU) and the Namibia People's Social Movement (NPSM) merged to form a new umbrella organisation, the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA). The NUNW and TUCNA thus represented the majority of workers in the country, and new unions which were not affiliated with SWAPO continued to emerge, while some sectors such as domestic workers, farm workers and petrol station workers remained ununionised.[133] Today, Namibia has more than 30 registered trade unions, most of which are either affiliated with the NUNW or with TUCNA. The latter has continuously criticised the NUNW for its affiliation to SWAPO and, as a result, contributed to the growing public perception of the NUNW as a non-independent actor. The NUNW and its affiliates have refuted these accusations numerous times, and it has on numerous occasions criticised government policies, but it nonetheless remains openly tied to the ruling party.[134]

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131   Dierks (2005).
132   LaRRI (2006).
133   Sakaria (2010).
134   Jauch (2018).

A decade after attaining independence, Namibia was characterised by high levels of income inequality and high levels of unemployment which needed to be addressed.[135] Therefore, the introduction of a minimum wage through the 2007 Labour Act speaks to the ongoing contributions of the unions to labour reform, despite their above-highlighted disagreements and the potential conflicts of interest for government-affiliated unionists. Jauch highlights the following contributions by unions:

After several years of intense and heated debates, a new Labour Act (Act 11 of 2007) was finally passed and became operational in 2008. [...] Employers on one hand and trade unions on the other represent very different constituencies—with different interests. [...] However, large sections of the 2007 Labour Act were agreed to by consensus; such as the sections introducing a new system of dispute prevention and resolution through compulsory conciliation and arbitration. [...] In cases of conflicts of interest, such as deadlocks in wage negotiations, the dispute has to be referred to the Labour Commissioner for compulsory conciliation. Only when this process fails, will trade unions be able to embark on a protected ("legal") strike. All parties (unions, employers and government alike) expected the new system to result in a better and faster resolution of industrial disputes.[136]

From Jauch's account, the trade unions appeared to put some of their differences aside for the purpose of aiding in a Labour Act which is in the wider interest of Namibian workers. As a result, the new Labour Act introduced numerous improved conditions for workers (in addition to the minimum wage mentioned above), such as maternity leave, annual leave and compassionate leave and included measures to mitigate tension in workplaces by promoting negotiations between managers and unionists.[137]

Finally, Jauch further argues that the new Labour Act put trade unions in a position where their main function became the represen-

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135   Jauch (2004); Karamata (2006).
136   Jauch (2018), pp. 28–29.
137   Parker (2012).

tation of workers in a tripartite arrangement.[138] This means that only well-organised workers such as those employed by the public service, mines and fishing companies could benefit from collective bargaining. However, that demographic represents the minority of workers in Namibia, with the majority employed in farms, retail and domestic work remaining in poverty as a result. Therefore, while the role of the trade unions at this turning point is well illustrated and documented, the benefits to individual workers of this dispensation remain few and far between.

The Labour Act of 2007 is thus in some ways a continuation of the Act of 1992 in the sense that it made some great strides (minimum wage) to address certain aspects of inequality while still generally leaving the weakest workers vulnerable to exploitation. The unions' complex relationships towards government and one another complicate the possibility of closed, organised action on one front as was the case before independence in the General Strike, but the Act nonetheless speaks to the possibility of agreement on at least some large-scale issues.

Moreover, the detailed examples from the 2000s in many ways are the direct continuation of the paths set by the decisions taken in the 1990s. In the case of Switzerland, the rejection of EEA membership led to a re-evaluation by the state about how to make greater openness towards European markets and European laws palatable to the Swiss public, leading to an unparalleled empowerment of the unions and, finally, to the end of the *Saisonnierstatut*. In Namibia, which had abolished the migrant labour system a decade prior, the government and unions continued to grapple with the consequences of past systemic inequality. The political differences between unions due to the NUNW's governmental ties and the not-as-far-reaching measures to redress inequality directly after independence resulted in a slow-moving process that ultimately culminated in a victory for workers when it came to the new minimum wage dispensation.

While the disparities between the two countries' political situations and the depth of the inequality caused by the systems become more evident in these divergent trajectories, what remains similar is that in both cases, unions and governments alike came to realise the deep impact the migrant labour systems had on their societies and economies. However,

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138   Jauch (2018).

in Switzerland, where the migrant labourers were always foreign nationals, the unions argued for their rights via rhetoric focused on workers with Swiss citizenship, so as to remain attractive to a wider public.

In Namibia, where the former migrant labourers became Namibian citizens post-independence and were instrumental in achieving liberation, the need for equalising measures remained and remains a widely debated issue.

Today, issues of nationalism and xenophobia threaten to push the rights of foreign national workers to the fringes of the unions and political discourse in both countries, while the governments continue to grapple with issues of wage dumping in an open and free market environment. Both Namibia and Switzerland still see a high influx of migrant labour, and this group continues to be in a much weaker position than the local labour force. Thus, both countries can draw lessons from their respective pasts of systemically oppressive organised labour migration, the legacies of which remain palpable in both societies. Furthermore, as we will argue in the conclusion, due to the historical differences, there is also unequal awareness about this past in Namibia and Switzerland today.

Conclusion

The previous section has highlighted a number of aspects of both the SGB and NUNW's attitudes to migrant labourers and their complex involvement in the abolition of the respective migrant labour systems at various turning points in labour relations in both Switzerland and Namibia. The findings from the individual country cases will be summarised and evaluated in this final section before being brought together in a conclusion.

Two findings stand out in particular in the Swiss case: Firstly, the change in attitude over time towards workers without Swiss citizenship, particularly *Saisonniers*, by the member unions of the SGB; and secondly, the two-pronged argumentation strategy employed by the SGB in relation to the improvement of workers' rights. The historical xenophobia of the SGB is undeniable, whether explicit or implicit, in the material dating from the late 1960s, if not later. It is also worth reiterating the divergent stance assumed by the GBH, which is also reflected in the archival material: frequently those documents consulted

that focused most explicitly on the rights and status of immigrants in Switzerland were those of the GBH.[139]

The second conclusion which can be drawn from the analysis of the SGB's role in the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut* is its tactic of employing a double line of argumentation which emerged from the balancing act it performed between improving the situation for workers without Swiss citizenship while protecting Switzerland's high wage level and ensuring job security for Swiss citizens. In practice, this means that, depending on its audience and the context of the discussion, the SGB would shift the emphasis of its argumentation to the improvement of workers' rights for either Swiss or non-Swiss citizens. This was made possible by the fact that poor working and wage conditions, and the conditions of the *Saisonnierstatut* in particular, were bad for both Swiss citizens and workers without Swiss citizenship. If employers could get away with paying non-Swiss citizens less and employing them on precarious temporary contracts, this would also directly affect the wages and working conditions of Swiss citizens in the same sector, leading to wage and social dumping, as outlined above. Advocating for the improvement and safeguarding of Swiss wage and employment protection and fighting for the development of controls to ensure employer compliance thus killed two birds with one stone.

An interesting example of this double-pronged argumentation strategy is provided in a contribution by GBH representative Burrino to the 43rd SGB Congress in 1975 (G 491/3). Burrino argues for the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut*, particularly in the construction sector, and bases his argument on two points. [140] First and foremost, he claims that the *Saisonnierstatut* makes no sense in the contemporary context, as advances in technology mean construction can be done year-round, and yet the sector lacks sufficient labour in the winter months when most *Saisonniers* have been forced to return home. To emphasise his point,

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139   However, due to the scope of this contribution, our research was limited to the archives of the SGB, though the latter's files did contain quite a lot of archival material from the GBH, such as correspondence between the GBH and various authorities (cantonal and federal) as well as between the various unions of the SGB (e.g., in G 491/9).

140   It is interesting to note once more that it was a representative of the GBH who thematised the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut* and the plight of *Saisonniers* at this Congress.

he gives the example of public building projects, such as schools, retirement homes and hospitals, which have had their construction delayed due to the absence of *Saisonniers*. He thus appeals in the name of 'weaker' Swiss citizens—namely children, the elderly and the sick—for the abolition of the statute. Only then does he turn to the *Saisonniers* themselves and outline the discrimination they face in comparison to annual permit holders and Swiss citizens.

The double line of argumentation is exemplified elsewhere in the archival material, particularly from the 1990s onwards, where the emphasis is clearly on the prevention of wage and social dumping and the advantages of FMP, without necessarily explicitly mentioning the abolition of the *Saisonnierstatut* which would come about at the same time. Indeed, the latter is rarely mentioned at all in the discussions on FlaM and FMP examined in the archival research. In the documents pertaining to the FlaM, the discussion on the status and rights of workers without Swiss citizenship appears almost exclusively focused on posted workers and the EntsG. In turn, much of the discussion surrounding the need for effective legislation to protect the rights of posted workers actually centred on the benefits this would entail for workers with Swiss citizenship and Swiss-based enterprises. However, it is impossible to gauge whether or to what extent this emphasis by the SGB was motivated out of a desire first and foremost to protect Swiss citizens among its membership, or whether it represents a conscious strategy employed to win support from the conservative (and anti-immigrant) elements of Swiss government and society. Overall, it was this challenge which fundamentally limits the conclusions which can be drawn from the Swiss findings outlined in this contribution. However, the archival research undertaken represents an important first step towards understanding the focus of the SGB's efforts, at least in terms of the documentation available. Had the scope of the research been limited to secondary sources and union publications, it is likely that even this tentative conclusion would have been obscured by the benefit of hindsight in the context of 'modern' attitudes to migration on the political left, which may lead to the reframing of historical debates on the *Saisonnierstatut* to put more emphasis on the plight of the *Saisonniers* than may really have been the case at the time.

The material surveyed in this research has made it evident that during the struggle for Namibian independence, there was an overwhelming

spirit of unity in the country, especially amongst migrant workers. This unity within and amongst the unions affiliated with the liberation movement promoted organised and impactful collaborative efforts in the interest of the workers, resulting in an increase in the negotiating power of the labour organisations, which, in turn, impacted law and policymaking. As a result, at the turning points in the 1970s and the 1990s, the unions which represented the migrant workers all sought a common goal. Perhaps, more importantly, they had a common enemy: the apartheid government and the dehumanising migrant labour system which was accompanied by the equally dehumanising pass laws. The goal therefore was clear: gain independence for the country and bring about decent employment conditions for workers. Indeed, the emergence of SWAPO out of the workers' movement meant that the larger nationalist struggle for independence was, at the same time, the pursuit of a political solution to workers' problems.[141] It was a case of us (the workers, the individual unions, NUNW and SWAPO) versus them (the white employers and the apartheid government).

However, an analysis of the final turning point (the 2000s) magnified the significant change in the political and union climate after SWAPO came to power. The unions increasingly faced challenges such as the ongoing retrenchments of workers, ideological differences, financial and human resource constraints, illegal strikes, struggles to represent workers across different industries, and the continued poverty and inequality in Namibia. Unsurprisingly, the reports analysed—regardless of the author—agreed that the SWAPO government (by its affiliation with the NUNW) played the role of arbitrator in labour disputes, while being the country's biggest employer. In this lies a conflict of interest. When the employer and the union are (for all intents and purposes) the same entity, it becomes nearly impossible to fairly represent the workers.

Because the NUNW is affiliated with SWAPO, trade union leaders have become more accommodating to the government. Before independence, the NUNW would deliberately facilitate and mobilise activities (such as the General Strike of 1971/72) by the workers to raise international awareness, and in turn, put pressure on the apartheid government. As Murray and Wood highlight, at least in the early years after

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141   Bauer (1997).

independence, the NUNW consistently relied on SWAPO to see that its needs were met, rather than mobilising and effecting change through the usual bargaining and policy-influencing channels.[142] Southall highlights a further reason for the NUNW's reluctance to disaffiliate from SWAPO. He argues that 'the alliance provides a path of upward mobility for trade union leaders, significant numbers of whom have moved into government or into the private sector.'[143] This observation underlines the questionable nature of tripartite relations between the social partners in Namibia as the lines become increasingly blurred between the ruling party and the respective organisations of capital and labour.

However, it would not be accurate to argue that the NUNW has become completely dormant. The union consistently counts the largest membership in the country and continues to both amplify the voices of its members and be an active player in the reform of labour laws and relations. For example, the NUNW played a major role in the development of the 2007 Labour Act, the Social Security Act of 1994 and the Affirmative Action (Employment) Act of 1998 which have collectively banned labour hire and the discrimination of people seeking membership, running for elections or organisational activities in unions and workplaces based on race, colour or ethnic origin, sex, marital status or family responsibilities, religion, creed or political opinion, social or economic status, degree of mental or physical ability, HIV/AIDS status and previous or current pregnancies.[144]

Another key observation is the shift of public opinion against the NUNW detailed above that led to the formation of TUCNA in 2002. This created a somewhat split official front for labour disputes. Both TUCNA and the NUNW appear to have the same goals but are hindered only by political interests. Jauch attributes the distrust and disunity within the labour organisations to political motivations.[145] For example, the NUNW has labelled TUCNA's call for the former's disaffiliation from SWAPO and subsequent unification of the two organisations as a ploy by other political parties to weaken SWAPO.[146] As a consequence,

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142 Murray and Wood (1997).
143 Southall (2013), p. 181.
144 It is worth noting that sexual orientation and gender identity do not form part of this otherwise wide-ranging list, even at the time of writing in 2025.
145 Jauch (2018).
146 Nakuta (2016).

unity amongst trade unions is unlikely to be attained anytime soon. Scholars and labour experts have indeed also been advocating for the NUNW to disaffiliate from SWAPO for decades in order for unions in Namibia to have a path forward without glaring conflicts of interest.[147]

Many have called for the establishment of one representative body for all the workers in the country with sub-unions which are industry-specific such as MUN (Mine Workers Union of Namibia) or NANTU (Namibia National Teachers Union). Such a unified trade union fede-ration would require the current trade unions to find common ground. Though challenging, this pursuit would require the leaders to identify their differences and similarities, reevaluate their current strategies and goals; and then work on ways to implement them by speaking with a unified voice.

The final point worth noting with regard to Namibia is that the socio-economic and political environment of the country after indepen-dence has played a major role in the reasons behind the changes in the focus, operations and methods of trade unions. As discussed, many trade union leaders have been integrated into political party leadership. Knowing this, many workers have chosen to remain un-unionised, or have little faith in the unions that represent them. This is not only due to their awareness of the disunity among the labour organisations and the blurred lines in respect to political affiliation, but stems also from overall dissatisfaction with the results of labour disputes and labour policies. Even with the abolition of the contract labour system and the introduction of the 2007 Labour Act, 1994 Social Security Act and the 1998 Affirmative Action (Employment) Act, Namibian workers con-tinue to face multiple challenges daily, the most glaring of which is a combination of low wages, income inequality, poor working and living conditions.

This chapter has demonstrated the means by and extent to which trade union organisations influenced labour reform throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the first decade of the twenty-first century, with regard to the abolition of the oppressive migrant labour systems which operated in both Namibia and Switzerland. The unions' involvement in such reform was pre-determined by the nature of the political, social and historical context of the respective countries at

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147   See, for example, Jauch (2002).

each point in time, a fact which continues to affect the reach of their influence today. In both Namibia and Switzerland, the unions created a platform for migrant workers to engage politically and have their concerns heard in arenas to which they would otherwise have had limited or no access whatsoever. Today, in part due to the legacy of the migrant labour systems, the trade unions continue to play an important role in championing the rights of underrepresented groups.

As the Namibian system of contract labour was thoroughly intertwined with formalised and systematic oppression, the exploitative nature of the system is widely and openly discussed. In Switzerland, though there have been recent attempts to raise awareness about the legacy of the *Saisonnier* system (e.g. by the museums' sector and in academic circles, as well as by recent trade union publications), not enough critical attention has been paid to the failures to address the plight of seasonal workers in the decades the *Saisonnierstatut* was in force. In both cases, the role of trade unions, as the bodies with arguably the greatest responsibility and potential to combat labour market injustices, such as those faced by migrant labourers, has not been examined in this way.

Both Namibia and Switzerland continue to be extremely dependent on labour migration to boost the domestic economy. And yet, public discourse often appears to favour prioritising control over the number of workers coming in over measures to improve and guarantee fair salaries and working conditions. In this way, the lingering effects of both systems are still felt by workers today, and labour migrants, who often find themselves in precarious employment, continue to face major challenges, a lack of political representation, and economic and social subordination in both Swiss and Namibian society. More often than not, labour migrants are framed as the problem, rather than the failings of the state and social actors to remedy their situation and recognise their essential contribution to the domestic economy. It is hoped that the current research will serve as a catalyst for dialogue about this legacy, and to push trade unions, as well as state authorities, to do more to protect the rights of labour migrants in both countries.

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Chapter 4

Public Remembrance of Contract Labour Systems in Namibia and Switzerland

Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro

Introduction

In 2022, a conference on seasonal workers was held in Basel, Switzerland. Here, Paola de Martin, the daughter of an Italian seasonal worker stated: 'I was only able to share my story after my father passed away.' Before that, she explained, going public with the trauma her family had endured would have been impossible. Her father told her about his time as a 'Saisonnier' (seasonal worker) in Switzerland, but had done so only on the condition that she would not share it with others during his lifetime.[1] After his passing, Paola recalls, she felt the time had come, and it would be liberating to tell her story. The other guests in the panel nodded enthusiastically. The story of Paola's father also echoed their experiences as *Saisonniers*. An unspoken sense of bonding and understanding existed between them. Although each life story is unique, what is called the 'Saisonnierstatut' in Switzerland (seasonal worker status) has had a strong impact on all those who were directly affected by it. 'Exploitation of cheap labour', 'trauma', 'torn apart families', 'resentment', 'sacrifice', 'wish for acknowledgment', those words are intrinsic to each of these stories.

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1   The terms 'Saisonniers', 'seasonal workers', 'contract labourers' or 'migrant workers' can be used interchangeably, depending on the context, since they all refer to workers enmeshed in a cheap labour system in the respective countries.

About 8000 kilometres to the south, in northern Namibia, we experienced a completely different, and yet oddly similar scenario.

My grandchildren always say, 'Yes, grandfather, we have heard the old stories many times.'

So the headman, Joseph Tuta Mbambi, explained to us. He was sitting under a tall tree, surrounded by friends, in a small village about an hour's drive from the town of Rundu. Some of his friends and neighbours have also experienced the contract labour system first-hand. All of them have lived through that time. They expressed the wish that the younger generations would be more engaged in the history of the contract labour system in their country. To their grandchildren it has become a repetitive and old story, almost like a tale, nothing tangible. The physical, infrastructural remainders of the contract labour system seemed to have been removed or erased from public memory. What remains is a circle of friends and neighbours, like the ones we met, who come together in order to remember the past.

Although the seasonal worker status in Switzerland and the contract labour system in Namibia, were different from one another, they shared many common denominators. On a socio-economic level, for instance, there are plenty of parallels in how both systems functioned, such as the exploitation of cheap labour, the inhumane working conditions, and the rupture of family ties that have been discussed in other contributions to this volume.

This chapter explores how the two systems are remembered and commemorated in both countries, in order to visualise the similarities and the differences inherent to specific remembrance processes in each of them. For these reasons, our focus will lie on manifestations and processes of what can be framed as public remembering. Although a more common term would be 'public memory', this research focuses primarily on active manifestations and processes. The term memory can be regarded as more passive, while remembrance implies process, i.e. activity. Indeed, as the two terms do compliment one another in this chapter, 'remembrance' has proven more appropriate for describing the examination of 'remembrance practices' in a broader sense, for example, the steps undertaken by protagonists to keep memory alive. 'Public memory' does not describe active remembrance processes, for example, building monuments, creating exhibitions, or transmitting

oral history, in the way 'public remembrance' does. In this way the terms create a complementary pair in this chapter.

Interest in the study of the public memory of contract labour in Switzerland and Namibia draws directly from a gap in knowledge about their histories that has been noted even among students of the social sciences and humanities in both countries. We asked ourselves, why has the history of contract labour not been introduced in our school curricula, or more generally speaking, as part of the grand historical narratives of Switzerland and Namibia? Questioning why such an important aspect of the history of both nations seems to be absent from the public discourse, adding to the fact that hardly anything in the public space calls to mind that particular time and theme, suggested that their study was necessary. At first glance, it appears as if reminders of those particular times in history had been erased. This is particularly puzzling, since both countries had functioning contract labour systems until rather recently. Indeed, although formally abolished in 1977, the Namibian 'Migrant Labour System' remained intact, at least until the country's independence in 1990, as in Switzerland, the 'Saisonnierstatut' until 2002.

This chapter is thus guided by the central question, how is contract labour remembered in the public sphere? The term 'remembrance' encompasses acts of commemoration as well as perceptible references and narratives that evoke historical periods marked by contract labour. These historical narratives and allusions to the past may find expression through various channels, including monuments, commemorative plaques, media representations, as well as the names of streets, buildings, and public squares, or educational programmes hosted in schools. As early as 1925, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs defined collective memory as the shared recollections of a group, arguing that it is fundamentally shaped by the social framework, within which this group resides in society.[2] This means that the structures provided by social groups play an essential role in how individuals organise, interpret, and retrieve their memories. In our chapter, we refer to this early definition of collective memory as we aspire to discern the extent to which the contract labour system is recollected within Swiss and Namibian societies. Consequently, we explore the contract labour systems' presence within the collective memory of both of them.

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2   Halbwachs (2009).

Collective memory is moulded by the social framework of a nation or community and often mirrors the national narrative and the broader historical context of a society.[3] Studies have underscored the important role of politics in shaping the historical narrative, a phenomenon that has been labelled 'memory politics'. Indeed, memory politics can be used to legitimise authorities or political inclinations and, therefore, also dictate which facets of history are foregrounded, celebrated, commemorated, and ultimately preserved.[4] When a state acknowledges its culpability in past traumatic events and engages with victim groups to express regret, it frequently aligns with acts of commemoration and memorialisation. A study by Lind introduces the concept of 'apologetic remembrance.'[5] This concept posits that the manner in which a country remembers and acknowledges past violence significantly influences its ability to foster successful reconciliation with former adversaries. 'Apologetic remembrance' operates along a spectrum and serves as an indicator to measure the level that such remembrance is practised by a nation through an array of political mechanisms and enactments. Public memory is produced by diverse actors. While private entities, such as curators, artists or performers, can significantly contribute to public remembrance, governments also assume a significant role in promoting, supporting, and subsidising various mechanisms for public remembrance. These mechanisms include the construction of memorials, the establishment of museums, the declaration of national holidays, the naming of streets, the inclusion of historical narratives in school curricula, and more.

The current chapter reveals this diversity with regards to the public memory of migrant workers in both countries of this study. In the first section, 'Museums and Monuments', we focus on how the history of contract labour is represented and remembered through monuments and museum exhibitions. In the second section, 'Activists and Advocacy', we focus on individuals and grass-root organisations that are committed to an active and appropriate public remembrance of the history of contract labour. Thereby we explore how factors foster public debate on silenced pasts. We further discuss the relationship between advocacy,

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3   Halbwachs (1992).
4   Liebman & Moffitt (2016).
5   Lind (2009).

activism and academia and their potentials and limitations in creating space and awareness for public remembrance of these pasts beyond the scope of the individual. In the third section, we discuss the potential of 'storytelling' in broadening the classical western model of the museum as the only tool to memorialisation of the past.

Museums and Monuments

Finding public memory of the seasonal worker system in Switzerland turned out to be very difficult. It appears that there are very few physical reminders in Switzerland of the seasonal worker status, either in the form of monuments or in the form of preserved buildings. In regard to monuments and memorials, we found a small monument *Hommage aux Saisonniers Italiens* (Tribute to the Italian contract labourers) in Geneva, erected by the private *Société des Associations Italiennes de Genève* (Society of the Italian associations in Geneva) in 2014. One of the more substantial monuments remembering contract labour that we could trace, is situated in Airolo in Southern Switzerland. However, due to various reasons this monument comes with its own limits and short-comings, which we will discuss in some length later on.

Furthermore, with regard to buildings and institutions of importance to Italian migrant workers, not all of them have survived. There was, for instance, the *Libreria Italiana* (Italian library) in Zurich that was an important structure for the Italian community, because it stocked all kinds of books, printed in Italian, including educational books for learning technical skills to support apprenticeships. It closed down recently. The *Ristorante Cooperativo*, also in Zurich, was a place where Italians and other foreigners could hold cultural and political gatherings or enjoy an affordable Italian dish. Shortly after our visit, it also closed its doors, a most deplorable event for all the people who remembered its significance for the Italian community. It became evident that many places, such as the barracks where workers lived or the Italian schools their children attended, have been torn down, and in their place, new buildings have been erected. Even when we contacted municipalities to establish the whereabouts of a specific building, like the sleeping quarters, the personnel with whom we spoke usually had no knowledge thereof.

Before we return to physical places of remembering, we will consider two temporary exhibitions in Biel/Bienne and in La Chaux-de-

Fonds, Switzerland, and the ways they convey and stimulate processes of remembrance in the public sphere. We will then discuss a public monument in Airolo, and other examples of remembrance in the area. Thereafter, we will explore how two prominent museums in Namibia, the Windhoek City Museum and the Independence Memorial Museum, remember migrant labour history. We will consider their limited attention to the history of migrant labour and its significant impact on Namibia, and argue that, while migrant labour contributed to the country's liberation, it is inadequately represented in museum displays, being overshadowed by concentration on military resistance against colonialism. This gap is a subject addressed by a mobile exhibition on the contract labour system that we will present in the end.

Exhibiting Silenced Histories: The Role of Swiss Museums

First we visited the exhibition in Biel/Bienne, a medium-sized Swiss city with a long industrial tradition. Biel/Bienne is one of the few bi-lingual cities of Switzerland and promotes a very consequential, dual-language policy in German and French. There, the *Neues Museum Biel/Nouveau Musée Bienne* (in short NMB) hosted an exhibition entitled, *Wir, die Saisonniers… 1931-2022 / Nous, saisonniers, saisonnières... 1931-2022* (We, the Seasonal Workers… 1931-2022) between December 2022 and June 2023. Originally conceptualised by three Geneva-based organisations (*Archives contestataires*, *College du travail* and *Rosa Brux*) the exhibition displayed a powerfully designed overview of the history of labour migration in Switzerland, bringing the notorious seasonal worker status, introduced in the year 1931, into a dialogue with the current marginalisation of migrant workers. The NMB's curators adapted the Geneva exhibition for the specific context of Biel/Bienne. Thereby they created a unique and more diverse narrative of the recent history of the city, a narrative that highlighted and integrated the immense contribution of tens of thousands of contract workers in the transformation of the city's human-made environment as well as its social fabric in the second half of the twentieth century. The exhibition employed histories, personal memories and art to tell the story of the harsh living and working conditions experienced by migrant workers from Italy and other southern European countries, in Switzerland. Carefully arranged contemporary posters, dramatic black-and-white photographs, personal

letters, recorded personal memories, and television snippets brought this largely ignored, dark chapter of Swiss history back to life. The historical material was presented in contrast with recent material, such as documentary videos of today's migrant workers telling personal stories of marginalisation and exploitation, projected on big screens. The exhibition was accompanied by extramural activities, like a guided tour through the city highlighting the now invisible long-time presence of seasonal workers. We personally experienced the considerable public interest in the exhibition and its topic, and we joined the guided tour. The organisers of the tour split the more than one hundred attendees into three language groups of German, French and Italian. Most importantly, the guided tour reinforced the exhibition's alternative narrative by encouraging us to engage personally with the often-overlooked contributions of contract workers. While the city of Biel/Bienne's dominant narrative typically highlights its industrial growth and cultural achievements, this experience illuminated the vital role migrant workers had played, and still do, in shaping the city's social and physical landscape.

La Chaux-de-Fonds, a modernist town in the Jura Mountains, had once been an international centre of watch making. There, the historical Museum of La-Chaux-de-Fonds (*Musée d'Histoire de La-Chaux-de-Fonds*) also hosted a temporary exhibition about seasonal workers and the Swiss migrant labour system. The La Chaux-de-Fonds exhibition, entitled *Les enfants du placard* (the children of the closet/wardrobe) highlighted a specific aspect of the seasonal worker status that had been ignored by the Swiss public for a long-time. Although not allowed to bring their families with them legally, many seasonal workers brought their children clandestinely across the border into Switzerland, where they lived hidden inside their homes, sometimes for years. According to the exhibition, an estimated number of 10,000 to 15,000 mostly Italian children were clandestinely in Switzerland during the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s, a number that continuously grew and increasingly included children from other countries such as Portugal and Spain. Visitors to the exhibition first learned its historical context through texts, photographs, short historical video-recordings and documentaries that retraced histories and depicted public opinions of the period. The following section showed thematically arranged voice- and video-recordings of formerly hidden children, confronting visitors with personal stories and memories of a

traumatic past. The last section of the exhibition highlighted the mobilisation and defiance that challenged the inhumane treatment of these children and their parents. For example, it depicted how a local woman from La-Chaux-de-Fonds, Denyse Raymond, taught hidden children in her home illegally. In sum, the exhibition *Les enfants du placard* not only shed light on a little-known chapter of Swiss history, it also gave voice to the personal memories of those who lived through it. By combining historical records with deeply emotional testimonies, the exhibition powerfully conveyed the protracted impact of the seasonal worker status on thousands of hidden children and their families, as well as on the moral and social implications of Switzerland's migrant labour policies, for the lives of an entire generation.

The exhibition *Les enfants du placard*, highlighting the plight of hidden children emerged from a partnership between Francesco Garufo, curator and trained historian with a long track record of working on Swiss internal, cross-border and international migration topics, and Kristina Schulz, who heads a research project on hidden children at the University of Neuchâtel. Their common goal was to bring current academic research into the context of a public museum and thereby, to open the research up to a wider public.[6] For Garufo, the museum's exhibition offered an opportunity to present historical facts that might not be (well) known and reveal specific segments of history in a new light. In the case of *Les enfants du placard*, the audience was given the opportunity to appreciate the impact and enduring legacy of the Swiss migration policy at the time. According to Garufo, museum resources and equipment, i.e. visual media, audio recordings, movies and other interactive tools, bring difficult subjects to the public and therefore are able to mediate between scholars and the public.

Because relevant academic research is often not widely accessible, museums can utilise their resources to address a larger audience, not the least through organisation of school visits to their exhibitions, where children and teenagers can discover and learn about the implications of Swiss migration history. In the case of the two exhibitions discussed above, the mediation of academic knowledge through museums is part

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6   The following paragraph is based on: Francesco Garufo, La-Chaux-de-Fonds, 24 April 2023, interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

of a larger call for recognition of silenced history.[7] According to Garufo, museums can play a major role in making the long-silenced experiences of seasonal workers part of national commemoration and remembrance as demanded by activist groups. The more museums engage the stories and histories of migrant labourers, the more the topic will receive public and media attention that in turn will promote political engagement. Garufo understands exhibitions to constitute political opportunities that will raise parliamentary debate. He is convinced that once the subject has achieved public acknowledgement, policies will be enacted that enable solid construction of collective memory. These ends can be reached through public remembrance as well as with schoolbooks and school (history) programmes that ensure access to historical knowledge, acknowledgement, critical reflections and dialogue. In sum, the intentions of museums and their exhibitions will bridge the gap between 'raw' science and the larger public. Historical museums, in particular, have the capacity to encourage political action as a medium that brings crucial societal issues to light.

Monuments and Memory: Competing Narratives in Swiss Commemoration

Both museums and monuments draw our attention to events and histories, but their roles and effect in building collective memory differ from one another. While museums build knowledge and are a tool for teaching and learning,[8] monuments often serve merely to reinforce well-established narratives of the powerful.[9] However, observing the Swiss memorial landscape, we find an interplay of different, and sometimes even competing, narratives. Scholarship on the politics of collective memory has shown that conflicting narratives are common.[10] A striking example of a conflicting historical narrative is the naming of streets in the city of Montgomery, where Jefferson Davis Avenue, named after the president of the Confederate States, met Rosa Parks Avenue, named in

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7   Francesco Garufo, La Chaux-de-Fonds, (24 April 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.
8   Francesco Garufo, La Chaux-de-Fonds, (24 April 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.
9   Smith (2006).
10   Dwyer & Alderman (2008).

honour of the woman who sparked one of the most famous campaigns for racial equality in the United States of America. This intersection symbolised how opposing legacies—one celebrating the Confederacy and the other championing civil rights—were honoured in the same space. Jefferson Davis Avenue was eventually renamed in 2021 to honour civil rights attorney Fred D. Gray, reflecting the city's evolving critical engagement with its history.[11] In Switzerland, we discover similar dynamics of contrast. Monuments erected as places of remembrance and tangible displays of historical narratives, sometimes appear to celebrate competing narratives, one example being the monuments of Alfred Escher and of *Le Vittime del Lavoro*.

The monument *Le Vittime del Lavoro* (the victims of labour) is probably the most relevant representative of commemoration of the seasonal workers in Switzerland (see Figure 1). The monument stands next to the train station in Airolo, the Southern entrance of the Gotthard Tunnel, which was built between 1872 and 1882. Nearly 200 Italian migrant workers died at work during the construction of the tunnel. *Le Vittime del Lavoro* is a highly symbolic location, because it calls to remembrance the workers who built the tunnel, precisely where the victims had worked and perished.[12] However, Airolo is a small town, and though the monument is at a train station, passengers rarely stop or change trains there. Although the monument effectively commemorates the workers who lost their lives building Switzerland's legendary railway infrastructure, its impact is limited because of its remote location.

On the other hand, Alfred Escher, a Swiss businessman, politician and railway 'pioneer' was a central figure for the Gotthard Tunnel project. He was the chairman of the Gotthard Railway Company from 1871 to 1878. Although he was forced to resign before finalisation of the tunnel, due to financial difficulties the project faced and the consequential criticism he received, he remains widely acclaimed in Switzerland.[13] Evidence for his elevation to status of national hero is his statue that still stands at Switzerland's busiest railway station in Zürich (see Figure 2).

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11   Dwyer & Alderman (2008).
12   Baratta & Giannini (2008).
13   Jung (2007).

Comparison of these monuments reveals a relationship based on power between different historical narratives of the Swiss railway network. Foreign seasonal workers who built a railway tunnel are only commemorated at the specific location where they worked and perished, while a powerful Swiss businessman who profited from their labour and the fame of the tunnel, was given a highly prominent place of remembrance in Zurich.

Commemoration Workers in Göschenen: Local Memory and National Neglect

Another example of local remembrance is a tour through Göschenen at the northern entrance to the Gotthard tunnel, where visitors can recall the construction of the tunnel. Between May and October, a guided walking tour is offered to take visitors through fourteen points of information and remembrance linked to the construction of the Gotthard tunnel. These stations are open to the public and most of them can be accessed without a guide throughout the year.[14] The walking tour is a good example of public remembrance as it is visible, easily accessible and free of charge.

The village of Göschenen is of important symbolic relevance for both the Gotthard tunnel project, and Italian seasonal workers. During construction of the tunnel, the village of Göschenen experienced a dramatic rise in the number of inhabitants and in economic activity.[15] It was here, at the northern end, where excavation for the tunnel was initiated. After work began, most workers were housed in Göschenen, which became their home during the tunnel construction. The village of Göschenen still remembers these workers' history and advertises the walking tour as one of the area's main tourist attractions. The tour acknowledges the history of seasonal workers by showing, for example, the place where workers had lived, also recalling the worker strike that was violently crushed, as well by erecting a monument in the village cemetery commemorating the workers who had died (see Figure 3).

Though the walking tour through Göschenen is significant, it is also very local in its reach to remember the workers; yes remembered, but

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14   Museumsfabrik, n.d.
15   Information given at Göschenen guided walking tour.

their role as presented, is intrinsically linked to the history of the village, rather than presented in the larger context of migrant workers in Switzerland.[16] In her writing, Judith Schueler, in contrast, showed how the contribution of migrant workers in building a railway tunnel can be seen as a contribution to building the country itself and, more importantly, to building national identity.[17] Such a broader narrative—that highlights the role of migrant workers in shaping Swiss national identity—has rarely found its due in Swiss memory politics.

Museums, Memory, and Nation Building: Framing Migrant Labour in Namibia's Liberation History

In Namibia, the role that museums play to create public memory is different. Based on two permanent exhibitions in Windhoek's history museums, the Windhoek City Museum and the Independence Memorial Museum, we argue that in Namibia memorialisation processes are strongly tied with political legitimation and nation-building processes.

Given Windhoek's significance in the migrant labour system, it is interesting to note how the city museum engages with the history of contract labour. Only a single panel vaguely refers to migrant labour (see Figure 4). Under the title, '"The old workers" compound, Katutura', the panel reads:

> *In the South African period thousands of men who travelled to Windhoek to work were housed in single-sex compounds. A compound was first built in Katutura in 1963. A new compound (that could house up to 15,000 men) opened in 1979. In 1987 a large part of the compound was demolished.[18]*

That short text serves as a reference for three photographs, two of which are historical, one that is recent. The first photograph depicts the intact worker's compound; its caption reads, 'The old entrance to

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16   Something similar could be said about the two following tunnels constructed much more recently, namely the Gotthard Road Tunnel, completed in 1980, and the Gotthard Base Tunnel, completed in 2016.

17   Schueler (2008).

18   Exhibition Panel, '"The old workers" compound, Katutura', Windhoek City Museum, 27 June 2023.

the Katutura compound showing the large blocks of dormitories where the workers slept.' The second photograph, taken by John Liebenberg, shows the compound soon after its partial demolishment and carries the caption: 'The large accommodation blocks in the centre of the Katutura compound were demolished in a controlled explosion on 10th October, 1987.' The third and recent photograph, taken by Jeremy Silvester, documents the transformation of the compound after independence. The photograph's caption reads: 'The remains of the old entrance to the Katutura Compound is still standing. The old kitchen and canteen building now houses the Katutura Community Arts Centre (KCAC) and the old boiler house is now The Boiler House Theatre.' In light of the limited attention granted contract labour in the museum, it appears that the curators did not consider the migrant labour system as an important topic in the historical narrative of Windhoek. While the staff at the museum recognises the importance of migrant labour, they could not explain why the subject has remained relatively marginalised in the exhibition.[19]

A closer look at the exhibition reveals another reference to migrant labour. The central section of the exhibition panel 'New Namibian Monuments' is entitled 'The three petitioners' and refers to an ensemble of three bronze statues that stand before Parliament Gardens next to the museum (see Figure 5). The life-size statues are of three men, each actively involved in petitioning for Namibia's self-determination and an end to South African occupation to the United Nations in the decades after the Second World War. The three petitioners are Chief Hosea Kutako, sitting on a chair in the middle, who is flanked at some distance by Captain Hendrik Witbooi, on the left, and Reverend Theophilus Hamutumbangela, on the right. The caption on the panel states: 'Theophilus Hamuntubangela was an Anglican priest who wrote to the United Nations to voice the complaints of migrant workers from northern Namibia. Statues always invite public interaction and, on this day, someone had given the priest a grass halo.'[20] The grass halo that was placed on the head of the statue of Reverend Theophilus

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19 Henry Nakale, Windhoek City Museum assistant, 27 June 2023: personal communication with Corina Bucher, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro & Ellen Sow.

20 See middle section 'The three petitioners' of the exhibition panel 'New Namibian Monuments', Windhoek City Museum, 27 June 2023.

Hamutumbangela, probably was intended to express admiration or respect for the reverend and his contribution, especially his advocacy for migrant workers. His depiction highlights how statues are not merely static objects, but also make statements that are open to interpretation, interaction, and even alteration, by the public.

The statue of the reverend in the Parliament Gardens is the only monument we could find in Namibia that commemorates the struggle against the migrant labour system. The fact that the statue is placed with other national heroes who fought for the abolition of the apartheid system, is significant. Its presence can therefore be regarded as part of the memory politics of Namibia whose aim is to foster national cohesion around the National liberation struggle against colonialism and apartheid. The ensemble of the three statues showcases how the commemoration of the fight against the migrant labour system in Namibia is part of a larger nation-building project. Next to their specific contributions to the liberation of the country, the three men also represent three different population groups in Namibia that proclaim unity of Herero (Kutako), Nama (Witbooi) and Ovambo (Hamutumbangela). The overarching notion of nation building and national unity expressed by 'The tree petitioners', therefore reflects a central motivation for government-led policies of remembrance.[21]

The Independence Memorial Museum of Namibia is situated close to the Windhoek City Museum and to the Parliament Gardens. Its size and particular architecture makes it one of the capital's most prominent landmarks. The Independence Memorial Museum was inaugurated in March 2014 and offers insights into governmental memory politics, shaped by the ruling party, SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) of Namibia, that has been in power since the country's independence in 1990. The national government initiated the conception and building of the Memorial Museum by North Korean architects and museum designers. The publicly contested Independence Memorial Museum is meant to symbolise and offer a place to commemorate the history of the liberation struggle.

Historically, SWAPO emerged from the Ovambo People's Organisation (OPO), created in 1957 (originally, the Ovambo People's

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21   Rose-Redwood et al. (2008).

Congress).[22] Its roots are closely linked to contract labourers, whose mobilisation was crucial in the early years of the party. However, the permanent exhibition of the Independence Memorial Museum is predominantly focussed on armed resistance against colonial oppression, particularly resistance by SWAPO's military wing, PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) that operated from bases in Zambia and Angola from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. The exhibition hardly acknowledges resistance inside Namibia conducted by civil societies, traditional authorities, churches and, last but not least, contract labourers. The great strike staged by contract workers in 1971-72, for instance, led by a majority of people from Ovambo and Kavango regions, and which was a major turning point in Namibian history, is referred to with only a single display.[23] This bronze relief (see Figure 6), depicting labourers working underground in mines, is the only direct reference to the contract labour system that was so crucial for both the colonial economy and the growing political awareness of people from northern Namibia, sending area of most migrant workers. We regard this general oversight as a missed opportunity to provide in-depth insight into the importance of the contract labour system, as well as to acknowledge the harsh working conditions of the labourers and their struggle for rights. Instead, the Independence Memorial Museum's exhibition is an example of a narrowly framed understanding of anti-colonial resistance that limits the liberation struggle to military operations.

As discussed above, museums play a pivotal role in shaping collective memory and national identity, serving as platforms for reflection, education, and remembrance in public discourse. In Namibia, the remembrance of the contract labour system is—if at all—primarily framed within the larger context of the liberation struggle, while a more specific remembrance of migrant workers' sacrifices and inhumane working conditions, is often missing. This selective narrative overshadows the broader significance of migrant workers in shaping Namibia's history. Indeed, the liberation movement, turned political party, in a way erases an important part of its own collective and personal history by diminishing the role played by the contract labour system in public displays. The dominant focus on military resistance within the

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22   Moorsom (1979) in Likuwa & Shiweda (2017).
23   Likuwa & Shiweda (2017).

Independence Memorial Museum, for instance, limits the recognition of the workers' key role in creating political consciousness and building resistance inside Namibia during the colonial period. On the other hand, efforts to address this imbalance are underway. The Museums Association of Namibia developed a mobile exhibition that offers a nuanced view of the contract labour system that will be explored further in the next section.

Museums and monuments in Namibia and Switzerland present workers' history in different forms, from advocating for greater recognition, honouring workers, telling local histories, to supporting nation-building processes. One difference between Namibia and Switzerland might be that, in Namibia some of the former migrant workers and their unions are influential in the memory politics of the present day, while in Switzerland many of the former seasonal workers have returned to Italy, or are or still considered, legally or culturally, as foreigners in Switzerland.

Figure 1: 'Le Vittime del Lavoro' monument, Airolo (Marcu private collection).

The Monument to the 'Victims of Labor' shows four workers carrying the body of a fallen colleague, honouring those who lost their lives building the Gotthard Tunnel. It was created by Vincenzo Vela, a sculptor from Ticino, Switzerland, who was deeply concerned with social issues and injustice. Vela completed the plaster model in 1882, though creating a bronze monument from the model proved difficult. Its tragic and realistic depiction of loss was considered too controversial for public display. After Vela's death in 1893, the Italian Ministry of Education cast it in bronze for a gallery in Rome. Many years later, on May 22, 1932, the sculpture was finally placed near the Gotthard Tunnel, at Airolo station, fulfilling Vela's wish to properly honour the workers' sacrifices (Baratta & Giannini, 2018).

Figure 2: Alfred Escher Monument, Zürich (Retrieved 2025, from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Bahnhofplatz_-_Hauptbahnhof_-_Bahnhofstrasse_Z%C3%BCrich_2010-09-21_14-34-44_ShiftN.jpg)

Figure 3: 'Victimis Labores' memorial, Göschenen Cemetery, Switzerland, 27 April 2023 (Ellen Sow private collection).

The Monument remembers the nearly 200 deceased Italian workers who contributed to the construction of the first Gotthard tunnel. The granite obelisk, topped with a marble bust of Louis Favre (the tunnel entrepreneur), bears the inscription 'Victimis Labores Christiana Comunio 1882' beneath a cross. Before it stands a statue of an Italian worker looking up toward Louis Favre. The worker, dressed in his work clothes and holding an oil lamp, is surrounded by tools. The Monument was originally enclosed with a fence, but the fence was later removed, and a metal plate listing the names of all the workers who perished during the construction was installed. After several failed attempts to commemorate the deceased Italian workers, sculptor Pietro Andreoletti was finally commissioned to carry out the work. The memorial was placed in the Göschenen cemetery and inaugurated a year later, on September 29, 1889 (Brunner, 2022).
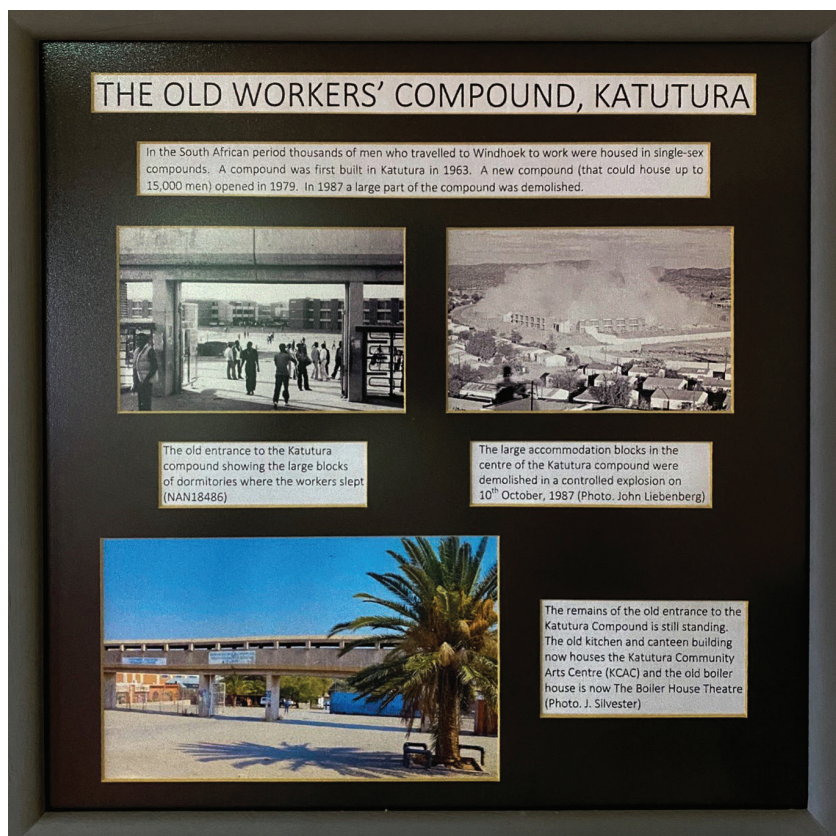
Figure 4: Exhibition panel 'The Old Workers' Compound, Katutura', Windhoek City Museum, 27 June 2023 (Ellen Sow private collection)

THE THREE PETITIONERS

A cluster of three statues stand facing Parliament. The statues were cast by the Namibian artist, Hercules Viljoen and show three of the first Namibians who petitioned the United Nations for an end to the South African occupation of Namibia.

Figure 5: 'The three petitioners' (photographs by N. Ashipala), detail of exhibition panel 'New Namibian Monuments', Windhoek City Museum, 27 June 2023 (Ellen Sow private collection).

Figure 6: Section 'Namibia under the Contract Labour system', Independence Memorial Museum, 27 June 2023 (Ellen Sow private collection).

Activists and Advocacy

As we have indicated above, public remembrance of contract labour is still in its infancy in both Switzerland and Namibia. During recent years, however, several attempts to bring the topic to the attention of a broader public have been made. There follows, an introduction of individual activists and organisations who are committed to an active and critical public remembrance of contract-labour history. To begin, we will focus on Switzerland and explore the relationships between advocacy, activism, political affiliation and academia, in recalling the contract labour system, and reveal both the potential and the limitations involved when creating space and awareness for public remembrance. Then we will address two Namibian initiatives for creating public remembrance of contract labour, a museum project that ended in failure, and a successful mobile exhibition. A comparison regarding advocacy for public remembrance reveals both similarities and differences in the challenges faced by activists in the two countries.

Breaking the silence on the history of contract labour in Switzerland

The most well-known protagonists of critical public remembrance of contract labour in Switzerland are usually first- and second-generation Italian seasonal workers. Despite the challenges of accessing higher education from a working-class background, some individuals, such as Catia Porri, have become highly respected and outspoken academics and professionals in Switzerland.[24] Catia Porri was born in Florence, Italy, in 1950 and at the age of twelve moved to Switzerland with her parents who became migrant workers. At the time, Switzerland did not allow the children of migrant workers to reside permanently with them, and for three years Porri spent half a year hiding in an apartment and the other half was permitted to attend school. Catia Porri's status became legalised after her parents received an annual residence permit. Despite missing years of schooling, Porri passed an entrance exam for an arts and crafts school, completed a photography apprenticeship, and later became an important spokesperson for migrant labourers and their

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24   Catia Porri, Zurich, 19 April 2023. Interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro

families.[25] She takes part in Zürich local politics, is an active member of the 'Schwarzenbach Kollektiv', a pressure group for anti-racist and intersectional politics of remembrance, and a founding member of Tesoro, an association that advocates to relieve the suffering of illegalised migrant families.

In 2024 Porri was invited to participate in a TV debate on the topic of 'Seasonal workers: the trauma of the forbidden children' on Swiss National TV.[26] The debate was broadcast to publicise the campaign for a public initiative, launched by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) to, once again, limit immigration to Switzerland. During the programme, Catia Porri debated with two elderly men, one a fierce supporter of an earlier anti-immigration initiative, the so-called 'Schwarzenbach Initiative' of 1970, the other, a former head of the Swiss immigration police (*Fremdenpolizei*).[27] She regarded her participation in this debate to be her duty, since it afforded her the opportunity to speak up.[28]

With other team-members, Porri also hosts a weekly radio programme, 'Radio L'ora Italiana' in Italian, at a local radio station in Zurich that has been on the air for over 40 years.[29] Initially addressing primarily seasonal workers, the programme's audience soon included

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25   Roth (2014).

26   The programme, moderated by Karin Frei, brought together critics and supporters of the infamous 'Saisonnierstatut'. Critics, alongside Catia Porri, were Elsbeth Müller, Executive Director of UNICEF, Marina Frigerio, child psychologist, and Paul Rechsteiner, member of the Social Democrats and Council of States. Supporters were Ulrich Schlüer, member of right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) who adamantly defended the Schwarzenbach initiative of 1970, and Heinz Brand, former president of the Immigration Police (Fremdenpolizei). https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/club/video/saison-niers-das-trauma-der-verbotenen-kinder?urn=urn:srf:video:7befe49f-78bb-416d-9466-cce80fbe547c

27   The 'Federal Popular Initiative Against Overpopulation by Foreigners', a controversial political proposal, aimed to limit the foreign population to ten per cent of the total population by limiting immigration.

28   Catia Porri, Zurich (19 Apr. 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher.

29   Radio LoRa, https://www.lora.ch/ (accessed 06 Feb. 2024); Enrico Campioni and Alberto Dagnino, Radio Lora, per amore dell'italianità (17 Dec. 2019), https://www.rsi.ch/info/oltre-la-news/Radio-Lora-per-amore-dellitalianit%C3%A0--1186782.html (accessed 06 Feb. 2024) ; Alvaro Baragiola, Area, Auguri LoRa: La Prima Radio Communitaria Svizzera Festeggia 18 Anni, https://www.areaonline.ch/auguri-LoRa-la-prima-radio-comunitaria-svizzera-festeggia-18-anni-f7633d00 (accessed 06 February 2024).

Secondos and *Terzios*, i.e. second- and third-generation immigrants. Hosted mainly by second-generation Italians living in Switzerland, the radio programme directly addresses issues relevant to the Italian community in Switzerland. In recent years, however, 'Radio l'ora Italiana' has dropped its focus on political issues. Catia Porri however takes on a leading role in providing a platform for her community to speak up about their past, as well as educating the general public about the history of contract labour in Switzerland.

Catia Porri is but one of many active advocates for the cause of former seasonal workers and their families. Another is Marina Frigerio, a psychologist and author of the well-known book entitled, 'Verbotene Kinder: die Kinder der italienischen Saisonniers erzählen von Trennung und Illegalität' (Forbidden children: The children of Italian seasonal workers tell of separation and illegality).[30] In her book, Frigerio gives children of seasonal workers a voice and lets them share their stories.[31] Another example is Vincenzo Todisco, himself the son of an Italian immigrant and author of the novel, 'Das Eidechsenkind' (The lizard child).[32] The novel tells the story of a child of seasonal workers from the child's perspective.

Such literary interventions contribute to bringing the history of Switzerland's migrant labourers to the forefront. However, not only individuals take an active role in remembering these histories and the fight for the rights of former migrant workers. The Tesoro association campaigns politically for the rights of former seasonal workers and their families. This association, founded in 2021, advocates for the interests of family members who were affected by the Swiss migrant labour system.[33] In 2018, its president, Paola de Martin, wrote an open letter to then minister of justice, Simonetta Sommaruga, in which she took a stand for the concerns of former seasonal workers and their families. In the open letter, Paola de Martin formulated three demands, which also are at the heart of Tesoro's mission. Firstly, an official recognition of the suffering and an apology from the Swiss authorities; secondly, a histo-

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30   Frigerio (2014).
31   Marina Frigerio had previously published in German and Italian on the topic.
32   Todisco (2014).
33   Tesoro, https://www.tesoro2021.ch/verein/ueberuns (accessed 17 March 2024).

rical reappraisal of the illegalisation of families living in Switzerland with a permit that denies the right to be accompanied by families, i.e. as 'Saisonnier' (A-permit) or 'Annual residence permit holder' (B-permit); and thirdly, adequate financial compensation for the suffering caused thereby.[34] Although the letter got no official response in Switzerland, it opened a dialogue between the government and the families of former migrant workers. As a child of seasonal workers herself, Figerio also knows first-hand how inhumane the conditions of the migrant labour system were, particularly in regard to the restriction against family reunification, and that this restriction has caused lasting trauma to many families.[35] Tesoro's aim is to mitigate suffering by naming the violence. Its members are convinced that the knowledge and lessons learned by those who were affected by structural xenophobia in the 'Swiss family policy', are also hidden treasures that can be utilised in the future and are to the benefit of society as a whole. Furthermore, Tesoro also gives a voice to people who are still suffering under the restrictive Swiss family policy, such as currently undocumented migrants.[36]

The people and organisations we have mentioned are well-known advocates for remembering the inhumane system of Swiss contract labour and its often-traumatic consequences. All advocates for remembering have a family history of recent immigration to Switzerland. This commonality also applies to Francesco Garufo, whose personal history, as a child of immigrant parents, was a driving force in his curation of the exhibition *Les enfants du placard* in La Chaux-de-Fonds.[37] Catia Porri and Paola de Martin were 'hidden children' for part of their childhood. These prominent advocates for remembering also have higher academic qualifications that facilitate their engagement with the Swiss political system, which was nearly impossible for their parents' generation. The efforts of these advocates for remembrance have enticed public debates on the history of seasonal workers in Switzerland in

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34 Paola de Martin, (21 Sept. 2018), Brennende Unschärfe – Offener Brief an Bundesrätin Simonetta Sommaruga, https://institutneueschweiz.ch/De/Blog/176/De_Martin_Brennende_Unschrfte (accessed 18 Mar. 2024)

35 Paola de Martin, Basel (10. Mai 2023), based on notes taken by Corina Bucher during the podium 'Versteckte Täter*innen – Angriff auf Familien'.

36 Tesoro, https://www.tesoro2021.ch/verein/ueberuns (accessed 17 Mar. 2024).

37 Francesco Garufo, La Chaux-de-Fonds (24 Apr. 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

general, and on seasonal-worker status in particular. Still, the process of active remembrance initiated by activists has yet to effectively engage the core of Swiss society. Exhibitions discussed in the previous section, the public presence of women like Catia Porri and Paola de Martin, and the work initiated by associations like Tesoro, are merely the beginnings in a process that is hoped will engage the Swiss government and the Swiss population so that they finally and openly acknowledge the inhumane nature of contract labour and assume responsibility for its enduring effects.

Lobbying for a Migrant Labour Museum in Namibia

Lobbying for public remembrance of contract labour in Namibia comes with unique challenges that differ from those encountered in Switzerland. Contract labourers in Namibia were not recruited abroad as they were in Switzerland, but in the country itself. In other words, unlike in Switzerland, where public remembrance of contract labour implies engagement with Swiss immigration policy and the country's inherent xenophobia, in Namibia, advocacy for public remembrance of contract labour calls for remembering the suffering of fellow Namibians. However, the history is more complex as it was only with Namibia's independence in 1990 that all people became full citizens with equal rights, regardless of race, ethnicity or place of origin. Before, i.e. under colonial rule, black Namibians living in the far north of the country had a different legal status than black Namibians living in central and southern Namibia. Furthermore, northern Namibia was physically separated from the rest of the country with a heavily policed, internal border, the so-called 'Red Line'.[38] Public remembrance of the Namibian contract labour system hence implies engagement with challenging topics, such as the country's complex history of ethnic and territorial division and the struggles against, as well as collaborations with, colonial institutions. As in many other postcolonial states, Namibia's social and cultural institutions experienced challenges caused by ethnic divisions and anti-colonial struggles.[39]

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38   Miescher (2012).
39   Weedon and Jordon (2012).

After independence, politicians as well as various academics, called for a new, post-colonial representation of Namibia's history in the public sphere. Libolly Haufiku, a social scientist and member of the ruling SWAPO party at the time, lobbied together with other SWAPO supporters for the establishment of a Migrant Labour Museum in his hometown of Walvis Bay. In an interview with the authors, Haufiku told the story of how his interest in history and museum work began:

> *The SWAPO Secretary for Education had a project in Finland, and as both a teacher and artist, I was asked to create illustrations for school materials, which brought me to Finland. There, my friend Dr. Frieda Williams, showed me an exhibit in a Helsinki Museum showing belongings of my great-grandfather's who worked as healer to King Mandume. Seeing his belongings inspired me to seek a Finnish scholarship, leading me to study Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki.*[40]

Haufiku shared that anecdote with us during an interview in his office in the central business district of Windhoek. Not only is Haufiku a successful entrepreneur today, he is also a social anthropologist and has other academic qualifications. Academia and education play a crucial role in influencing cultural heritage preservation by fostering awareness, practical skills, and community engagement.[41] Through educational activities, individuals are equipped with the knowledge and tools to appreciate, protect and actively participate in preserving their heritage.[42] Access to good formal education is one of the factors that most certainly influenced and enabled Haufiku's activism regarding the migrant labour museum.

The coastal town of Walvis Bay, home of the biggest port and centre of the fishing industry in Namibia, seems to be an adequate place for such a museum due to its long history of both contract labour and organised contract labour resistance. Libolly Haufiku and his fellow campaigners regarded Walvis Bay's huge former migrant-labour compound as an ideal site for such a museum. However, they also realised

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40   Libolly Haufiku, Windhoek (28 Jun 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

41   Sulima (2022).

42   Mattone and Frullo (2022).

they would face obstacles in developing this museum.[43] The Namibian government, as main funding institution in the heritage sector, never openly rejected the proposal for a migrant labour museum in Walvis Bay, but rather chose to focus its energy, and resources, on other projects inside and outside the realm of public remembrance. The memorialisation of the liberation struggle (wherein SWAPO, the largest party, played a central role) seemed to be at the top of the government's agenda. These are conclusions that can be drawn from the fact that two of the biggest memorial-site projects thus far have been Heroes Acre, opened in 2002, and the Independence Memorial Museum, inaugurated in 2014, in Windhoek or its vicinity. The latter, discussed in the previous section, offered an opportunity to publicly celebrate and idealise the role of SWAPO as liberator of the country from colonial rule. It seems that after the opening of this museum, the ruling party's willingness to spend more money on the establishment of further museums was exhausted. Of course, other justifications to forego investment in the heritage sector of countries like Namibia certainly exist. Namibia was and is facing pressing issues that beg not to be ignored, such as the eradication of poverty and improving access to public health and education.[44] Libolly Haufiku mentioned another possible reason behind the government's hesitance towards 'his' museum, namely because he had resigned from SWAPO to join an opposition party, Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP).

Libolly Haufiku's new political affiliation reduced the personal capital he might have used to lobby for establishment of a migrant labour museum, not the least because the newly formed RDP did not secure a substantial voter base. Still, in 2009, the municipality of Walvis Bay proudly announced the establishment of the 'Contract and Apartheid Museum' in the old migrant workers' compound.[45] The municipality of Walvis Bay, run by another opposition party, is also an important stakeholder in the project but was also not ready, or able, to provide sufficient funds to the envisaged museum to make up for lack of support from the central government. The case of Libolly Haufiku and the planned mig-

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43 On the history of the Walvis Bay migrant labour compound, see Byerley (2015).

44 Wakashe (2006).

45 See The Namibian, (13 Oct. 2009).

rant labour museum in Walvis Bay bolsters Ayanda Ngcobo's argument that politics of representation are about the power dynamics in what is represented, by whom, and the purpose for which it is represented. [46] The museum in Walvis Bay was meant to showcase the migrant labour system and its impact on residents at a national as well as very specific local level. Situated in the former compound, the museum would have offered its visitors a splendid opportunity for an embodied experience of how contract labourers were obliged to live. However, selection of location for the museum might have come with other challenges and resistance, namely from today's residents of the former compound. The example of the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, has confirmed that people facing a dramatic housing crisis and poverty are not easily persuaded to vacate their home in order to establish a museum, no matter how well-meaning that intention might be.[47]

In short, political engagement and activity define the ways in which museums function, what they are expected to accomplish, and actually undertake, what they provide for various groups and individuals that are associated with them, and what they mean for the societies within which they are raised.[48] Governments often influence the representation, inclusion and type of museum and prioritise certain narratives, cultural groups or histories over others, which can result in under-representation of specific narratives, cultural groups or histories.

Advocacy for a public remembrance of contract labour lives on

In the mid-2010s, new protagonists began to lobby for the establishment of an appropriate public remembrance of the history of contract labour in Namibia. In contrast to their predecessors, such as Libolly Haufiku, they combined their quest with concrete action and did not wait for direct state funding. One of these protagonists was the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN), a small non-governmental, community-development focused organisation that represents museums and heritage institutions and practitioners throughout the country.[49] MAN

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46   Ngcobo (2018).
47   For the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, see https://lwandle.com/ .
48   Gray (2015).
49   MAN, https://www.museums.com.na/about-us (accessed 8 Feb. 2024).

is essentially an umbrella organisation that represents all Namibian museums, providing support through training, funding, and professional networking. MAN created a mobile exhibition on the history of contract labour in Namibia, entitled *Omutete wOkaholo*. Omutete means 'a queue' in Oshindonga language and *okaholo* was a word used by migrant workers from the north to refer to an identification disc that they wore around their necks, or 'stand in line to be identified'. During the launch of the exhibition in Walvis Bay in September 2016, MAN's director at the time, Jeremy Silvester, expressed his hope and belief that the exhibition would promote establishment of a permanent museum in Walvis Bay.[50] The vision of such a museum was expressed in words that accompanied the exhibition itself:

> *We believe there is a great opportunity for Namibia to create a museum that will document the regional history of migrant labour and the role of workers in our national history. A section of the old compound at Walvis Bay, where the 1971 strike started, has been preserved. It would be a very appropriate site to house a unique museum that would attract more visitors to the coastal town and provide an important educational resource. The museum could house the memories of workers and help young people to better understand the experience of Omutete wOkaholo.[51]*

For MAN the mobile exhibition, *Omutete wOkaholo*, stood at the beginning of an active process that ultimately would lead to the establishment of the envisaged museum. The conceptualisation of *Omutete wOkaholo*, therefore, embodies the content and design of a future postcolonial museum. The title of the exhibition is emblematic for MAN's attempt to tell the story of contract labour from a worker's perspective. The exhibition design combines text and images that depict people, archival documents, maps, plans and objects. Visitors are guided through a variety of topics configured on ten panels that engage the roots of migrant labour, the recruitment of labourers and their long, arduous journey southwards, living conditions in the compounds, the

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50   The Namibian, Migrant Labour Exhibition Creates Awareness, (23 Sep. 2016). https://www.namibian.com.na/migrant-labour-exhibition-creates-awareness/ (accessed 8 Feb. 2024).

51   MAN mobile exhibition, Omutete wOkaholo, Panel 10.

economic importance of migrant labour for the colonial economy, the long history of worker resistance that culminated in the general strike of 1971/72 and ultimately with the independence of Namibia. As such, the exhibition can be regarded as a museum without walls, telling, preserving and collecting the stories of migrant labourers.

After two weeks in Walvis Bay, *Omutete wOkaholo* went on tour through the country and was shown at a variety of places. In fact, *Omutete wOkaholo*'s journey actually never did end because it is still available on request at MAN for exhibit at schools and other institutions. The belief that *Omutete wOkaholo* is the beginning of a process that shall produce the establishment of a permanent contract labour museum has yet to be articulated or confirmed. The success of *Omutete wOkaholo*, however, illustrates how alternative methods can create public remembrance beyond bricks-and-mortar museums and bronze monuments.[52] The following section explores the potential of these alternatives.

Alternative Forms of Public Remembrance

The Museums Association of Namibia was not discouraged by the hitherto unsuccessful efforts to establish a permanent contract-labour museum in Walvis Bay. On the contrary, the positive reception of the mobile *Omutete wOkaholo* exhibition encouraged MAN to make a virtue of necessity by asking some fundamental questions on what people believe constitutes a museum as a place of public remembrance.[53] For a long time a common perception in museum studies persisted that museums are physical sites of preservation, perpetuation and transference of social memory, i.e. collective memory.[54] By way of their collections, museums continuously produce and re-produce collective pasts. According to Mehmet Taynaç and Hasan Yeniçirak 'museums are technologies, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, pro-

52   Ndapewoshali Ashipala Ilunga, interview with Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

53   Ndapewoshali Ashipala Ilunga, Windhoek (29 Jun. 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

54   Taynaç and Yeniçirak (2022), pp. 11-19.

duced, and given meaning.[55] The existence of a physical space, generally a building whose walls act as tangible agents against the process of forgetting, is fundamental to these technologies of memory (i.e. museums). The equation of a museum with a building is still widely shared, as Taynaç and Yeniçirak showed.[56] However, practices of public remembrance and reconstruction of the past are often performed and transmitted through various other ways outside the confines of museum buildings.

Storytelling as a practice of public remembrance in Namibia

Ndapewoshali Ashipala Ilunga, the then director of MAN, confirmed that the *Omutete wOkaholo* exhibition is a perfect example of mobile exhibitions as a means of public remembrance in their own right:

> *We don't need to be validated by these western institutions and academics to define by which terms we have to operate. We create travelling exhibitions, we create spaces to talk, to see, to learn.[57]*

Mobile exhibitions can easily travel, be displayed around a country and at a variety of places ranging from schools, churches, public buildings and even outdoor venues. Hence, mobile exhibitions such as those produced by MAN allow for a paradigm shift: it is no longer that people come to exhibitions, it is exhibitions that go to the people. For MAN, mobile exhibitions stimulate storytelling, a practice at the heart of the process of collective memory in Namibia. Historically, many African communities are rooted in oral cultures and traditions and as a result, they are home to esteemed stories and enthusiastic storytellers.[58] Ashipala Ilunga notes it is important to acknowledge that an entire system of remembrance functions through the power of storytelling. She says further that if you look at public remembrance in Namibia with the gaze of western academia, you will see a void where in fact

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55   Taynaç and Yeniçirak (2022), p. 16.
56   In this context,see also the example of the micro museum as discussed by Bunitx (2006),
57   Ndapewoshali Ashipala Ilunga, Basel (21 Oct. 2023), personal communication with Ellen Sow.
58   Tuwe (2015).

none exists.[59] Nicola Brandt's exploration of decolonizing memory practices that also highlight the importance of local storytelling and community-driven memory work reinforces this statement.[60] Indeed, Brandt's work on embodied memory and performance art underscores how alternative memory practices, through art and performance, are able to challenge official narratives and bring marginalised histories—such as migrant labour—to the forefront. These less conventional forms of remembrance could further enhance public engagement and fill gaps left by formal institutions.[61] Many pre-colonial societies relied on oral tradition to capture history and to pass heritage from generation to generation. Still today, storytelling plays an important role in safeguarding Namibia's heritage and accordingly transfers information from one generation to another. In this manner, experiences of the migrant labour system were remembered and disseminated.

Joseph Tuta Mbambi (mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), who lives near the town of Rundu in a former homeland in north-eastern Namibia where he is the headman of his community, was recruited during the period of apartheid as a contract labourer to work in Johannesburg mines.[62] Now, an old man, he perfectly recalls his life as a contract worker and how he, then, shared his experiences with those at home. Whenever he and fellow workers came home, relatives and community members would gather to hear stories about their life far from home. Popular topics were, for instance, stories about the recruitment and selection process, a most humiliating experience that entailed stripping naked in front of other potential recruits and recruiting staff, to undergo a medical examination. Other stories depicted how they were transported to work stations and about the harsh living conditions encountered there. In the context of the argument made in this chapter, it is important to note setting, in which Mbambi shared his memories with us. It was itself a vivid example of public storytelling. When talking to us, Mbambi was surrounded by a group of people sitting under a tall tree in a village about an hour's drive from Rundu.

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59   Ndapewoshali Ashipala Ilunga, Windhoek (29 Jun. 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.
60   Brandt (2023).
61   Brandt (2023).
62   Joseph Tuta Mbambi, Rundu, (21 Jun. 2023), interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

We were not the only members in his audience. He spoke to everyone present, mainly men of his generation, as much as he spoke to us. Some of the friends and neighbours present had also experienced the contract labour system first-hand and they would contribute to Mbambi's story as he spoke, each experience unique, yet similar. The elder people felt both a need and a joy to tell their stories to the younger generations. The latter do not always listen enthusiastically, or as Mbambi put it, 'My grandchildren say yes, grandfather, we have heard the old stories multiple times.'[63] The colonial contract labour system no longer exists; still the memory of this inhuman system will live on through storytelling. For this reason, the elderly must tell their stories again and again, Mbambi insisted.

Storytelling and museums, however, do not exclude one another, neither in Namibia nor in Switzerland. In both countries, we came across numerous contributions that included storytelling in the public remembrance of the contract labour system. In both countries, efforts are made to include the contract labour system in the collective memory of their respective societies through numerous channels that include both tangible and non-tangible tools.

Storytelling in public remembrance in Switzerland

In Switzerland, storytelling is also a practice that reinvents and makes memories accessible to a broader audience. One example, already mentioned in the first section, was the city tour in Biel/Bienne. The guided city tour with contemporary witnesses in Biel/Bienne, labelled 'Living Library', was presented as an extra-mural event of the previously discussed exhibition on seasonal workers by the NMB in cooperation with *Geschichte im Puls* (History impulse). *Geschichte im Puls* describes itself as 'a public history project that creates a bridge between the historical sciences and the public that encourages a young audience to think independently and critically.'[64] At the core of the project are

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63   Joseph Tuta Mbambi, Rundu (21 Jun. 2023). Interview conducted by Corina Bucher, Ellen Sow, Kavenauarue Tjiuoro.

64   Living Library, Geschichte Im Puls, https://www.geschichteimpuls.ch/veranstaltungen/living-library (accessed 20 Feb. 2024); Omocerri, https://www.olmocerri.ch/wp-content/uploads/Programm-NMB-Saisonniers.pdf (accessed 20 Feb. 2024).

former seasonal workers who tell their stories at historical locations in the city of Biel that were important in the lives of contract workers. The organisers wished to create a new collective memory through this sharing of experiences by contemporary witnesses and to bring attention to the seasonal workers whom had long been ignored in the historiography.[65] One stop, for instance, was in front of an unspectacular house in the city centre. There we learned that the house had played an important role in the 1971 feature film *Lo stagionale* (The seasonal worker) by Alvaro Bizzari, an Italian migrant worker and self-taught filmmaker who lived in Biel/Bienne.[66] Produced on a small budget, *Lo stagionale* told the story of a man forced to hide his son inside a tiny apartment of a building, in front of which we were standing. The historical significance of *Lo stagionale* is manifold. The film denounces the inhumane Swiss contract labour system and calls for active resistance against it. After watching film clips of Lo stagionale on the street in front of the house, we witnessed how Bizzari's nearly forgotten work still strongly resonates with the memories of former migrant workers and their children who were present at the event.

Indeed, life was tough for many Italians and immigrants from other countries in Biel/Bienne during those years. They worked hard, lived under terrible conditions and experienced unmasked xenophobia directed at them, by many Swiss. At another stop on the tour, our guide pointed out an open space that had once been an entire neighbourhood inhabited only by foreigners, mainly Italians, that has since been demolished. The guide said that people in Biel/Bienne believed this segregated neighbourhood and its inhabitants were a hotbed of infection and disease. One anecdote noted that the postman would drop piles of mail at the entrance of the neighbourhood but refused to enter the area out of fear of being contaminated. On the tour, we also stopped in front of the last single-quarters housing in Switzerland that is still standing, located

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65   Living Library, Geschichte Im Puls, https://www.geschichteimpuls.ch/veranstaltungen/living-library (accessed 20 Feb. 24); Omocerri, https://www.olmocerri.ch/wp-content/uploads/Programm-NMB-Saisonniers.pdf (accessed 20 Feb. 24).

66   Regarding Alvaro Bizzari, see, e.g. https://www.working-class.ch/blog/alvaro-bizzari-worker-filmmaker%20accessed%204%20May%202024 (accessed 4 May 2024).

on the so-called Bührer-Areal.[67] A former contract labourer shared his memories of the sordid building where up to one hundred contract workers used to live, employed by the Bührer construction company. The living conditions were pitiful. The men, separated by nationalities, had practically no sanitary facilities, only very basic cooking and heating options, and had to sleep in cramped dormitories. During our visit, the entrance gate was locked and we could not enter. Life in the Bührer-Areal single-quarters is, however, well documented in the 1974 documentary film, *Il rovescio della medaglia* (the flip side of the coin) by Alvaro Bizzari. The museum in Biel/Bienne is lobbying to safeguard this last remaining single quarters in Switzerland.

During the city tour, we could sense the xenophobic atmosphere that Italian migrants must have faced every day in those times. On one of our last stops, the tour guide confronted us with a very explicit example of open xenophobia. We were standing in front of the Café-Bar Alba, which had been a popular club and disco in the 1970s. During that time, the owner had mounted a sign in Italian that stated, 'No Italians allowed to enter the premises'. The Italian migrants were not willing to accept this open xenophobic insult. The same evening a hundred Italian men and women, supported by young militant locals, gathered in front of Alba. The atmosphere was tense, and some windows and doors were broken. Eventually the owner took down the sign. The successful collective resistance against xenophobic discrimination occurred in a generally tense political atmosphere in Biel/Bienne. Particularly interesting was the fact that the Italian migrant workers were joined in their protest by a nascent youth movement in the city.[68] In sum, the city tour in Biel/Bienne was a powerful example of how storytelling was able to contribute to a public remembrance of contract labour in Switzerland.

Another innovative approach to impart and pass on knowledge to an audience is through art and artistic performances. An example is the theatre play, *Versteckt* (Hidden), by the Lucerne theatre. The play, written by authors Ariane von Graffenried and Martin Bieri, addresses

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67   For recent information and photographs, see https://www.workzeitung.ch/2023/10/so-hausten-saisonniers-auf-dem-buehrer-areal-in-biel-stehen-noch-die-einzigen-original-erhaltenen-baracken/ (accessed 4 May 2024).

68   Ralph Hug, Aufstand der italienischen Saisonniers in Biel, https://www.workzeitung.ch/2023/03/aufstand-der-italienischen-saisonniers-in-biel/ (accessed 4 May 2024).

a dark chapter in Switzerland's past. It is about a girl whose parents are seasonal workers. Without legal status in Switzerland, the girl is forced to hide in her room from the immigration police. *Versteckt* was shown throughout Switzerland and was critically acclaimed by the press.[69] Another example is the artistic performance of the previously discussed exhibition *Les enfants du placard* (The Children of the Closet) by La Mezclita. La Mezclita is an artistic collective of teenagers from different departments of the Ton sur Ton foundation, based in La Chaux-de-Fonds.[70] They drew inspiration for the production from the previously mentioned exhibition at the La Chaux-de-Fonds History Museum.[71]

In this section we explored forms of public remembrance of contract labour outside the context of museums. In Namibia, public storytelling is an enduring tradition. Through public storytelling, individual and collective acts of remembrance are constantly re-negotiated, re-elaborated and recounted. In Switzerland, too, we have witnessed how public storytelling contributes to the remembrance of often-silenced history of contract labour. Storytelling outside the museum can take on various forms, from re-viewing landscapes to attending and experiencing theatre performances. Additionally, movies can act as a form of public storytelling and become modes of remembrance, as do films by Alvaro Bizzari, for example. Thus, we conclude that in addition to museums and monuments, storytelling is important for public remembrance of contract labour.

Conclusion

Our research has examined both Swiss and Namibian contract labour systems and their remembrance in the public sphere. We have shown how the public sphere encompasses a wide variety of spaces to include

69   Luzerner Theater, https://www.luzernertheater.ch/versteckt (accessed 20 Feb. 2024); Kultur Züri, https://kulturzueri.ch/db/veranstaltungen/41798-300-versteckt/ (accessed 20 Feb. 2024).

70   Ton Sur Ton, La Mezclita, https://www.tonsurton.ch/mezclita (accessed 4 May 2024).

71   Théâtre du Jura, Les Enfants du Placard, https://theatre-du-jura.ch/f/programme/detail/277-les-enfants-du-placard (accessed 20 Feb. 2024); Ton Sur Ton, Ton sur Ton au Théâtre du Jura! Avec "Les Enfants du Placard" https://www.tonsurton.ch/post/ton-sur-ton-au-th%C3%A9%C3%A2tre-du-jura-aves-les-enfants-du-placard (accessed 20 Feb. 2024).

museums, railway stations, public gardens, alpine and Kavango villages, tunnels, streets, libraries, and even restaurants. All these spaces serve either as potential or actual sites of remembrance. As our Swiss case study has highlighted, museums play a crucial role in framing the stories of migrant workers within broader societal and historical contexts, sparking critical reflection and public dialogue. This increased awareness can pressure political institutions to acknowledge and address these histories, elevating the topic from regional conversations to national debates. Museums have the power to shift collective memory and advocate for formal recognition of historical injustices, transforming cultural awareness into concrete political action. By fostering deeper societal understanding, museums not only preserve the past, but actively shape the future, potentially motivating policy changes and broader social justice.

Our analysis of how contract labour is publicly remembered in museums and through monuments in both countries reveals that the government significantly influences how these tools are utilised. Windhoek's prominent museums primarily reproduce the narratives of the ruling political party and pay little attention to the history of migrant labourers. In Switzerland, on the other hand, it was only in recent years and after decades of silence that at least some museums have gradually begun to raise awareness of the topic and in so doing, generate political support for change. Such unwillingness to engage with the history of migrant labour extends to monuments as well. The fact that only one monument in Namibia remotely commemorates the migrant labour system and only two examples were found in Switzerland, clearly demonstrates authorities' reluctance to give due credit to migrant labourers. In the case of Switzerland, this failing demotes the vital contribution made by seasonal workers to build the renowned Swiss railway network.

The scarcity of tangible, official public memory sites has prompted activists in both countries to push for better public remembrance, i.e. with higher visible profile, and to use alternative forms of remembering, such as storytelling. The significance of storytelling in Namibian society explains why, despite the lack of visible memorialisation in public spaces, extensive knowledge and awareness of the past's migrant labour system endures among the populace. Based on our observations, we argue that the past migrant labour system might actually

be stronger within Namibian collective memory than in the Swiss one. This could partly stem from the fact that in Switzerland, those affected were foreigners, who have either returned to Italy or assimilated into Swiss society, whereas in Namibia, the system affected a large portion of the native population. Nevertheless, we contend that the strong tradition of storytelling embedded in Namibian culture has significantly contributed to the widespread acceptance and awareness of this aspect of the country's history. Storytelling, passed down through generations in families and communities, creates a greater sense of proximity and intimacy with historical events, as our Namibian case study demonstrates. Traditional museums, statues, and plaques provide information in a relatively neutral manner emotionally, creating a certain distance between a recipient and the information conveyed. In contrast, storytelling intrinsically involves emotion, and the familiar or societal ties create a distinct intimacy with the subject matter. This emotional factor produces a stronger awareness of history in people's everyday lives.

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Chapter 5

Feeding Narratives: The Politics of Storytelling in the Context of Contract Labour Migration

Raluca-Maria Marcu

'Senza il lavoro un uomo è niente' (Carmelo Vecchio)[1]
'Half-bread is better than no bread' (proverb)

Introduction

This chapter provides a reflection on how historical narratives regarding contract labour migration help shape our understanding of those legacies and the way we question them today. A dominant narrative about labour migration is encapsulated in the famous saying that people crossed borders 'for bread'.[2] This narrative directly links migrant labour's motivation and ability to escape both poverty and famine.[3] A widowed Italian migrant worker at the Hero Factory in Lenzburg, Switzerland, and originally from the province of Potenza, was interviewed by the journalist Piero Campisi in 1963. The interview builds on this narrative. She commented: "Back home there was only the freedom to starve; here there is only the freedom to work."[4]

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1 Vecchio (2019), p. 44. Carmelo Vecchio, father of Concetto Vecchio, explains why he and other Italians are willing to work under harsh conditions. Originally Italian, own translation into English is, 'without his work, a man is nothing'.
2 Ibid., p. 70. Own translation of the Italian original, 'per il pane'.
3 Similar circumstances, linked to food and famine, have been identified as applicable during certain periods of migrant labour in Namibia as well. See Gewald (2003), pp. 211-239, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4100864
4 Campisi (1963), p. 10. Own translation of the Italian original, 'Al paese c'era soltanto la libertà di morire di fame, qui c'è soltanto la libertà di lavorare.'

Migrationsgeschichte.ch is an online project whose aim is to popularise the history of migration in Switzerland. Developed by students and professors from various Swiss universities, the project has published that between 1960 and 1970 over half a million immigrants held Italian citizenship. This finding does not imply that all these immigrants came to work on contract, and it would be difficult to estimate a realistic number. At the same time, it would be unrealistic to believe that the number of individuals these figures imply would fit all of them into the category Francesco Arese Visconti refers to as 'public opinion's stereotyped poor, with a suitcase at the train station',[5] referring to a popular image of Italian men portrayed in the media at the time.[6]

Although the study of migration has gradually shifted its focus and methodology in recent decades, the motivation for migration—and labour migration in particular—continues to be understood in terms of poverty and economic gain.[7] Paul Silverstein in his publication 'Anthropological Review on the Racialisation of Immigrants in Europe', argues that 'the study of migration was generally subsumed under the study of population dynamics in general or urban spaces.'[8] Starting with the 1950s, migration studies shifted and expanded their focus from the:

colonial-era studies that subsumed migration under the larger study of nomadism and transhumance to the microeconomic focus on the migrant as first and foremost a mobile labourer, to a Marxist critique that bemoaned the migrant as the perpetually uprooted victim of capitalist world systems, to the postmodern celebration

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Please note that a literal translation for 'al paese' would be, 'in the country,' which could refer to either 'in the country [of origin]' or signify 'in the countryside' or 'village', reflecting the backgrounds of many Italians who came from rural areas. Consequently, I chose to translate the expression as 'back home', in order to capture the various meanings, at the same time providing a more relatable context for the reader.

5   Visconti (2024), p. 3.

6   See, for example, the photograph published in the Swissinfo article, 'Italians leave their mark on Switzerland' (2005), swissinfo.ch, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/science/italians-leave-their-mark-on-switzerland/4804422 accessed on 29 April 2025.

7   See Visconti (2024), p. 3, citing Pugliese (2018), p. 1688, and Ricciardi (2018). Also, Mai (2018), p. xiii.

8   Silverstein (2005), p. 367.

of the migrant as the cosmopolitan hybrid par excellence, to the contemporary focus on transmigrants.[9]

In the face of all these shifts, however, and as Nicola Mai suggests in his study on 'Mobile Orientations', 'the role of imagination in the formulation and enactment of people's migratory projects has not been sufficiently explored.'[10]

Just as it would be simplistic to analyse the phenomenon of labour migration in Switzerland and in Namibia solely in monetary terms, so too would it be simplistic to ignore the power of imagination—for the economic reference oversimplifies the complexity of the motivations, identities, and aspirations that have led thousands of people to migrate on a contract.[11] As will become clearer further on, when I employ the verb 'led', I am not suggesting a conscious choice by individuals to migrate on the basis of a contract, rather I am seeking to address an individual's capacity for action and his/her orientation[12] that is embedded in the political, 'contextual and relational dynamics'[13] at play. Furthermore, by looking beyond the dichotomy of voluntary vs. forced decisions to migrate under contract that seems to be encapsulated in the narrative of migration for bread, I aim to open the dialogue for other kinds of aspiration, action and projects that emerge from the contextual and relational dynamics in which individuals find themselves, some of which, admittedly, are translated into economic terms in migrants' testimonies. However, inflexible representations of labour migrants as poor and vulnerable also nourish violent perceptions in host societies that view migrants as poor, dirty, criminal, lazy or rude.[14] Such perceptions are

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9   Silverstein (2005), p. 368.

10   Mai (2018), p. xiii, referencing Mai (2001) and Koikkalainen & Kyle (2015).

11   See Vecchio (2019), p. 38. 'Nel 1962 soltanto in Svizzera emigrano 143.054 italiani, tra cui mio padre.' English: 'In 1962, 143,054 Italians emigrated just to Switzerland, amongst them was my father.' See also, Moorsom (1977), p. 52, who sheds some light on the difficulty of assessing the number of Namibian contract labourers while providing a rough estimate of 200,000, the number of labourers that went on strike against the contract labour system between December 1971 and January 1972.

12   Ahmed (2006), pp. 1-25.

13   Ham (2017), p. 17.

14   La Barba (2009), pp. 78-89, referencing various accounts from the archives of the Radio Télévision Suisse Romande (RTS). In Namibia, similar cognitive limitations can be observed in the narratives imposed by white settlers,

closely tied to an institutional, and even imperialistic desire to fix 'the others', to change them or force them to adopt other forms of behaviour that are compliant.[15] Those limited views also counter reality. Migrant workers tend to return to host societies after initial contracts expire, and thereby engage in a continual process of contributing to the economic development of host societies. Yet, because their contribution of labour is desired and expected by host societies, the system is designed to promise a near-future reward that is too close and too distant for labourers to achieve.

In the pamphlet, 'Namibia: SWAPO Fights for Freedom', edited by the Liberation Support Movement (LSM), published and printed in 1978 in the U.S., states that labour was needed in three sectors primarily, 'mining', 'fishing' and 'agriculture'.[16] Driven by the colonial economy and fuelled by the interests of private companies from the U.S., such as the American Metal Climax, AMAX, which owned and operated the Tsumeb Mining Corporation of South Africa and others, cheap and skilled labour was in great demand.[17] "Until the big contract worker's strike of 1971-72 crippled Namibian Industry for several months, this labour was supplied by the South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA), which each year supplied tens of thousands of Namibian men to farms, mines, and factories throughout the police zone."[18] While the contract labour system inside Namibia was racist, oppressive and exploitative, "[t]he living conditions were extremely dire, with contract labourers living in virtual prisons or compounds… could not visit home, could not accept visits from family, ate only what their employer was willing to feed them and suffered whatever punishment an employer thought appropriate for any suspected offences,"[19] Jannie de Wet, then 'Commissioner General for the Native People of South West Africa' made a declaration that outraged the workers. Some scholars, such as historian Peter Katjavivi, argue that Jannie

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employers and police shared by Ndadi (1974), p. 25, 36, 77, 80, as well as the ones narrated by Samuel Shafiishuna Daniel Nujoma in LSM (1978), p. 22.

15   See Ahmed (2010), Shao (2023), and Mai (2018).

16   LSM (1978), p. 13.

17   Ibid., p. 14.

18   Ibid., p. 13.

19   Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), p. 32.

de Wet's statement led to the workers' strike of 1971-1972.[20] Cited in the Windhoek Advertiser on 15 November 1971, "[i]n response to growing criticism of the harsh and binding nature of the contract labour system, De Wet stated that it was not a form of slavery because workers signed their contracts 'voluntarily.'[21] Drawing on Katjavivi's argument, Jannie de Wet's statement provided yet additional proof for Namibians to realise that South Africa's colonial promises had not been kept. Katjavivi argues that South Africa was expected, under the terms of the mandate, to administer Namibia as a 'sacred trust of civilisation.'[22] Yet, "South Africa not only failed to promote the 'material and well-being' and 'social progress' of the people of Namibia, but actively set about moulding them into servants of white society."[23] A similar line of argument was also put forward by the LSM in 1978:

> *The great majority of Namibians are forced to carve out a living as best they can from the sandy and eroding soil of the reserves. Many of these peasants, particularly among the Ovambos, have been integrated into the colonial economy by "exporting" the best of their [labour]. The others, such as the San and the Caprivians, still live largely within their traditional ways, but are fighting a losing battle against capitalist intrusion. Neither group has received anything in return for the expropriation of their land and [labour] power. The handful of schools outside the Police Zone are run by missionaries while medical care and modern technology have been completely absent. Only during the past decade, under pressure from the liberation struggle and international protest, has the South African government tried to paint a brighter facade by building a few schools and clinics.[24]*

By pointing out that 'neither group has received anything in return for the expropriation of their land and labour power', LSM makes it clear that no money, infrastructure, education or medicine, could be claimed

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20   Katjavivi (1988), p. 67.
21   Ibid., statement has been corroborated with Green (1987), p. 2, and Cronje & Cronje (1979), p. 81.
22   Katjavivi (1988), p. 13.
23   Ibid.
24   LSM (1978), pp. 14-15.

by black Namibians. Although, they are "'exporting' the best of their [labour]', are 'living as best they can' in the reserves set aside for them by the colonial power. Consequently, when asking and attempting to answer questions such as those previously posed by Clarence-Smith & Moorsom, Moorsom, Hayes, and Kreike:[25] 'Why did young Owambo men become migrant labourers when no external conquest, taxation or land dispossession encouraged wage-seekers to migrate?'[26]—I ask, to what extent do promises of a better life play a role? And based on the stories that migrant workers tell, to what extent can we trace their attempts to continue or not to continue, to follow or cling to these ideals and fantasies of happiness and a better life that have been suggested to them?

What is missing, and what this chapter aims to provide, is a conceptualisation of the mechanisms by which desires, fantasies, sociocultural and economic promises are promoted by colonies and nations. These are then, to some extent, internalised and negotiated by individuals in the context of their labour-migration projects. What I am suggesting is that the contract labour systems are deliberately designed, not only to promise a good life, but also to exclude certain categories of people from achieving it, and like a mouse running the wheel, the migrants on contract are the ones who are expected to keep trying to live up to the ideals being promoted, but most of the time would find themselves not arriving, not yet. Within this complexity, migrants make use of narratives that highlight, on the one hand, the way in which they understand themselves to be perceived by the system and, on the other, their ability to negotiate and choose the actions that best suit their individual aspirations with respect to the contract.[27]

As this edited volume maintains, contract labour systems are distinctive historical and social phenomena, with economy being just one of the many aspects that characterises them. This chapter aims to

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25   As referenced by Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), p. 30.
26   Ibid.
27   See Mai (2018), Ahmed (2010), Bonish, Brednich & Meyer (2024), but also Ntarangwi (2010), p. 13, stating that 'the Western gaze manifests itself also in the "Other's" perception and presentation of self so much that even when alone, the Other has this overwhelming desire to project self in a way that fits the West's construction of the Other,' for a more in-depth reflection on self-representations.

reach beyond economic narratives and explore storytelling techniques deployed by various labourers and historians to make sense of the historical journeys of labour migration to Switzerland and within Namibia and their self-representations. For this, I draw on selected historical accounts, films, biographies, immigration and integration policies, or even the expression of pain through drama. I take inspiration from feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who is sceptical concerning the 'promise of happiness', noting that in the neo-liberal quest for the good life, 'melancholic migrants' are pressured to pursue and claim a sense of happiness through their orientation, narratives, objects or rituals.[28] Ahmed's compelling analysis of 'melancholic migrants' (mostly the descendants of Indians in the UK) prompts me to pay attention to the ways in which '[t]he happiness duty for migrants means telling a certain story,'[29] usually a happy one, about their arrival or earnings, a story that translates as 'making it'. In this case, the promise of happiness suggests that migrants should forget the racist attitudes they have encountered, their pain and suffering, in order to capitalise on the opportunity of getting ever closer to the good life that awaits them.[30] If they fail to make the right choices, to take the necessary steps, they become 'melancholics' and thereby erect barriers to their own happiness. At the same time, it also means taking into account other, often violent, narratives imposed upon contract workers, and how these shape perceptions of who is worthy of happiness, of integration into the new 'home', and therefore highlight the means by which migrants become and remain 'the other'.

What I am suggesting is that, by keeping the conversation about labour migration focused on the bread, we allow the narratives of workers to continue to be trapped in the systemic logics in which some are destined to fail and others are destined to 'make it'. It is important to note that most of the testimonies provided by migrants do indeed reflect the economic burden. However, by shifting the focus and considering economic factors as tools used by migrants to express their self-representations within situational and political contexts, we begin to see that migrants are aware of the reasoning imposed on them and are capable of deciding whether to follow or not, to keep trying, to prio-

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28   Ahmed (2010), pp. 121-159.
29   Ibid., p. 158.
30   Ibid., pp. 121-159.

rities their values and aspirations, or to revolt in order to pursue individual projects. To illustrate the nature of this choice, I propose to look at the politics of food and the politics of home, key issues brought to the fore by contract workers, to trace how they self-reflect on the realm of oppression and dehumanisation to which they are subjected, and their strategies for realising individual migratory projects.

Challenging Dominant Narratives

This chapter will show that noteworthy similarities in the political, social, and economic roots exist between the migrant labour systems in Namibia and Switzerland, particularly from the 1920s to the 1970s. The combined analysis of the two cases, however, should not prompt simplification of the complex spectrum of labour migration and individual projects.

I argue that the dominant and restrictive narratives of contract labour migration are misleading for several reasons. Firstly, conventional narratives portray the contract-labour migrant as fated to embark on a challenging but ultimately rewarding journey. Every individual migration project can be driven by a combination of social and cultural motivations, including desires (e.g., to build a home), needs (e.g., to put food on the table) or accustomed values (e.g., to become the husband of a future wife).[31] Yet this promised fulfilment is time-limited and still demands, as proposed by Likuwa, a cyclical journey.[32] The failure to achieve the desired outcome from the first contract is a key element in the construction of the needs that lead to signing subsequent contracts.[33] Ahmed suggests that 'the promise' of happiness is the condition that makes things promising; the promise is always 'ahead of itself',[34] ahead but not there yet. It requires a journey of following and orientation towards the possibility of achieving the objects of desire. Hence,

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31 Likuwa (2014).
32 Ibid., Likuwa & Shiweda (2017).
33 An analogy to the argument proposed by Liisa Malkki (2015), where 'the need to help' is constructed at home, by social and cultural values associated with the act of helping. Proposing the idea that the need to migrate is constructed as well, triggers a need for rich understandings of the various ways one can make sense of labour migration experiences and narratives.
34 Ahmed (2010), p. 181.

one contract after another can be understood as getting closer to that which is promised, which fuels hopeful sentiments that one is getting closer and closer to the good life that is expected.

Secondly, as Ahmed argues based on utilitarian ethics, '(c)olonialism is justified as necessary not only to increase human happiness but to teach the natives how to be happy. They must learn 'good habits' by unlearning what is custom or customary. The general end of happiness translates into the particular end of the individual: the creation of 'individuals' becomes the purpose of colonial education or training.'[35] H.E. Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, the current and first female president of Namibia, at the time serving as Deputy Representative of SWAPO in Zambia and member of the movement's Central Committee, granted an interview for the SLM in which she stated:

> *Neither the German nor the South African colonial regimes ever really bothered to establish institutions of learning for Africans which would have enabled Namibian women to acquire trades or professional skills. The only professional women you can find in Namibia's towns are nurses and teachers. But nearly all the women teachers are primary school level, which means that they are at the lowest scale of pay. The same is true with respect to nursing.*[36]

Here, again, promises of material well-being and social progress for the people of Namibia were not kept, and systematically so. Having access to a few schools and a 'Bantu' education that Nujoma described as 'simply brain-washing the African to believe that he's inferior to the White—to prepare him for a life of labouring for the white 'baas' [Afrikaans word for boss]'[37] challenges the dominant narrative that workers are poor or lazy. Rather, the nature of that education reveals how the system projects an ideal that is systematically impossible to achieve. Moreover, in migrant labour contexts, ideal projections of a good life often conflict with one another. The following example illustrates such a clash.

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35   Ahmed (2010), p. 128.
36   LSM (1978), pp. 63-64.
37   Ibid., p. 22.

On 25 June 1962, the journalist Bruno Marini published in the Corriere d'Informazione a short story about 40 Italian contract labourers who lived together in barracks in Zurich entitled, 'Sognano nelle baracche una loro casetta in Italia' (English, 'They dream in the barracks of their own little house in Italy'). When a labourer was asked if he had ever been invited by a Swiss person for a beer, the only answer Marini heard, as if in chorus, was 'no'. One worker said he had been working for the company for five years, but he had never seen a Swiss colleague in their barracks nor ever met the wife of one either.

> *In Italy it would be different. If we saw a foreigner in the company, and we saw him alone, sad, we would say to him on Saturday: "Hey, you, do you want to go out with us?" And my wife would make him spaghetti, and I would pour him wine. Instead, the Swiss only tell us: "Why did you have three, four, five children? Who made you do it?"[38]*

Though the xenophobic tone of this reaction is obvious, it does highlight the fact that certain cultural and social expectations regarding the establishment of relationships between men in Italy are not shared by men in Switzerland. While sharing food and wine may also be considered a ritual that serves to build and consolidate relationships, or to demonstrate support in times of emotional turmoil, in Switzerland, those customs are not necessarily extended to every man. Furthermore, a judgment directed specifically at the number of children conveys the assumption that caring for numerous children back home was the labourer's motivation for coming to Switzerland to begin with. But the reasoning can also call into question the ideals one might follow. If starting a family and raising children is depicted as an ideal of happiness and the 'good life', it would seem that migrants might also be at a disadvantage by following them, i.e. 'Who made you do it?'

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38   Marini (1962), p. 8. 'Sognano nelle baracche una loro casetta in Italia', Corriere d'Informazione, 25.06.62. p. 8. Original 'In Italia sarebbe diverso. Se vedessimo uno straniero in ditta, e lo vedessimo solo, triste, gli diremmo al sabato: "Ehi, tu, vuoi uscire con noi?". E mia moglie gli preparerebbe gli spaghetti, e io gli verserei del vino. Invece gli svizzeri ci dicono soltanto: "Perché hai fatto tre, quattro, cinque figli? Chi te l'ha fatto fare?".'

The experiences of migrants are often confined to fundamental economic and social activities, such as providing for families left behind and returning to them after accumulating wealth or attaining a sense of maturity.[39] These accounts often begin with the assertion that millions of people lack basic necessities, which prompts them to embark on a journey to a promised land where they can secure these essentials by working under contract.[40] In their pursuit of this terra promessa[41], migrants are said to either abandon their entire lives or meticulously pack their belongings into suitcases, while maintaining the dream of return.[42] Subsequently, such dominant narratives reduce the experiences of labour migrants to a state of familial separation, to dependency on the employer for basic sustenance and to acceptance of any punishment an employer chooses to mete out.[43] While these representations are crucial and far from simplistic, potential misrepresentation may proceed from using them exclusively. Framing individual experiences as being fixed precludes other ways of living, especially the negotiations that are made, and what the journey of making a home entails. In the next section, I focus on exploring how migrants may contest the fixed assumptions of home through their actions and narrative techniques.

Ever-changing journey home

As migration is commonly perceived as a process of displacement, it becomes directly linked to feelings of loss and distress.[44] In 'Uprootings/ Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration', Ahmed et al. challenge the static understanding and dualities of an unchanging home as a place to which one belongs, and a concept of away that necessarily embraces a sense of loss. Instead, the authors encourage the perception

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39   Likuwa (2014), Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), Wessendorf (2007), (2013).

40   Vecchio (2019), pp. 27-33.

41   Ibid., p. 28. Here the promised land refers to Switzerland. Original Italian: '[L]a Svizzera è la terra promessa.' In Namibia a similar construct referred to the cities where migrants could purchase European goods and prepare boys to become men, see: Likuwa (2014), Likuwa & Shiweda (2017).

42   Vecchio (2003), pp. 27-33.

43   See Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), p. 32 for Namibian cases, similar interpretations of the Italian narrative are provided by Vecchio (2019) and Bizzarri (1974).

44   Ahmed et al., (2020), pp. 1-19; and Meyer (2024), pp. 59-71.

of migration as a transformative process in which 'home' is not fixed and being mobile does not necessarily mean being detached.[45] Ahmed et al. propose a closer examination of the circuits of exchange and power in the processes of 'homing' (making, feeling, and living in a home).[46] They argue that a home cannot be inherited, as it is not a static entity, but rather something that becomes a home with the passage of time.[47] This process necessitates, among other things, a continuous adaptation to the surrounding environment. Beginning from this point of view, I propose that one should base a similar perspective on labour migration, regarding it as a continuous negotiation of ever-changing futures that workers engage in with regards to home.

The following account of a contract labourer in Namibia tells the story of Vinnia Ndadi, an illuminating example of how one can make a home and inspire others to do the same.[48] Ndadi, who later became an important figure in the South West Africa Peoples Organisation's (SWAPO) struggle for liberation, became a migrant labourer in 1946 when he was only seventeen years old. In 1946 Ndadi went to the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA), the central recruiting agency for contract labour, to apply for a job in central or southern Namibia.[49] At the recruitment centre in the town of Ondangwa, after physical and medical examinations, he received a 'C' classification and went to stay with others, awaiting issuance of work papers and transportation details in a large SWANLA compound outside Grootfontein. In the recruitment process, a potential labourer was classified into one of four categories: (A): fit for work requiring strength, for mining, compa-

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45   Ahmed et al., (2020), pp. 1-19; See also Bonish-Brednich & Meyer (2024), and Bradley (2022).

46   Ahmed et al., (2020), pp. 1-19.

47   Ibid.

48   Ndadi (1974). See, Silundika (2013), p. 55. In April 2013, Ole Gjerstad, journalist and filmmaker based in Montreal, wrote in his letter to Felix Silundika, the son of Silundika, that he and Dennis Merces (the editor of Ndadi) were both members of the group (based in Canada and the U.S.) in charge of publishing operations for the Liberation Support Movement. Gjerstad notes that Dennis, after being picked up by SWAPO and brought to a safe house, "recorded the life of Vinnia Ndadi, which we published under the title, *Breaking Contract*. It was the first inside story of the South African contract labour system after the manner it functioned in Namibia, a tale of slavery pure and simple."

49   Ndadi (1974), p. 20.

ratively best pay; (B): fit for work in factories and agriculture, average pay; (C): young, physically suited for light work such as in households, low pay; and (D): unfit, too young, should be sent home.[50]

> [T]hey assigned you a job, "Johannes! You're going to milk the cows on the 'x' Farm"; "Samuel! You'll work at the Tsumeb mines!" And so on. You couldn't refuse. At first, I told myself that I wouldn't just take any job, but when I saw a man badly beaten for refusing his 'contract', I decided to take whatever they gave me… I was told, "Vinnia – you'll work as a 'houseboy' for a Mr. Jooste. He's a farmer in the Mariental District."[51]

After three years of working on the farm—"three years of nothing but maize-meal porridge, a little salt, and occasional meat when a diseased sheep died"[52] — Ndadi was excited to be returning home and wrote to his family. He mentioned the achievements made possible by three years of hard work. He sent money to his family, paid for the return ticket, bought a jacket for his father, trousers for himself, and a few small gifts for the rest of the family.[53] Despite the long period of hardship that had produced little benefit, Ndadi did not return home as he had initially planned.

As the title of his biography, 'Breaking Contract', highlights, Ndadi first embarked on a journey of resistance against the oppressive system imposed by colonial South Africa. To begin, he broke colonial law by living and working in Windhoek without a working contract. Even

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50 In June 2022, Dr. Martha Akawa (University of Namibia) and Dr. Lovisa Nampala, offered a guided tour to help people understand the workers' classification system and the architecture of the former premises of the SWANLA compound at Ondangwa. Other historians, such as Likuwa & Shiweda (2017, p. 32), depict the D category to denote child labour, mostly with reference to males from Angola and Zambia, and later used to denote underage workers in general. Once recruited, men had to wear an 'okaholo'—a badge that carried information such as the worker's permit number, place of work, and their classification. Akawa and Nampala told us that Ovambo contract workers were given two blankets and a pair of khaki trousers, and these uniforms were often too small or too large. Whenever possible, workers would use only one blanket and take the other one home as a mark of respect (omutengi) for their elderly fathers.

51 Ndadi (1974), p. 21.

52 Ibid., p. 23.

53 Ibid., p. 24.

though he was arrested and briefly detained, he continued to accept contracts and broke them when conditions became unbearable. Such was the case when his boss *"want(ed) to hear nothing about a raise,"*[54] and even when Ndadi argued that he was a human being and had rights, the boss threatened him with a gun.[55] Ndadi notes that other Africans had been shot for insubordination with 'little fuss about it'.[56] The experience of having his life threatened, deepened his realisation that the colonial power, as well as institutions whose job was to protect him—such as the police and labour institutions—did not recognise him (or any other black Namibian) as human, and he felt compelled to flee. Ndadi changed his name, organised strikes, and contacted international organisations, such as the United Nations, to appeal for support and to raise awareness of the oppressive nature of the contract labour system. His friends, parents, and local authorities attempted to help him become aware of the fact that colonial authorities regarded him as a dangerous opponent who sought the downfall of the colonial system, yet Ndadi continued fighting to realise his goal of liberation. In Ndadi's view, the working contract he had originally signed with SWANLA that entailed blatant and total control over him, turned into a different kind of contract—one whose aim was liberation and made claim to the power of imagination that the colonial system had suspended. Ahmed (2010) makes a compelling point that merges with Ndadi's and SWAPO's visions: *"[p]olitical movements are about becoming, 'not not' becoming something other than not… Political movements imagine what is possible when possibility seems to have been negated or lost."*[57] The struggles carried out against migrant labour systems showed that the new ideal was not to become 'human' in the face of an oppressive system, but to become something else: free.[58]

Ndadi's narrative of homing is a powerful account of strength, innovation and resilience in the Namibian context of liberation that repre-

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54   Ndadi (1974), p. 36

55   Ibid.

56   Ibid.

57   Ahmed (2010), p. 196.

58   See Emejulu (2022), a thought-provoking experimental manifesto that challenges the label 'human' as being designed solely for 'whiteness', making it impossible for racialised groups to achieve this 'status'.

sents a process of political freedom.[59] Home expands the traditional understanding of family[60] or the land to which one is bound, and it becomes charged with political values, human rights and collective belonging.[61] Even in exile, as Ndadi was forced to leave Namibia, home became the collective ideal of a liberated nation. Arguably this process can also be understood as one of crafting a new home. Insisting on individual dignity and the unity of protagonists in resisting an oppressive system, became a crucial tool in shaping Ndadi's narrative of change, liberation and the building of a new home for all.

For Antonio Corciulo, an Italian immigrant in Teufen, Switzerland, the process of homing is somehow smoother in narrative. His understanding of homing is focused on merging two lives that, even though perceived as being distant from one another, should be able to coexist. On 25 July 2003, Antonio Corciulo (called Ucciu Pepperussu by his friends) published a poem that he dedicated to friends, relatives and people living in the southeastern Italian towns of Salve and Pescoluse. He published the poem on the digital platform, www.salveweb.it, that promotes tourism and culture, and fosters connections between individuals living in southeastern Italy. The platform particularly attracted interest in the 2000s for its diaspora forum, entitled, 'I messaggi dei Salvesi' (English: Messages from the People of Salve). My curiosity was sparked by a mention of the poem in an article by Wessendorf (2013).

> *Salve mia cara Salve*
> *A 18 anni io ti lasciai*
> *ed in Svizzera emigrai.*
> *Poco tempo credevo di stare via*
> *per poi tornare nella Salve mia.*
> *Ma il tempo si sa è ingannatore*
> *non ti lascia mai fare quello che hai nel cuore.*
> *In Svizzera una bella famigliola*
> *mi sono formato, mi ritengo fortunato.*
> *47 anni da quel lontano 1956 sono passati*
> *mi ritrovo pensionato, felice nonno*
> *perciò diventa sempre*

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59   See also Moore et al. (2021).
60   Likuwa (2021), p. 80.
61   Cole & Gross, Christian (2016).

piu difficile un mio ritorno.
Ma non ti preoccupare, perchè
tutte le volte che posso, ti vengo a trovare
con un pò di nostalgia
sei sempre nel mio cuore, o Salve mia.[62]

Hello, my dear Salve[63]
At 18 I left you
and to Switzerland I emigrated.
A short time, I thought, I would be away
to then return to my Salve.
But time is known to be a deceiver
it doesn't ever let you do what's in your heart.
In Switzerland, a lovely family
I formed[64]; I consider myself lucky.
47 years have passed since that distant 1956
I find myself retired, a happy grandfather
therefore, it is becoming always
harder, a return of mine.
But don't worry, because
each time I can, I come visit you
with a little bit of nostalgia
you are always in my heart, oh, my Salve.[65]

Antonio Corciulo's poem aptly renders the process of homing through an aspiration to integrate. In 1956, Antonio Corciulo made a decision that diverged from a predictably foreseeable life path of returning home. Nearly five decades later he established a family in Switzerland, becoming a father and eventually a grandfather, and at the time of publication, was enjoying his retirement in the mountains of Appenzell. The return to Salve that Antonio Corciulo had once wished to fulfil, never materialised. Yet creating, and imagining a home, remained possible through actively managing the process of homing. At least at the time of

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62   Original in Italian
63   Corciulo applies wordplay here by using the fact that the common Italian greeting *salve* is the same as the town's name.
64   Once again, the author could be seen as using a double entendre. *Mi sono formato* ('I formed') is both a continuation of the previous line ('a lovely family I formed') and the beginning of a new line, and could also mean 'I formed myself', with *formato* ('formed') being a synonym for matured. In this way, Corciulo says that he formed a family and also implies that he made himself into a man or 'matured', and feels lucky about it.
65   Own translation. See Salveweb.it, https://www.salveweb.it/posta/posta2003l. htm

writing his testimony, Antonio Corciulo did not need to choose between ignoring or embracing his feelings of melancholia. One might interpret this as successfully overcoming the social pressure to 'return' to one's roots.[66] However, he also states: *"But don't worry, because each time I can, I come visit you."* Antonio Corciulo simultaneously navigates both: he is content with past conceptions of home, yet is also happy with his current circumstances, which he considers fortunate. He says, *"I consider myself lucky."* He also refers to his feelings for Italy as nostalgic, rather than melancholic. Melancholia, as it is often used in narratives of migration, is understood and explained by Sara Ahmed as the loss of a desire to follow a certain course, or a possible judgement addressed to those who did not make the 'right' or expected decision in their pursuit of happiness as dictated by the system. In other words, people regarded as stuck to past experiences of racism, inequality and the like, are believed to have placed barriers to the personal happiness they must attend to.[67] In contrast, nostalgia can be seen as the *"power of an image of the good life… or regret for what has been lost."*[68]

What is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, but may be considered possible is, that a decision to migrate may also be driven by the opportunities a different country can offer. Narratives associated with the life there can lure a person to leave the place here. The desire to be part of such a space, where one can be both here and there is crucial to understanding labour migration.[69] Because labour migration is not only closely linked to the material attractions associated with a better life, it is also associated with the imaginative possibilities of these elements. Migration, therefore, has the potential to expand the understanding of belonging, and to transform ideas and values attached to home. Likuwa (2021) somehow expands on that conception in his paper about the continuity and change of gender relationships in Kavango, Namibia, during contract labour. Likuwa points out that in Kavango, it was common for a married man leaving on contract to order his wife to stay at his

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66   Wessendorf (2013, 2017).
67   Ahmed (2010), pp. 121-159.
68   Ibid., p. 52.
69   Cvajner (2019) offers a rich account of how first-generation women from Eastern Europe who migrated to Northern Italy constantly had to navigate the *here and there*; being present *here*, in Italy, while constantly providing and worrying for the ones *there*, at home.

parents' or maternal uncle's home area during his absence.[70] As Likuwa pointed out, this situation arose, in part, because 'in Kavango, a general rule was that taboos had to be observed by those who stayed at home.'[71] Because the wife remained at home, it was believed that if she were unfaithful to her husband or would bring bad elements into their home, would ultimately '[determine] whether her husband would encounter misfortune while on contract.'[72] Men, on the other hand, were not bound by the same constraints. Men left home and for some reason, 'contract labourers believed that their immoral acts (such as adultery or second marriages) while on contract, did not violate a taboo.'[73] The notion of home, as we understand it, bends. Home becomes fluid and subject to interpretation in some cases, while in others, is fixed and therefore defines acceptable behaviour. Wives had to continue performance of their duties as loyal partners, because they were considered fixed at home. On the other hand, one may consider this double standard as questionable, since sometimes those women were sent to live in the homes of their in-laws, and were not left to continue living in their marital home. Men relied on their wives' ability to protect their health and well-being through spiritual 'home bondage', which was guaranteed by their wives' loyalty, at the same time that the men found new homes with different women, new friends, or newly conceived ideals of a free Namibia. Such would, of course, represent a simplistic fabrication. As Ahmed et al. point out, migration and home cannot be understood fully in the absence of power. "Mobility can be foisted upon bodies through homelessness, exile and forced migration just as the purported comforts of the familial 'home' may be sites of alienation and violence (for women, children, queers)."[74]

To better understand ways by which migrants embody or challenge power, I will introduce two testimonial accounts, one from Switzerland, and one from Namibia. Both have previously been cited by historians, such as Pelli and Likuwa & Shiweda, as exceptions. The first account is related by R.C., an Italian worker at a steel factory in Switzerland.

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70   Likuwa (2021), p. 87.
71   Ibid., p. 86.
72   Ibid.
73   Ibid., pp. 86-87.
74   Ahmed et al. (2020), p. 6.

Remembering his work in the steel factory, R.C. noted that:

Practically, we dragged each other along during that period (1961), among friends, just like that, because I could have stayed there (in Italy), we had a farm, we weren't forced to come here. There was very little money in farming [...]. Life on the farm was hard. I wanted to see [...] a different system of work that provided more money, there was nothing to lose, but as a teenager, there was no possibility to have fun, you know how life in the farm can look like.[75]

R.C. clearly expressed the desire for a different lifestyle. In contrast with the prevailing idea that workers were compelled to migrate by the scarcity of food and economic insecurity, R.C. explicitly stated that, despite financial considerations supporting his decision to leave, they were not the only factors that propelled him to leave Italy; he was certainly not forced to migrate to Switzerland. R.C. remembered that it was not only economic factors at play, but also his desire to explore 'a different system of work'. Thus, curiosity coupled with the desire to 'have fun' played a role, as well as the sense of having 'nothing to lose'. R.C. left Italy when he was a teenager. He also noted the lack of opportunities for leisure and enjoyment in his previous life on a farm in Italy. The work itself was not particularly enjoyable, and the lack of alternative experiences and opportunities to make money led him to seek a different way of life. A significant number of Italians who migrated to Switzerland originally came from the southern regions of Italy, where agriculture was the main economic activity.[76] R.C.'s testimonial draws an intriguing parallel between the aspiration for mobility and the pursuit of other forms of employment and enjoyment, such as dancing and visiting clubs. But it also represents a powerful account of how he and his friends were perceived (as poor and vulnerable), and through his testimonial, he challenges these perceptions. 'We weren't forced to come here', therefore becomes a statement that challenges the power with which some narratives were used against him and other Italian

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75   Pelli (2008), p. 14. Own translation of the testimonial of R.C., interviewed by Pelli.
76   See Wessendorf (2007).

men. The second account is provided by Likuwa & Shiweda, who note that:

> in the Kavango [North-East Namibia], some men regarded mig-
> ration as an act of kudanaghura, (playing around) […] As such,
> migration was not a crucial aspect of their lives but simply as an
> act of play and fun searching.[77]

Based on interviews with over 30 former contract labourers, Likuwa and Shiweda corroborated that narratives of poverty, aspirations of emancipation and the desire to support their families, are consistent throughout. However, there was also the mention of kudanaghura.[78] While the notion of migration as an 'act of kudanaghura (playing around)'[79] might be perceived as somewhat immature or naive, it is at the same time a courageous act, which challenges the central narrative of suffering associated with migration. I contend that, despite the brutal effect of the migrant labour system on an individual, labour migration could have been, and in some cases was explicitly experienced as, an act of play. This effect might have produced a diversification of know-ledge, positive experiences, travel opportunities and vital sensations, among other things. Even if undertaken while subjected to harsh con-ditions of the apartheid system or Swiss migration laws, value might have been discovered pursuing the journey, embodying an unconscious desire shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors.

As I have suggested, home is not a static concept, rather it is a pro-cess and an active negotiation. Home is a social and political construct that moves bodies and controls aspirations. However, it is also a collec-tive identity, linked to a sense of belonging and to political movements. When people migrate, they do not just lose or find a home; they redefine what home means through their actions, hopes and struggles. Migrant workers are aware of the political power inherent in the concept of home and use it whenever it manifests itself in their migratory projects. Some regard migration as a way to escape hardship, others as a playful

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77   Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), based on the interview with Muyenga Shintunga Unengu.

78   Ibid., p. 31.

79   Ibid.

adventure, and many wield it as a tool to achieve freedom or dignity. The key idea is that home is something they actively shape—it is more than a geographical location or family; in fact, it is identity, resistance and imagining new futures.

We have seen how one of the central themes of contract labour migration is actively negotiated and transcends the fixed understandings proposed by the dominant narrative, which regards migrants to be tied to their homes. Will the same bond apply to the second central theme, namely food? The following section considers how food also serves as a symbol of power and imagination.

One feeds the other—the bread

Bönisch-Brednich and Meyer maintain that, "to shape memory into narratives, we need mnemonic markers that allow us to bookmark and bring up stories."[80] Remembering specific encounters, storing memories, and using or sharing them to build a narrative with a past that "develop[s] a life of its own"[81] are specific steps that Bönisch-Brednich and Meyer argue are essential to demonstrate a sense of urgency, belonging, and community-building in migrant narratives. In their work, these scholars consider smells and food to be core tools among a migrant's storytelling techniques. Comparing countries, customs and food enables the migrant to assert their agency and to narrate their position within the dominant narratives imposed upon them.[82] Furthermore, discussions about food are regarded as 'safe, entertainment and social glue all in one.'[83] This function is identifiable in the previous example in which the migrant worker interviewed by Marini evokes a feeling of being safer when food is present, food is shared with others and emotions are experienced through company, family and home. As we have seen, in Switzerland, however, feelings of safety and home must be negotiated and constantly renegotiated. The same applies to food.

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80 Bönisch-Brednich & Meyer (2024), p. 192, referencing Bönisch-Brednich, (2019).
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., p. 196.

Essentially, food is a symbol of culture and prosperity; it possesses the power to bring people together. Food can also justify migratory projects. In his book 'Cacciateli! Quando i migranti eravamo noi' (English: Throw them out! When we were the migrants), Concetto Vecchio recounts various testimonies and socio-political interpretations of Italian labour migrants to Switzerland, in an attempt to trace the system that motivated his parents to migrate as labourers. One example Vecchio gives relates to a scene Rudolf Braun mentions in his book published in 1970, 'Sozio-kulturelle Probleme der Eingliederung italienischer Arbeitskräfte in der Schweiz' (English: Socio-cultural Problems of the Integration of Italian Workers in Switzerland). Braun, who took the initiative to study the integration of Italian migrant workers in Switzerland, conducted hundreds of interviews with migrants. "'Perché siete venuti?' chiede a tutti. 'Per il pane,' rispondono.'" (English: "'Why did you come?' he asks everyone. 'For bread,' they reply.'")[84]

Food and eating are crucial topics in the memories of Namibian migrant workers, as well. In this regard, Likuwa and Shiweda mention a local parable that refers to wild fruit that is told by Kapinga Muhero, a former migrant worker. He stated:

> *I see contract work like the issue of collecting wild fruit. When your fellows are gone to look for wild fruit in the jungle, then you too begin to question why you must stay. You then decide that you also have to go there, regardless of whether you will die there or survive.*[85]

Although Kapinga Muhero's metaphor highlights the issue of personal security and whether an individual has a choice to stay at home when social pressure exists to leave. It is also interesting to note how the role of the fruit is expressed in the phrasing. In their article of 2017, Likuwa and Shiweda make a compelling point about Muhero's reference to collecting wild fruit. They remind us that wild fruit often lasts only for a day and that repeated journeys are therefore necessary in order to obtain more fruit.[86] This repetition and circularity are significant elements for

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84   Vecchio (2019), p. 70, refering to Braun (1970).
85   Likuwa (2014), pp. 57-58.
86   Likuwa & Shiweda (2017), p. 38.

comprehending the broader meaning of the parable in the framework of contract labour, in which workers, too, had to repeatedly sign new contracts. One could argue that picking fruit finds a parallel in the system of migrant labour. Likewise, I would maintain that going without food also symbolises the anxiety associated with being 'uprooted' or 'displaced'[87] or, as described in the chapter's first section, of 'not yet being there'. A journey of following and continuing is therefore required to lead a better (i.e. more satiated) life.

Italian director Franco Brusati's 1974 comedy-drama about migratory labour in Switzerland, 'Pane e Cioccolata' (English: Bread and Chocolate)[88], is a good starting point to engage food symbolism. In the film, 'bread' is a layered metaphor. The narrative follows migrants who accept contracts and work abroad. The sacrifice entailed in leaving their families, occupying unhealthy accommodations (e.g. a chicken coop), and accepting work that locals do not want to do, can be understood as a choice driven by necessity, for a worker must provide bread. The absence of bread therefore symbolises poverty. Alternatively, the film's title reveals how bread is an essential component of a typical Swiss snack, consisting of a piece of bread and a chocolate bar. Particularly when viewed through the lens of the hospitality-and-tourism sector chosen by the director, migration involves both the workers and those who benefit from their services. Therefore, chocolate (representing benefits) and bread (representing labour) indicate that work and benefits are linked, and a labourer must be mobile in order for someone else to have the privilege of staying put.[89] Bread and chocolate also indicates that a migrant worker similarly produces food for the society that receives him.

The OECD Economic Survey, published in January 1970, reported that "[s]ince the middle of 1968, the Swiss economy has been characterised by a full scale upswing, which has been associated with a remarkable acceleration of productivity advances in industry."[90] "In real terms, the rate of growth of GDP picked up from 1.6 per cent in

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87   See Wessendorf (2007).
88   Pane e Cioccolata, Franco Brusati (1974, Cinema International Corporation).
89   Ahmed et al. (2020).
90   OECD (1970), p. 33.

1967 to 3.4 per cent in 1968, and may exceed 4 per cent in 1969."[91] The report also noted that the growth was not expected: "as there has been little natural growth of the labour force, the rise in employment has been largely due to a higher net immigration of foreign labour."[92] As social movements that called for limiting the number of foreigners in Switzerland were strong in the 1970s, the economy suffered as a result. The 1963 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report clearly indicates how Switzerland's economic boom used to manifest itself. "1962 was the third consecutive year of remarkably vigorous growth in the Swiss economy. Rapidly rising investment and exports remained the chief dynamic elements of demand. A continued large influx of foreign labour and capital from abroad and a sharp rise in commodity imports relieved the pressure on domestic resources."[93] Although the reports do not indicate a direct link between an increase in the number of foreign workers and Switzerland's rapid growth, the experts expressed puzzlement at the government's planned anti-immigration policy. They say: "The rapid and stable expansion of the Swiss economy since the mid 1950s will be difficult to maintain with a decline in the growth of the labour supply of this magnitude."[94]

'Onions Make Us Cry', a play by Swiss-Nigerian-Brazilian playwright, Zainabu Jallo, provides further insight into the metaphor of food, suggesting that food also symbolises the repetition of rhetoric. In the play, Melinda, a patient who is locked away (no reason provided), tells a doctor: "I miss my babies. Wonder what they're feeding them: beans, plantains, or bad stories about me. I wonder… it eats me up."[95] These lines reveal a strong link between food and the creation of miracles, insecurities and narratives of what it means to be happy, to be home, to be safe, which connection is our focus in this section: feeding narratives.

In 2017, Turkish-British writer, Elif Şafak, launched a TED talk with the question: "Can you taste words?"[96] In the course of the talk, she explained that this question had been posed by a teenager whose mother

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91   OECD (1970), p. 8.
92   Ibid.
93   OECD (1963), p. 5.
94   Ibid., p. 26.
95   Jallo (2013), p. 44.
96   The revolutionary power of diverse thought, Elif Shafak, TED, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCr8s57hdzY

experienced hunger episodes while reading about food and dinner scenes in Şafak's book. The young adult wondered whether the author had also experienced hunger while writing. Elif Şafak used the platform to explain how each word she used had a particular association, be it colour or taste. As the topic of Şafak's TED was directed towards the revolutionary power of diverse thought, the link between food and narratives started to make even more sense. The question whether one can 'taste words' reveals an intimate relationship between language and nourishment. Food not only denotes physical nourishment, but also emotional and cultural sustenance. Besides the construction of aspirations and hopes for a better future, in the circularity of attempts, a person must traverse and yet still finds him or herself not quite there, food becomes an important tool in maintaining the system. Below is a testimony provided by a domestic labourer in Namibia, as cited by Cronjé & Cronjé:

> *Especially we workers who are working in the kitchens, we find that the whites —or our employers—think they are better than us, that they are cleaner than us. But they forget that it is we who are washing their dishes, cooking food for them, making up their beds. But when the time for eating comes they take a tin and give us food in the tin instead of in a plate. It means that those whites regard us lower than their dogs. Because when we get our food in a tin they tell us to go and eat outside, while I have to wash the plate where the dog is going to get its food. And the dog can eat inside the room while I am ordered to go and eat outside. The employers do not regard us as human beings.*[97]

This anecdote illustrates particularly how power relationships play out at the intersection with food. It illustrates how food reinforces power dynamics and racial and social stratification. The discrepancy between how food is served—and where it is eaten—serves as a powerful analogy for the dehumanisation and marginalisation of the working class. By comparing the treatment of domestic workers with the treatment of dogs, the testimony exposes the enduring cruelty embedded in such social hierarchies. This example invites us to think critically about who

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97   Cronjé & Cronjé (1979), pp. 35-36.

gets to present narratives, i.e. who puts food in the tin and who eats what is given in order to make ends meet.

As I have postulated in the previous sections of this paper, the promise of a good life implies that, by doing what is considered 'right', one can get closer to achieving that good life. Food, as a symbol of affluence, was utilised by the colonial regime in Namibia. By impoverishing the North and using 'the reserves as a labour pool',[98] the South African colonial government fostered and helped sustain among labourers a desire and a fantasy that suggested, with a contract, one could escape famine. However, almost all accounts of labour migration in Namibia reveal that food was provided by employers, though it was of poor quality. Sometimes this 'payment in kind' was even utilised to justify low wages.[99] In these cases, the promise not only went unfulfilled, it created more suffering. As we have seen in the case of Switzerland as well, through hard work, Namibian migrant workers produced food only for the colonialists. The role of food and related sensory experiences in the context of labour migration, transcends merely providing nourishment, as both are intricately intertwined with the social, political and emotional dimensions of oppression. Food functions as a symbol of identity, as a marker of power, and as an instrument for negotiating the promises and personal projects of migration.

Conclusion

In both Namibia and Switzerland, contract labour was a social, political and economic system designed to perpetuate access to cheap labour by keeping the workforce in rotation and preventing it from settling in the location of employment. These systems used stories of fixed homes, poverty and loss in order to create a dichotomy between the 'local' and the 'migrant', and between the 'migrant' and the 'contract worker'. The systems fabricated aspirations and promises of a better life, aspirations that were designed to be unattainable for certain categories of people. This chapter highlights the fact that migrants were well aware of the logic proffered by the system, and their behaviour shows how they continued to negotiate their individual migratory projects. The careful

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98   Moorsoom (1977), pp. 86-87.
99   Cronjé & Cronjé (1979), pp. 44-45.

perusal of personal memories reveals spaces of derision, resistance and courage. Some dared to describe contract work as a way of 'playing around', that is, of acquiring experiences, but also playing around the system. While their lives were highly controlled and enclosed by strict border regimes, migrants found ways to transform the language of and about work, in order to cross borders, to fight the system, to gather and to build a new sense of home. By highlighting the importance and fluidity of food and home, two central themes present in almost all accounts of labour migration, this analysis suggests that migrants' experiences were not simply narratives of economic gain or socio-economic pressure. The quest for a better life needs to be examined on systemic and individual levels, opening up space for diverse, contrasting and hopeful narratives that are able to transcend entrenched, racist and oppressive perceptions.

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This edited volume shows surprising similarities in labour history and its legacy in two different contexts: South African occupied Namibia and Switzerland in the second half of the 20th century. Both the apartheid state and post-war Switzerland established an exploitative migrant labour system. In the Swiss case migrant labourers came on seasonal contracts from poorer southern-European countries such as Italy and Spain and later Turkey or the Balkan states. In the Namibian case the sending areas of the migrant labour were defined as African reserves and later 'independent' homelands, allowing the workers to be treated as foreigners by the state. The systems aimed at fast-tracking economic growth and safeguarding the nations from crises by setting quotas of 'imported' cheap labour to be lowered or increased according to the needs of the economy. In both cases migrant labourers had only very limited rights and they were marginalised or outright excluded from participation in public life and society in their places of work.

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