

NORMAN LEVY on African gold

First of her kind

RUTH FIRST: Black Gold. The Mozambican Miner. Proletariat and Peasant. (The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1983, £35.)

IMMIGRANTS (usually from former colonial territories) made up one in seven manual workers for Europe's industrialised economies in the seventies. In the South African mining industry until recently, foreign migrant workers were not one in seven but three in four.

Ruth First's sensitive and scholarly study, undertaken with researchers from the Centre of African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, sets the work in the context of the international migration of labour.

The phenomenon she is explaining was never temporary but a permanent necessity. African migrants from Mozambique were the spine of the workforce: at the turn of the century, 60 per cent of the miners were black Mozambicans. The mines could not have been worked without them. Since then, the percentage of East African migrants has fallen but they still make up more than a quarter of the total migrant labour force.

The study is not a chronicle of the system but an analysis of it. The analysis concentrates on the contemporary impact of Mozambique's flow of labour to South Africa and the consequence of the repeated labour exodus for peasant economies.

The emphasis is on the immediate, although the historical roots of immigration for wages is far from ignored. A study of history is seen by First as part of the task of decolonising the region, for after a century of migrancy, the rural economies have developed a dependency on migrant labour in a way that the system has become economically self-reproducing.

The total impact of colonial penetration is part of the Centre's larger study. The assassination of Ruth First — by a letter bomb, this time last year — will undoubtedly delay that project, but in the words of Aquino de Braganza, director of the Centre, "a single bomb cannot destroy the basis of Ruth

First's work in Mozambique nor silence her ideas. The work she began as a journalist in South Africa and which she pursued with the work of *Black Gold* will continue in Mozambique".

In *Black Gold*, there is the familiar, scrupulous presentation of data, the attention to structure and process — but more than in her earlier works, notably *South West Africa* (1963); *The Barrel of a Gun: the politics of Coup D'Etat in Africa* (1972) and *Olive Schreiner* (with Ann Scott, in 1960).

Through work songs, interviews, scrutiny of contracts and unique oral histories of miners, the character of the workforce is carefully portrayed, as is the draining of skills from Mozambique and the distortion of the rural economy.

The continuous stream of peasant labour to South Africa has left its mark on independent Mozambique. Peasant economies have been destroyed with the poor, and to a lesser extent the middle peasants, the most seriously affected. This emerges in the most innovative of First's study, where the social differentiation of the countryside is discussed and illustrated through 16 case studies of Mozambican peasant householders.

While the middle peasants were able (after a period of mine work) to sustain a certain level of agriculture, the agrarian base of the poor peasantry was too depleted to allow even a modicum of healthy subsistence. Consequently they became locked into a cycle of contract labour from which they could never withdraw.

The succinct final chapter (*Workers or Peasants?*) explains how mine wages underwrote the peasant economy; and how the peasant economy has in turn produced successive generations of worker-peasants who are neither wholly separated from the soil nor independent individual producers.

A resource centre in honour of Ruth First has been created to service and support the study of history, economics and sociology of Southern Africa. The centre will provide study grants and fund research as well as publish suitable projects.

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