GLOBAL PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

WORKERS ON THE MOVE

By ANDRÉ McNICOLL

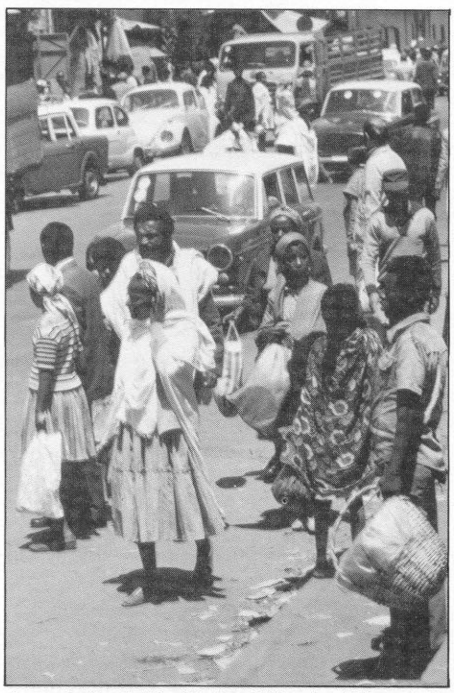
In Latin America, Mexico City is a favorite destination of migrants.

When Asian tribes crossed the frozen Bering Strait in search of food some 20 000 years ago and settled across the Americas as far south as Tierra del Fuego, they embarked on one of the most remarkable migrations in human history. But it was neither the first nor the last such massive demographic shift.

It is wrong to assume, as many anthropologists do, that we are either nomads or settled agriculturalists. Subject to pressure, we can all pack up and move — sometimes awesome distances — and have been doing so ever since we started to hunt and fish for our survival. Population patterns around the globe have been and continue to be shaped largely by one inescapable imperative: the need for food and shelter.

Over the centuries, as survival turned into an economic activity, the most important form of demographic dislocation has been labour migration. Labour for hire, labour for sale is now an integral feature of the global economic system. Since the Industrial Revolution, when economically motivated migration clearly displaced religious and political migrations in importance, there has evolved an international division of labour — largely unstated — which shifts as it responds to major changes in technology and the variable needs of transnational capitalist interests.

The most dramatic example of international labour migration today is in the countries of the Middle East where the near quadrupling of oil prices between



A market in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Africa, Asia and Latin America have "armies" of undereducated and unemployed workers.

October 1973 and January 1975 triggered frantic economic and social development. With a small indigenous population base, low labour force participation, especially by women, and underdeveloped educational resources, these countries had to rely heavily on foreign labour to implement their ambitious plans.

By 1980 there were 2.7 million immigrant workers in the oil-exporting countries of the Middle East and North Africa — Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Although the total number of people involved is small compared to previous waves of labour migration (whether forced or voluntary), it is substantial when considered as a proportion of the whole labour force. As early as 1975 the share of immigrant labour in total employment in the United Arab Emirates was 89 percent, in Qatar 83 percent, in Kuwait 71 percent, in Oman and Saudi Arabia 39 percent.

There is a tendency to see the situation in the Middle East as temporary, that someday the millions of migrant mechanics, farm labourers and technicians will return to their native villages and towns and leave nothing behind but roads and bridges, oil and sewer pipes. This may happen, but labour migration in the past has often resulted in permanent demographic changes of great magnitude.

THE AMERICAS

From the 16th to the middle of the 19th century, 15 to 30 million Africans were shipped as slaves to the American continent. By 1840, in the British Caribbean, slaves comprised 70 to 75 percent of the total population. Later, when slavery was abolished, the importation of indentured labour resulted in millions of Indians, Chinese, Pakistanis and Malays settling permanently in the colonies. This guaranteed the sectioning off of underdeveloped nations into specialized producers of cereals, meat, coffee, cocoa, fruits, and, later, oil for the benefit of imperial coffers.

Substantial international labour migration is normally associated with the middle stage of industrialization when a country's economy is expanding. Technical resources are modest and there is a need for a large but relatively unskilled labour force to clear land for agriculture and to build mines, roads, railways, and a physical infrastructure in urban areas. This was very much the case with both Canada and the United States from the middle of the 19th century until well into the present century. Following the importation of Chinese labourers to help build the railroads across the vast prairies and the far West of North America in the 1850s, there came millions of immigrants from Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Many came from the British Isles where the growth of capitalism, population increase, and the crop failure enclosure acts, which turned common lands into private cultivable land, precipitated migration overseas. Between 1904 and 1914 alone, fully 10 million people migrated from Europe to the United States. This particular example of migration has been seen by students of demography and geography as evidence that labour migration cannot be understood without reference to the internal and external dynamics of the world capitalist system.

ARMIES OF UNEMPLOYED

The pivotal variable shaping current patterns of capital expansion is now considered to be the existence of "armies" of under-educated and unemployed workers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This huge, potential labour force is helping enforce a new international division of labour and capital flow characterized by rapid industrial relocation of manufacturing operations.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there are now more than 200 million 12- to 17-year-olds out of school in the developing countries — 137 million in Asia, 45 million in Africa, and 19 million in Latin America. Most of them have either never been to school or have less than a grade 4 education, and live in rural and poor urban areas. The Third World labour force in the 15 to 24 age group, now numbering 338 million, will increase to 467 million by the year 2000. This means that developing countries have the formidable task of creating well over 100 million jobs to absorb new entrants to the labour market and an additional 35 million jobs for the present jobless youth.

WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON

International labour migration is a significant demographic feature in several regions of the world. In Western Europe there has been a strong migratory tradition for centuries, abetted in part by political liberalism which facilitated the free movement of people across state boundaries, and by associations with former colonies. Since 1945 migratory flows have been principally from the Mediterranean Basin and North Africa to the industrial economies of the Northwest. In 1973 France and West Germany each had some 2.5 million foreign workers, accounting for 10 to 12 percent of their labour forces. Switzerland had 600 000 (30 percent); Belgium and Sweden each had between 200 000 and 220 000 (6-7 percent); the Netherlands had 80 000 (2 percent); and Luxembourg had 33 000 (30 percent).

Until the 1930s there were significant migratory flows from Europe to Latin America, mainly to Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Between 1857 and 1930, Argentina received 6.3 million overseas migrants. By the 1950s, though, international labour migration had been replaced by intraregional flows affecting very large numbers of workers. The Southern Cone (Argentina, part of Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay) has been particularly prone to labour migration involving mainly manual workers from rural areas. Between 1950 and 1974, Argentina experienced a net migratory flow of over one million people from its Southern Cone neighbours, with foreign-born workers eventually accounting for 14 percent of the country's labour force.

West Africa has also experienced intensive intraregional labour migration. Workers from Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso seek higher wages in Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. In Ivory Coast, a country where wages, in even the poorest regions, are higher than anywhere in Burkina Faso, fully 20 percent of workers are foreign born.

FROM EAST ASIA TO MIDDLE EAST

But it is the situation in the Middle East that attracts attention and is now the focus of much research, particularly as concerns the impact of remittances on sending countries. In 1975, 58 percent of foreign workers in the oil-exporting countries of the region came from other Arab states. After 1975 there was a dramatic increase in the number of workers from East Asian countries such as South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. These countries boosted their labour exports by using national contracting firms who bought the labour component of large projects, established work camps, and provided most of the basic services such as housing, utilities, and health services, thereby considerably cutting costs for receiving countries. Estimates are that by 1982 there were 500 000 Filipinos, 200 000 Koreans, and 200 000 Thais working in the Middle East.

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Most Asian governments encourage the export of labour, seeing it as a way to reduce national unemployment, a source of foreign exchange, and a means of improving the standard of living of affected families through better nutritional intake, better clothing, housing, and schooling for children. The effects on sending countries depend on many factors, such as magnitude of outflows, employment and occupational status of migrants before they leave, proportion of remittances to income, use made of remittances, extent of increase in the skill levels of the returned migrants, and stability of the labour export market.

Certainly, sending countries can be negatively affected. Some become too dependent on remittances and therefore vulnerable to outside economic factors. Some lose too many workers themselves. Jordan, for instance, experienced a serious shortage of skilled labour after 1975, threatening the implementation of its own development plans. Tunisia, which has only some 2500 skilled workers abroad, is nonetheless now very short of teachers of mathematics, sciences, and languages. Some workers return and end up poor, spending their money on consumer goods such as television sets and cars.

BRAIN DRAIN

IDRC has been funding a series of projects to look at the consequences of labour exportation on sending countries. Studies have already focused on the effects of the "brain drain" in the Caribbean and Tunisia. Others are planned in Guyana, Surinam, and Argentina. In the Philippines, project support will help the Institute of Labour and Manpower Studies look at the range of possible impacts of exported contract labour at the individual, household, and community levels.

Indonesia, which in the period 1969-1974 had only 5500 nationals working abroad, has formulated an ambitious plan to have 300 000 workers outside the country in the period 1984-1989. It is expected they would generate almost US$2 billion per year in remittances. IDRC support will enable the Atma Jaya Foundation in Jakarta to gather in-depth data on temporary labour migration from Indonesia to the Middle East. Indonesian planners, though wishing to stimulate labour migration, do not wish to experience the negative effects of a brain drain. The country is already losing too many physicians and teachers to Sarawak and the Malaysian mainland.

Another project, in this loose and informal Southeast Asian network, will describe the process of migration to the Middle East from rural areas of Thailand. Of particular interest will be the effect of labour loss on agricultural production.

Migration has existed from the dawn of history. But we no longer have vast hunting and fishing grounds to serve as a refuge for roaming bands fleeing from hunger, or virgin lands to be settled by millions of disenfranchised peasants and urban poor, or weak and sparsely populated nations open to permanent demographic transformation from military conquests. Today migration is largely a legal matter, a contractual affair modulated according to economic interests. Whether a nation sends or receives labour migrants, it must have a clear notion of the consequences. □

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