



## **‘Indecent’ Work? The Case of Colonial Indentured Labour**

by Oliver Tappe

After the foundation of the ILO in 1919, a key element of the organization’s activities was the fight against forced labour – as it were, ‘indecent’ labour relations – worldwide. Many decades later, following numerous campaigns against ‘modern slavery’ and in favour of decent labour, this struggle is far from over. Global variants of contract labour, in particular, still recall colonial systems of indenture that often implied coercion and violence. The ILO’s engagement with colonial labour relations was a precursor of the ongoing global battle for decent work.

Variants of indentured or contract labour constituted the pillar of colonial labour relations after the abolition of slavery. So-called ‘coolies’ signed work contracts for a specific number of years, and for that time became bound to their employers, with a high risk of exploitation. Within this framework, millions of Indian and Chinese labourers were shipped around the globe to work in labour-intensive sectors such as plantations, mining, and infrastructure projects. The legacy of indenture is reflected by the demography of créole societies such as Mauritius, where the first large-scale experiments with Indian indentured labour were begun in the 1830s (Northrup 1995; Allen 2014).

Established as an alternative to slave labour, contract labour was indeed advantageous for the colonial powers and their claim to be undertaking a ‘civilizing mission’: under the guise of an allegedly voluntary recruitment, with good payment and legal security for the workers, the Asian ‘coolies’ became a disposable labour force, since colonial capitalists had to invest less in the workers’ bodies than in the case of slavery. They benefited especially from a continual flow of impoverished people from the vast hinterlands of China and India who signed often treacherous labour contracts to work in unknown places abroad.

In British South Africa, for example, the plantations and mining industry relied on itinerant and bonded labour. While Indian ‘coolies’ were mainly employed by the sugar and tea plantations of Natal, Africans from the whole southern part of the continent worked in the gold mines of

the Transvaal, from 1904 supplemented by 63,000 Chinese indentured labourers (Lindner 2016). Colonial capitalists were obliged to provide suitable lodgings, food, and medical care. However, breaches of these obligations were common, in addition to illegal floggings, withheld wages, and sexual assault (ibid.).



Chinese Coolies and Overseers.

*Nationaal Archief [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons<sup>5</sup>*

Thus, colonial contract labour revealed similar aspects of coercion as slavery had before, and was already being condemned as a “new system of slavery” in British Parliament in 1840 (Tinker 1974). For the time under contract, labourers lost basic rights and were subject to exploitation, racism, and violence. Even when conditions were not as extreme as under chattel slavery, coerced labour still tolerated labour relationships that implied violent control, economic exploitation, forced immobilization, and oppressive debt obligations (Zeuske 2018; van der Linden and Rodríguez García 2016; Damir-Geilsdorf *et al.* 2016; Hu-DeHart 1993).

<sup>5</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese\\_Coolies\\_and\\_Overseers,\\_Bestanddeelnr\\_815\\_13.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_Coolies_and_Overseers,_Bestanddeelnr_815_13.jpg)

Progress in securing workers' rights in the metropole did not find an equivalent in the colonies, where 'native labourers' were often considered racially inferior, and forced work a means to discipline and 'educate' the non-European population (Maul 2007; Lindner 2011). Unsurprisingly, the Indian nationalist movement under Gandhi attacked the racist system of indenture, and in 1917 achieved a ban in India (Sturman 2014). However, in most colonies the system continued, as in the case of French Indochina, where a European 'might believe he had the right to beat, sometimes fatally, a worker whom he perceived to be lazy or rebellious' (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 193).

This double standard of workers' rights challenged the internationalist and humanitarian aims of the ILO. When it was founded in 1919, the organization problematised the fact that definitions of slavery remained narrow, restricted to the possession of one person by another, meaning that other forms of coerced and forced labour thus counted as 'free' (Maul 2007). Some of the operational indicators of unfree labour defined by the ILO – for example, in the context of Asian contract labour in the Gulf States – still help to explain degrees of coercion within colonial contract labour: 'Unfree recruitment', which means coercive as well as deceptive recruitment; 'Life and work under duress', including limited mobility, withholding of wages, forced overtime work, and the retention of identity papers; and the 'impossibility of leaving the employer' as exemplified by the various penalties for 'breach of contract' on the colonial plantations (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016; Aso 2018).

Rubber plantations in Indochina are a case in point. During the rubber boom of the 1920s, an average of 12,000 Vietnamese labourers from densely populated coastal Tonkin were brought to the upland plateaus of southern Indochina where locally available labour was scarce. The Vietnamese 'coolies' endured scandalous sanitary and medical conditions, miserable housing, and insufficient nourishment, and faced severe corporal punishment for the slightest offence (Tappe 2016). A system of advances and withheld salaries, various penalties, and the need to buy food and goods from plantation-run shops entailed indebtedness that forced many workers into signing consecutive contracts (Aso 2018; Boucheret 2008). This situation fits the criteria to be classed as forced labour, which the ILO Convention 29 from 1930 defined as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily"<sup>6</sup>.

In late-1920s France, the Ministry of Colonies had started to pay more attention to the human factor on behalf of an ongoing justification of colonial rule, and a new leftist and internationalist government had received the message of the ILO positively. Thus, they allowed some improvements to be made to the 'coolies' plight. According to historian Marianne Boucheret (2001), the Ministry of Colonies opened a Pandora's box in 1926 when it initiated surveys on living conditions and became interested in social questions. Inspectors produced disturbing accounts of insufficient housing and sanitary conditions, arbitrary violence, and relentless exploitation of the workers' bodies. Resulting reforms to improve the conditions – while meeting fierce resistance from the planters' lobby – were still mainly directed at continual justification of

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029)

the system of indentured labour, which was considered indispensable for a functioning colonial economy, and basically thought beneficial for the colonised (ibid.).

However, colonial contract labour in many respects still resembled forced labour more than what would count today as decent labour according to ILO definitions.<sup>7</sup> Aspects of security in the workplace and social protection for families, as well as freedom to express concerns and to organize, were unknown to many 'coolies'. Rather, exploitation and violence prevailed on some plantations, as literary memories of former plantation workers illustrate (see for instance Binh 1985). In the 1930s, plantation workers organized strikes and started to respond to the emerging anticolonial and communist propaganda in Indochina: the Vietnamese 'coolie' became a prominent symbol of colonial oppression (see Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Tran 2013).

In Indochina and elsewhere, after colonialism this system of indentured labour seemed to disappear. The ILO shifted its focus to human rights issues, in particular with regard to forced labour in socialist countries. Meanwhile, newly established systems of contract labour, most notably the state-sponsored labour migration in the Philippines from the mid-1970s, resembled the mechanisms of colonial indenture (Piper et al. 2016; Derks 2010). The ILO now has to face new global challenges: today, Asian construction workers in the Gulf States and workers in the global care economy have to balance economic opportunity with precarious living and working conditions, legal insecurity, and racial and sexual harassment (see e.g. Gardner 2012; Kitiarsa 2014; Nguyen 2015; Killias 2018).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

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