



TEBA Limited
Head Office: +27 11 353 6000
Website: www.teba.co.za
26 August 2002

TEBA History

Almost a century has passed since the launch of the original company on which TEBA was founded in 1902. Then, its mission was to find and recruit unskilled labour from any source at almost any price to bring the gold mines of the Witwatersrand back to production after they were mothballed during the Boer War.

Now, TEBA provides services that go far beyond the scope of merely employing able-bodied men to work in the mining industry. This transition was achieved gradually, sometimes painfully, but it never lost its forward momentum. Indeed, the chronicle of the liberation of the whole southern African sub-continent from colonialism and apartheid is tightly woven into the history of TEBA, and of its predecessors, Wenela (Witwatersrand Native Labour Organisation) and NRC (Native Recruiting Corporation).

Initially, Wenela was an instrument of capitalism and colonialism as the gold mining magnates and the British Empire joined resources to exploit the world's richest goldfield.

J F "Peter" Perry, the Imperial Secretary, became Wenela's first chief executive. Lord Milner, the high commissioner at the time was tasked with

using gold production to provide the economic backbone that would turn the conquered and ravaged former Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State into prosperous British colonies.

The mines, which had begun operations in 1886, were by this time following the surface reefs deeper underground, and deep-level mining required far more workers. But where would they come from?

The major impediment facing Lord Milner was the reluctance of former African workers to return. They, too, had suffered great losses in the three years of hostilities, and had no desire to go back, particularly as the mines were actually offering lower basic pay rates.

Above all else, though, there was African resistance to the dishonest and inhumane treatment meted out to workers by unscrupulous recruiters who lured them from the remote country areas with false promises. Mines desperate for workers added to the chaos by competing with each other for the same scarce workers. On the mines themselves, Africans were often harshly treated. There were no rules, so mistreated workers had no way to articulate their protests.

RESOURCES FOR BETTER LIVING

It was obvious to Milner and the leaders of the mining industry that this chaos had to end, and the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, meeting "in exile" in Cape Town decided to form a single recruiting organisation exclusively serving all member mines to end the destructive competition among them.

The mining companies were the pro rata shareholders in this non profit-making company, and Wenela's Board was the Chamber's Gold Producers' Committee. A network of permanent offices was to be established in rural areas, staffed with credible recruiters offering formal contracts stipulating exactly the terms and wages offered to workers. Organised transport would take them to the mines, where other Wenela inspectors would ensure they were provided with standardised accommodation, food and medical services. After their contracts expired, it was compulsory for the miners to return home under arrangements agreed with different colonial authorities. From its earliest days, Wenela actually pursued a far wider commission. The managers and representatives in the field operation soon realised that their responsibilities were not to the mining industry alone. For the first time the white recruiters were living and working in rural areas where they were accessible to the miners, to their families, and to the traditional leaders. Their presence transformed the relationship with the local African communities.

Wenela was recognised as the honest broker between the workers and the mines, and apart from a short period in the worst days of apartheid and labour turmoil in the 1980s, successive surveys have confirmed this trust has endured. Wenela believed correctly that satisfied workers would be its best recruiters when they returned home. And so it proved; in later years TEBA was

not so much a recruiting company but an employment bureau, generations of miners having established the bona fides of the organisation.

TEBA's role in the organised migrant labour system in Southern Africa was created from these foundations. Its operations have often been confused with the informal migration of rural people to settle permanently in South African cities, usually without jobs in harsh conditions, and the result was an unfair comparison.

Nobody would suggest that migrant labour was an ideal instrument. Over the decades it was applied differently by the colonial and independent governments of the region. Some of them, like Tanzania and Zambia, banned recruiting in solidarity with the South African liberation struggle; others like Mozambique, under the rule of Frelimo in the early days of independence, regarded the income from its workers in mining as an economic lifeline.

The debate on migrant labour is not yet over, but TEBA's involvement in it has essentially provided the human touch, not the political response often generated far from the reality of the rural areas where men go away to work because there are simply no opportunities at home. They are working for a better life.

Wenela's progress was seriously hampered in its first decade. The mines were expanding so rapidly that their appetite for more workers seemed insatiable. Wenela wrote to almost every country in Africa, as well as India, Italy, Russia, even the United States asking about supplying unskilled labour. None was available.

Eventually Perry was sent to China in 1904 to organise the importation of contract labourers. This monumental task was dogged with controversy, including allegations of slavery on the mines, and it led to the downfall of the British government which had approved the importation.

The 50 000 Chinese were all back home by 1910, and the mines panicked. They broke their agreements and returned to competitive recruiting. The old evils returned, and Wenela's operations within South Africa were virtually destroyed, particularly in the Eastern Cape, the major local source, by this confrontation between former partners.

By 1912 the labour situation had become so chaotic that the industry was again forced to regulate itself to survive. The NRC was formed to recruit in the nearby British dependencies of Basutoland (Lesotho), Swaziland, and Bechuanaland (Botswana) and in South Africa itself. Wenela was confined to Mozambique and the "tropical" areas of central Africa including Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Angola and South West Africa (Namibia).

The companies adopted separate identities, although they reported to the same Board and management in Johannesburg. Harry Taberer, was the NRC's general superintendent, born in the Eastern Cape and fluent in Xhosa. His surname was difficult to pronounce, so local people called him Teba, and the NRC offices became known as kwaTeba, or Teba's Place. In the 1970s when the NRC and Wenela were merged under a single management a new name was sought, and Taberer's nickname was revised to stand for The

Employment Bureau of Africa.

Between 1912 and 1974 Wenela and the NRC, now firmly established as the only recruiting organisations for the Chamber's affiliated gold and coal mines, consolidated their operations.

Wenela opened outposts beyond the end of existing roads. In the wilds of the Kalahari, along the Zambezi floodplain, through the forests of Nyasaland and into the *terra incognita* of the Mozambique hinterland it built and maintained roads for its truck and bus fleets to carry workers to regional administration centres.

There documentation was issued, clothing provided, medical examinations carried out, and men were housed and cared for until they left by train for the massive Mzilikazi depot in Johannesburg's Eloff Street extension.

Company doctors examined them with the most up-to-date x-ray system in the world, fingerprinted them for positive identification (as many were illiterate) and added them to perhaps the world's largest private employee register that ran into millions. A specialist hospital, one of the finest in South Africa, dealt with cases too complex for regional mine hospitals.

At the end of their contracts all these men came back through the system and were synchronised to their trains and buses to go home. Huge kitchens turned out thousands of meals a day and hundreds of clerks dealt with pre-computer paperwork.

In the 1940's Wenela created its own airline which flew between Botswana, and destinations in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Tanzania. It was the busiest airline in Africa, and it cut the travelling time to a few hours.

In Barotseland, men from Angola and Zambia travelled by a Wenela barge system on the Zambezi and its tributaries; along the coast of Mozambique chartered steamers collected workers at a dozen small ports; dhows and canoes plied the smaller lakes and rivers. This enormous transport network became the foundation of later international transport infrastructures. The NRC, too, built roads and ran bus services that opened up new routes, particularly in Swaziland and Maputaland, and in the southern Kalahari.

Money flowed along these routes to the poorest areas. Among the first priorities for the recruiting companies was to devise ways that men could bring or send their money home safely. The earliest "banking" facilities in the rural areas were the payment of remittances sent home via Wenela/NRC to their families in places where there were no commercial banks or even post offices. This simple but secure system, based on a fingerprint and a coloured slip of paper, has now evolved into the TEBA Bank. The mining industry recognised it had an unacceptably high dependency on foreign labour -- 78% compared with 22% from South Africa itself. Mining had to be made more attractive and lucrative at home. The mines had the money -- a year later gold peaked at about US\$800 an ounce -- and TEBA had the will.

A media department was created with film, television, public relations and communications divisions which mounted a campaign to advertise improved wages and conditions on the mines to people in the South African rural areas. Based on mobile cinema units and publications it was so focused and successful that the labour mix was soon stabilised at about 60% from South Africa

and 40% from foreign countries.

Making the most of the buoyancy of the mining industry and the diversity of its operations TEBA had by the mid-1980s moved some distance from its core business. When the mining industry defined new operational parameters to confront a low gold price and rising costs in the 1990s, TEBA had to do the same. TEBA's new direction took it back to the mines where the practicalities of its role were emphasised and greater interaction was fostered. With the peripherals gone TEBA was able to reduce the costs of supplying workers at a time when the very survival of gold mining depended on fiscal discipline.

TEBA also reinforced its relationship with rural communities and miners, launching a "TEBA Cares" campaign which provided streamlined and supportive services and professional customer care. Perhaps, though, the most crucial aspect of change and progress for TEBA in the last decade was its adaptation to the new democratic South Africa.

James Motlatse, a miner engaged by TEBA, who rose to be President of the National Union of Mineworkers. He has his own vision of the future ... and that is a satisfying African outcome.