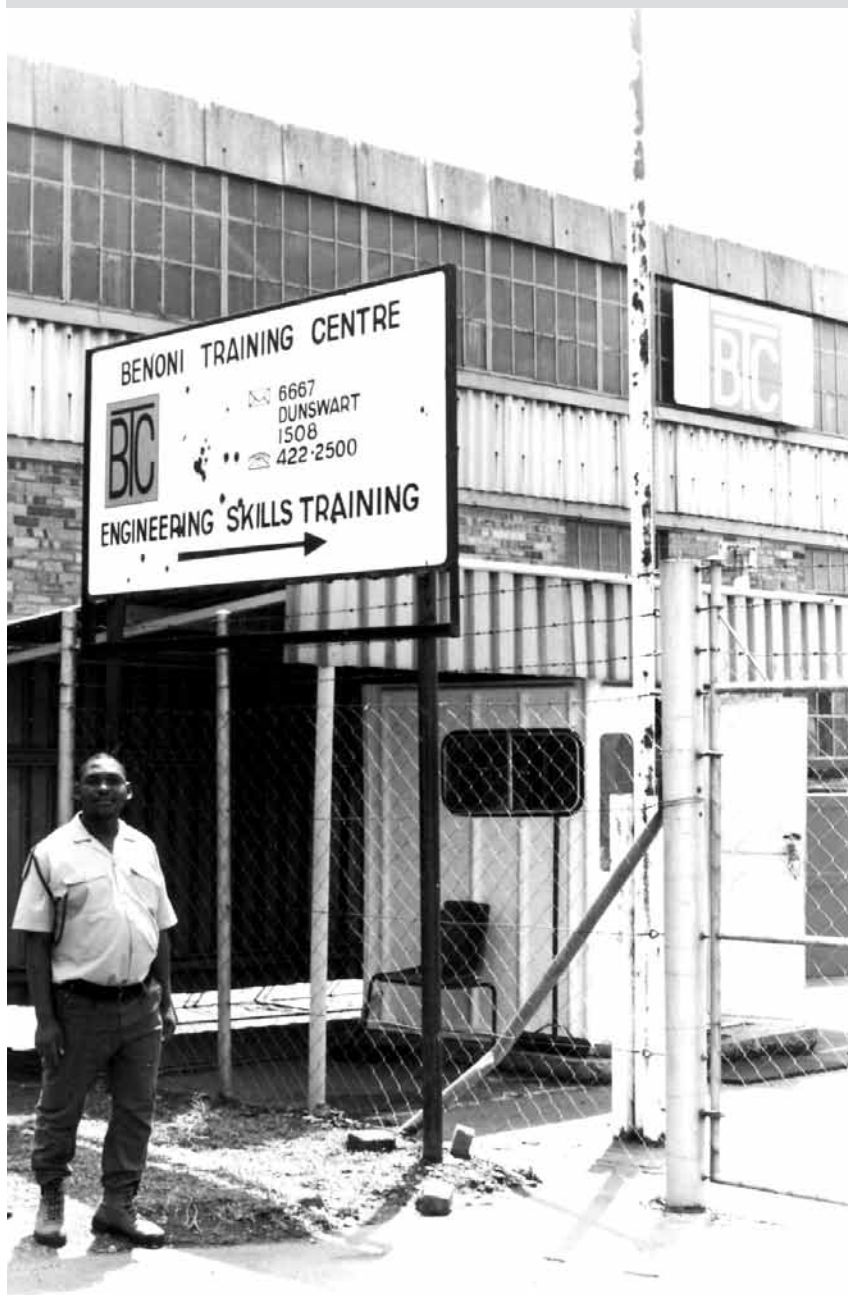


Security guards in Gauteng

Dangerous and badly paid work

While it is easy to get a job as a security guard in Gauteng, the working conditions are appalling, writes **Thabang Sefalafala**.

William Matlala



At 25% official unemployment, job creation is one of the serious challenges facing South Africa today. Not only do jobs provide the potential for a better life through income, but employment is central to our notions of freedom, dignity, identity and social inclusion.

The spectacular growth of the private security industry (PSI) has enhanced our labour absorption capacity. The New Growth Path (NGP) notes that one in every 14 jobs created is in the private security industry. The NGP commits the African National Congress (ANC) to the creation of decent employment. The policy commitment foregrounds the idea of job quality in the framework of job creation. This article addresses the question: under what kind of conditions do security guards work in post-apartheid South Africa?

The PSI is the fastest growing occupation in South Africa. The industry has more than doubled the size of its workforce in the past decade (194,525 in 2001). According to the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA), the main regulatory body in the industry, there are currently over 411,109 active and registered security guards in South Africa compared to only 194,000 police officers.

The reality is that the industry has an invisible side characterised by an unknown number of unregistered private security companies and security officers. As a result, no one knows with absolute certainty exactly how large the industry is.

With limited prospects of finding employment in factories, many job-seekers easily find employment in the security industry. Says Mandla: 'I am from KwaZulu-Natal. I came to Johannesburg looking for work. I thought maybe I could find one in a factory but I didn't... My cousin then told me, "Security is the only industry in which you can find a job. Just give it a try." I went for two weeks training and got a job fast.'

A crucial feature of the work of a security officer is that it offers virtually no job security. With uncertainty and insecurity, security guards are not only amongst the most exploited, but also oppressed and vulnerable workers.

The nature of employment in the PSI is contractual and some companies employ workers on contracts that are renewed on a monthly basis without any guarantee for renewal the following month. Often these contracts are ignored and workers are dismissed at will. While it is easy to get a job in the industry, it is also easy to exit, as remarked by Jonathan: 'I feel very sad because anytime they can say "Take your bags and go." There is nothing you can do.'

Security guards work long hours and do not have enough time to spend with their families. They often have to wake up while their children and spouses are sleeping in order to catch transport and make it to work on time. When they return from work, they are often tired and want to sleep in order not to fall asleep while on duty the following shift and run

the risk of dismissal. Most said they only get time to spend with their families on off days.

The job is also very boring. 'Boredom is our daily bread; it is a lonely job and it is something you cannot run away from. Every day I just come and sit here. You can play music, but you get tired of it. The night is very lonely - 12 hours is a long time. You just sit there and you think,' says Siphon. Standing for 12 hours is also

difficult for many security officers. Feet get swollen, joints are painful and back aches are common because of standing for long hours. Says Khensani: 'Standing the whole day is no play: the back, the legs... eish!'

Some guards are forced to work double shifts (day and night shift in a row) and are still not paid overtime for the extra hours.

Some companies, registered and unregistered alike, do not pay for leave days. Furthermore, workers have no sick leave, family responsibility leave, maternity leave, annual bonus, overtime pay, and also do not get paid extra according to the law for work done on Sundays. Moreover, security guards are often forced to pay for uniforms.

DANGEROUS JOB

Being a security guard is a dangerous job, especially taking into consideration the violent nature of crime in South Africa. As a result, security guards feel that the job is risky as it exposes them to continuous danger. Some, like Simon, feel that you always have to be alert, especially if you handle a gun. 'No, I can't hold your hand [shake your hand]. What if you know karate and you kick me and take my gun? No, no I can't.'

Some registered companies have two layers of workers: registered and unregistered. The unregistered workers are usually foreign nationals, but include South

Africans as well. In some cases non-compliant companies pay low wages such as R1,800, which is below the minimum of R2,519 on grade D in area 1 (Gauteng).

Some workers do not have a set pay day. Says Tendekai: 'Sometimes it is on the 7th, 15th, 17th, 19th - you never know.'

Low wages often lead security guards to live under appalling conditions in order to save money to send back home. Registered and unregistered private security guards, both South African and foreign, occupy a deserted building situated next to the highway just outside Newtown, Johannesburg. The building, formerly Bingele College, had no water and electricity before illegal connections were made. The property is run-down, and rat-infested. Some doors do not lock and there are almost no windows.

HOSTILE TO UNIONS

Security companies are very hostile to trade unions. Workers who join trade unions are often intimidated and victimised. If there is a new contractor, that contractor does not want unionised workers. Instead, they want someone without knowledge of a union so that they can exploit them.

When workers join a union, they cease to be seen as employees by their bosses, but are identified as 'comrades' whose loyalty to the security company is doubted. They are quickly perceived as 'trouble-makers' that ought to be dismissed. In some cases, the unionised security guards are targeted for dismissal by employers, who knowingly victimise them and set them up to make errors.

In some companies the guards are not even allowed to belong to a union as confirmed by Mandla. 'No, my employer does not allow us to join a union. In one instance, the supervisor came and said

there were some “comrades” among us, and that those “comrades” must go on night-shift.

‘The employers say “we want to work with security guards, not comrades”. They take the “comrades” to night-shift so that they can catch them falling asleep and then dismiss them. Obviously, sleeping on duty is a serious offence and there is no excuse that you can give. I even think it is better for me to get a lawyer.’

Because of anti-union attitudes by employers, security guards avoid joining unions. Instead they view lawyers as a better way of getting representation because employers will not know about it until they receive a visit or letters from the lawyer. These practices pose a direct challenge to the union and undermine efforts to establish a national bargaining council in the industry. Without a bargaining council, the ability of trade unions such as the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) to represent the interests of its members more coherently is limited.

Conditions of work in the PSI are not dependent on whether a company is registered (operating legally) or unregistered (operating as a fly-by-night) or on whether the worker is registered or not. While registration is important, because it seeks to ensure compliance with minimum standards set out in the sectoral determination 6 of 2001, it by no means guarantees it.

Rather, working conditions are more dependent on whether employers are compliant or non-compliant - and this depends on the strength of the union in the company. Problems facing the security industry, especially that of compliance, can be addressed by each social partner (employers, unions and the government) taking responsibility to contribute to strategic planning. By acting

together in common purpose, South Africa will be able to ensure that security guards can enjoy the dignity, fulfillment and social inclusion promised by wage labour. This needs to be done as a matter of urgency.

WOMEN SECURITY GUARDS

The security industry is dominated by men (86%). Despite legislative efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace, exclusion of women from specialised services continues to exist. Women in the industry are seen more as support staff rather than core security guards. They are viewed as unsuited for the industry given the perceived mismatch of the dangerous nature of the job to women’s physical and psychological makeup. Women are also portrayed as having an inborn inability to do certain tasks.

Says Cyril: ‘When you respond, you need to jump over walls, you need to break in, [and] you need to be able to resist any burglar. So generally, the dangerous side of the job is not for ladies. We have 10,500 workers in armed response across the country of whom only five are women and none of them are in Gauteng.’

These gender stereotypes play a role in the distribution of female security guards across the three categories in the industry, which are guarding, armed response and cash-in-transit. It is generally argued by employers that risk associated with the job generally varies across these categories with guarding being the least dangerous and armed response and cash-in-transit the most dangerous.

According to Fourie, ‘Cash-in-transit workers often make the headlines for the danger of their job’. Women are virtually absent in cash-in-transit as this is viewed as the most dangerous of the three categories in the security industry. Moreover, some companies prefer


to place women on day-shifts, rather than night-shifts. But when they are placed on night-shift, they are placed indoors and often with other men.

Robert a security supervisor said: ‘We avoid putting women on night-shifts. We put them on day-shifts because the job is very dangerous for them.’

These beliefs form part of the justification to exclude women from certain categories of employment in the PSI. Women in the industry are spread according to these perceptions and the risky nature of the job. They tend to be placed mostly in the guarding category, for example in malls to observe customers mostly in retail for incidences of shoplifting. Even so, they generally work under the supervision and/or authority of men.

Studies by Dalla Costa and James argue women’s incapability is perceived in several respects whether it is jumping over walls or resisting a criminal and therefore makes it necessary that they be led by men. One woman guard spoke of an instance where she caught a thief and had to call the men to assist her in handcuffing because thieves often resist violently and want to take advantage if a woman is guarding.

Maria who guards a shop confirms this. ‘I stand here and make sure that they don’t steal from the shop. When I catch a thief, I call the men I work with to come and handcuff the culprit and take him [or her] away.’

She adds: ‘Men are stronger and have less fear when handling robbers.’ 

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