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**Van Onselen, C.**

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CHAPTER 1

# Worker Consciousness in Black Miners: Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1920

C. VAN ONSELEN

It has become axiomatic for historians of Southern Rhodesia to accept the relatively late emergence of organized African protest in the industrial setting as being indicative of stunted political consciousness. Writing of the 1920s and 1930s, Gann and Gelfand suggest that, 'the country's unskilled hands on the whole remained inefficient, unreliable, poorly paid and yet without much political consciousness.'[1] Hooker[2] is even more specific in his suggestion that Africans were 'slow to think themselves into the industrial context of Southern Rhodesia'. And in a more recent study it is suggested that the 1927 strike at the Shamva mine was 'the first industrial action ever seen in the country'.[3] Only Terence Ranger's stimulating study of the 'African Voice' attempts a more systematic historical probing for the basis of such observations. But even Ranger doubts the existence of worker consciousness in the first two decades of this country: 'At the beginning of the 1920s, ... there were few evidences of any effective articulation of the hopes, fears and grievances of the workers.'[4]

All of these observations seem to be underpinned by a common assumption — that the political consciousness of black workers should be assessed largely through the presence or absence of associations and organizations which manifestly articulate worker interests. If this assumption is accepted then the assessment of these historians is, in large measure, correct. It was not until well into the 1920s that the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Clements Kadalie became part of the Rhodesian political scene and addressed itself specifically to black workers. Later still were the appeals of the more broadly based African National Congress for the identification of Africans with 'Zhuwawo' — the 'ordinary labourer'.[5] Measured in these terms it must be conceded that worker consciousness was not a marked feature of early Rhodesian history.

This assumption, however, has created problems for social scientists and historians alike. The most obvious problem has been the need to explain the absence of worker consciousness amongst Africans in the three decades of their industrial experience prior to 1920. This has been accounted for in a variety of ways, but two explanations are most

frequent. On the one hand, there are those who turn to the structural features of the political economy, and the dominant position of the migrant labour system in particular, to account for African passivity in industry:

> tribesmen needed money and were prepared to accept relatively rude living conditions and a rate of pay which represented the marginal utility of their labour since the economic support of their families and themselves in their old age or infirmity was carried by the rural community.[5]

In this version, African workers tolerated day-to-day exploitation in exchange for future security in the peasant community. This explanation by a social scientist is similar to that of a historian who points out that, 'in a laboring class containing a large percentage of migrants ... trade union principles did not easily strike root.'[7] On the other hand, alleged achievements of a reform-minded administration are used as explanations for the low level of worker consciousness: 'The labour abuses of the early years were largely mitigated after the rebellion, and Native Commissioners and industrial inspectors took care to regulate employer-employee relations.'[8] In this version Africans had very little to be politically conscious about. Such tensions as might have existed between white employers and black employees were siphoned off through the intervention of an impartial administrative official.

Both these sets of explanations have limitations for those who are anxious to understand African responses in Rhodesian industry. From general descriptive features of economic life — the presence of administrative officers or migrant labour — they draw conclusions about the absence of industrial conflict. This is not satisfactory, especially when it is realized that in no case are these observations based on a thorough examination of African responses in a particular industry.

By more detailed consideration of African experiences in a specific industry it is intended to demonstrate the validity of two propositions. Firstly, it will be suggested that from the very earliest years of capital-intensive industry Africans had a well developed and demonstrable self-awareness of their position as exploited workers. Secondly, it will be suggested that it is inadequate to gauge this worker consciousness through the relative absence of overt industrial action aimed at securing improvements through readily identifiable organizations with articulate leadership. Rather, it should be sought in worker strategy in the context of the overall functioning of the political economy and in day-to-day responses in the work situation. If this can be shown, it will be clear that later organizations like the Dance Societies, Watch Tower

and the I.C.U, should not be seen as the first evidence of worker consciousness.

As it is the largest employer and premier industry of the country, it is appropriate to illustrate this from the experiences of Africans in the mining industry. Throughout the period under consideration the Rhodesian economy was totally reliant on the mining industry in general, and on gold mining in particular. In 1924, 72 per cent of export revenue was derived from the mining industry as a whole, and gold alone accounted for 46 per cent of all export revenue.[9] Capital-intensive gold mining in Rhodesia developed from two mines opened in 1893 to the point where, in 1920, there were 295 producers, including eight 'large' mines. This expansion was paralleled by the growth in demand for cheap African labour. The black labour force of over 17 000 employed in 1906 had expanded to over 36 000 by 1920.

This expansion and consolidation of the Rhodesian gold-mining industry was not, however, the uninterrupted and unqualified success of the Witwatersrand gold mines of South Africa. The early progress of the industry was halted by the African revolt of 1896-7, and it was only after the turn of the century that there was extended progress. There were also problems of a more lasting nature. In Rhodesia, as in South Africa, the ore bodies were of an exceptionally low grade. But in Rhodesia this problem was complicated by the fact that the ore was not contained in a reasonably continuous reef. In most parts of Rhodesia there were fluctuations in the profitability of ore within even a single mining property.[10]

These geological realities shaped the organization of the Rhodesian mining industry. Unlike the Rand, the Rhodesian mines were spread over a wide area and operated on a much smaller scale. The average output of a 'large' Rhodesian mine was only one-tenth of that of a Witwatersrand mine. It was only within the constraints of these factors that Rhodesian mines were profitable, and the industry had to organize accordingly. Mines had to limit managerial overheads and operate with the minimum of expensive plant and machinery. Within this context the 'smallworker' became a characteristic and important part of the industry.

Operating within these profitability constraints also led to the curtailing of direct and indirect expenditure on African labour. Direct expenditure on wages was minimized through co-ordinated employer action which attempted to ensure a uniformly low wage structure.[11] Low wages were justified on the grounds that in the mine compounds African workers also received food and accommodation. In theory, the minimization of indirect expenditure on food and accommodation was

more difficult to achieve because of the existence of protective labour legislation. In practice, however, the British South Africa Company, acting as company-government — part shareholder, part legislator — was reluctant fully to implement labour legislation which ensured minimum standards of food and housing. These inadequacies in wages, food and accommodation manifested themselves in the conditions in the mine compounds.

Conditions in the compounds were appalling, and it is only with a wide stretch of the imagination that we can accept Lewis Gann's comparison of the position of mine-workers with that of domestic servants in England.[12] It was precisely because of inadequate food and housing that the majority of fatalities amongst black miners in Rhodesia occurred. This is clear from the fact that, in the twenty years under review, 2 000 black workers died from accidents, but in the same twenty-year period over 18 000 workers died from diseases in the compounds.[13] Unhygienic compounds inhabited by successive generations of migrant labourers and the lack of adequate change-house facilities ensured that pneumonia was the major killer. Prior to 1911, it alone had accounted for 2 500 lives. Crowded compounds were particularly vulnerable to epidemics, and in 1918, the year of the Spanish 'flu, 7 per cent of all black workers died. Other diseases reflect the inadequacy of compound food. It was not simply the case that 'many men reported sick with scurvy' as Gann suggests;[14] up to 1920 — excluding the first three years up to 1903 when registration of deaths in compounds was not a legal requirement — at least 550 workers had died of the disease.[15] Further, it is exceptionally misleading to assert that from 1907 'the Government ... enforced the proper feeding and housing of African miners'.[16] In 1908, at a 'low estimate' there were 207 deaths directly attributable to scurvy.[17]

It is certainly true that the first twenty years of this century saw a considerable decline in the death rate from disease in the mines. Whereas in 1906, sixty-five out of every 1 000 black workers on the Rhodesian mines died from disease, by 1920 this figure had been reduced to fifteen. Care should be exercised, however, in the way that this is interpreted — especially in so far as it reflects on the Rhodesian mines. Thus, although it has been suggested that Central Africa experienced a medical revolution during the first two decades of the present century,[18] this should not be extended unthinkingly to the Rhodesian mines, for it was only half-way through the next decade that it was suggested in an official Rhodesian report that mortality rates for Africans '... in all probability now *approach* what may be considered normal for the industry'.[19]

In these circumstances, for an African mine-worker, the choice of employer or employment centre was, in many cases, a life-and-death decision. Within the premier industry of the colony, the day-to-day working conditions must have been so disagreeable for migrant workers that the thought of a better tomorrow in the peasant community, or the intervention of an industrial inspector, must have been a small consolation. What was more pertinent was the development of an efficient system of intelligence which enabled workers to make critical assessments of wages and working conditions in different parts of the labour market. It is within the context of this system of market intelligence that we have to seek for indications of worker consciousness and try to understand labour strategies.

For Africans living in the area between the Limpopo and the Zambezi this can best be seen in their total avoidance of the Rhodesian mines. The 1910-11 Native Affairs Committee noted that in many instances African families would sell stock to meet tax obligations, rather than allow kin to seek employment on the mines.[20] Shona communities, in particular, sold grain to meet their legal obligations, and so avoided mine labour. It was not until well into the 1920s that Rhodesian Africans were sufficiently proletarianized for them to form a majority of black mine employees.[21] While this widespread avoidance no doubt reflects labour conditions and wage prospects in the industry as a whole, it seems difficult to draw specific conclusions about 'worker consciousness' at this level of abstraction. The picture emerges with greater clarity, however, when the fate of individual mines is considered.

The case of the Bonsor mine is worth tracing in detail. The Bonsor was one of the first large mines to come into production after the revolt, and it started production in November 1898 with a crushing capacity of forty stamps. In common with other mines of the period, its compound consisted of African huts, constructed by the labourers who first arrived, and inhabited by successive generations of workers. The lack of change-house facilities coupled with an unhygienic compound did not hamper initial operations during the warm summer months. But with the onset of colder weather, which the night shift in particular felt, problems appeared. During four weeks in June 1899, twenty-one workers died of pneumonia. The situation was serious enough to warrant a visit from the Chief Native Commissioner, who instructed the manager to supervise the erection of a new compound.[22] Conveniently forgetting the issue of compound accommodation, it was explained to the London shareholders that: 'the natives are very careless of chills and every possible precaution was taken and everything tried

to make them wear blankets, but they would not do so.'[23] Since they were expected to purchase such blankets for themselves out of a cash wage of 35*s.* to 55*s.*, the reluctance of the workers is hardly incomprehensible. In any event, the abnormal death rate at the Bonsor that June heralded the start of 'labour troubles' for the management.

Within a matter of days, word was spread on the labour grape-vine that the mine was 'bewitched'.[24] In a fascinating way, a 'traditional' belief of peasant society was now extended to operate in the industrial setting and to protect prospective workers from exploitation. Over the following weeks this belief spread so rapidly that in a period of two months not a single African applied for work at the Bonsor, and the mine was forced to close for a short period. This 'boycott by bewitchment' forced the management to turn to foreign black labour.

In October 1900, an attempt was made to procure labour from the Butterworth District in the Transkei. With the Rand gold mines closed during the South African War, it was hoped to recruit 500 workers for the Bonsor mine. Only 300 were recruited, but on their arrival in Rhodesia they demanded higher wages than were being offered. Rhodesian wage rates must have been a considerable shock to workers familiar with the relatively liberal South African rates. It was probably for this reason that these labourers were 'unsatisfactory', and that they were passed on to the Tebekwe mine, where they were reported to have caused 'disaffection' amongst local workers.[25] Thus the first attempt to get foreign labour failed. The Bonsor was saved from closing down yet again by making use of Shangaan labourers from Portugese East Africa who also could not sell their labour on the Rand during the war.

It was still necessary for the Bonsor to augment its labour supply with further outside labour, and this time the management turned to the north, to Barotseland. This attempt, too, was unsuccessful. When the 159 workers from across the Zambezi learned they were bound for the Bonsor, all but seven deserted.[26] It seems unlikely that local witchcraft beliefs alone produced this result. What started as 'boycott by bewitchment' for local labour may already have become simply 'boycott' for long-distance migrant labourers.

Matters did not improve at the Bonsor during the remainder of 1900 when the mine was rocked by a series of explosions which resulted in further loss of life and an official enquiry. The cause of the explosions was difficult to determine, but the enquiry exonerated the mine management. At least one leading mining engineer of the day, however, was of the opinion that 'the explosions were caused through malice'.[27] Whether the cause of the explosions was industrial sabotage or

not, it certainly did not increase the popularity of the mine, and the labour 'shortage' now became acute.

Recruitment under false pretences was resorted to in 1901. Five hundred workers were especially recruited in rural areas, and the name of their destination carefully kept from them. During an overnight stop, however, somebody bungled, and the workers were 'unjudiciously told their destination'; by morning all 500 had deserted.[28]

By now the situation was desperate, and while the Selukwe mine, a mere four miles away, worked through most of 1901, the Bonsor stood idle for nine months for want of labour. In 1902, the mine resumed production, but in September there was a further set-back when nine African workers were killed in an accident. Events were reaching a climax, and Leyson, the manager, wrote to his London Head Office:

> On no less than three occasions has it seemed probable that sufficient labour was coming forward ... but these schemes, like those that had gone before, failed absolutely at the last moment .. It is with great regret that I have recommended the closing down of this mine.[29]

It is possible that it was not simply want of labour that closed the Bonsor mine. Like most mines in Rhodesia at the time, it was badly over-capitalized and did not yield sufficient profit.[30] Nevertheless, there is little doubt that an effective boycott of the mine by African workers contributed to its demise.

It might be argued that the withholding of labour from the Bonsor demonstrates common sense rather than any form of worker consciousness — that it was simply good sense to stay away from a place that had an obviously bad health record. This would, of course, suggest that in some way 'common sense' was not part of worker consciousness; nevertheless, it is profitable to consider other cases where mortality rates did not form the over-riding consideration. The case of the Ayrshire mine hinges around wage policy rather than health, and is perhaps even more instructive.

1903 was a particularly bad year for peasants in many parts of Rhodesia. Faced with a severe drought, many must have been forced to consider a spell of work on the mines to raise the cash that would normally have come from the sale of grain. Unlike the rains, the Administration's tax demands did not fail to materialize, and peasants made their way to the mines in considerable numbers. In these circumstances, mine managers soon found that they could lower wages by a substantial margin.

The Ayrshire mine, astride the labour routes to the south, was well

sited to exploit the situation. Not only could it rely on a stream of migrant workers making their way south to the mines of Matabeleland and South Africa, but, situated in the heart of a badly affected drought area, it could also expect an abundant supply of labour from local sources. So favourable was the situation for exploitation by management that a point was reached where it was reported that many workers were being employed for food only.[31]

As the year progressed, however, this position produced changes in the composition of the labour force. The mine became increasingly reliant on 'passers-by' — migrants who, for want of savings or food on the journey south, were forced to take employment at the Ayrshire. As this process got more firmly established, so the percentage of local labour decreased, and by the time that the season changed in August the management was uttering the familiar cry of 'labour shortage'. In that month, the Chief Secretary in the Salisbury Administration, H.H. Castens, in a letter to the High Commissioner in Pretoria, pointed out what he considered to be the perversity of the local labourers: 'within the district [in] which is situated the Ayrshire mine, 12 000 Mashona natives are said to be in want of food. The mine is 400 boys short of its complement, and has only six Mashonas working on it.'[32]

Out of a labour force of over 300, only six — or a little more than 1 per cent — were drawn from the adjacent area, in spite of severe drought.

For the Administration and the management this was yet a further illustration of what was considered to be Shona perversity and laziness — something that was proverbial in mining circles. The fact of the matter was very different for, in two other Mashonaland mines to the east of Ayrshire, Shona labourers were working in considerable numbers. At the Penhalonga mine they formed 30 per cent of the labour force out of a complement of 550, and at the Rezende mine 41 percent of a force of 523 labourers. Both of these mines held out better working conditions, and operated with less exploitative wage policies. This demonstrates a highly selective withholding of labour, despite the added pressure occasioned by the drought. That the percentage of Shona labour could fluctuate on Mashonaland mines from 1 per cent at the Ayrshire to 41 per cent at the Rezende seems to show the strength and spread of worker consciousness, and certainly points to the need to qualify the suggestion that 'Africans were slow to think themselves into the industrial context'.

In one respect the cases of the Bonsor and the Ayrshire illustrate the same process at work — workers' care in selecting employers prior to engagement under contract. It is also, however, necessary to examine

how this worker consciousness showed itself once the worker had accepted work at a particular mine and was bound by contract. Here it is necessary to appreciate that Rhodesia, in common with other settler societies, possessed a web of coercive labour legislation, designed to regulate the mobility of labour and stabilize employment under contract. This legislation was in force from the earliest years, and two ordinances in particular were central. Firstly, the Rhodesian administration took over the harsh Cape Master and Servants Law, which made it a criminal offence to break a labour contract; and secondly, for the benefit of the mining industry in particular, the Rhodesia Chamber of Mines drafted a Pass Law, which limited the mobility of labour and facilitated the tracing of deserters.[33] How was worker consciousness manifested in relation to this web of legislation?

For many years the most obvious, the most widespread, and the most successful African response to this legislation was to ignore it and desert. Ranger has pointed to desertion as an index of discontent, and suggested that before World War I 'the characteristic expression of discontent . . . was desertion rather than combination'.[34] This suggestion, however, unintentionally conceals the rationality which underlies the majority of desertions. By systematically probing the causes of desertion, it becomes apparent that desertion *was*, in many cases, a form of combination — and in some cases an extremely effective form. Ignoring for present purposes those cases in which desertions were prompted by the grievances of an individual worker, there seem to be three sets of causes which demonstrate desertion as a form of combination and as a manifestation of worker consciousness.

Desertion was in the first instance an African reflex reaction to a system of forced labour. This was particularly marked in the first three years of the period under review, when forced labour was widely resorted to. In many cases, workers were 'recruited' in rural areas by agents of the Labour Board and forwarded under escort to the mines. Frequently, both agents and escorts were armed, and this must have done much to assist in the flow of labour to the mines. That much of the labour was, to put it midly, 'reluctant' is evident from the fact that of 8 429 workers 'engaged' by the Board between October 1900 and March 1901 no fewer than 2 160 deserted.[35] Since the mines had to pay capitation fees to the Board for labour procured in this manner, they complained bitterly about the rate of desertion. In 1902, for example, the manager of the Surprise mine, in a letter to the Labour Board enclosing a detailed schedule, pointed out that: 'of the total boys despatched from Bulawayo, 22.8% deserted before reaching the mine, Of those who duly arrived, 66.6% deserted before working an average of 14

days. Of the small balance left, 40% are in hospital sick.'[36] Africans simply waited for the first opportunity to desert and avoid forced labour. Opportunity presented itself in different ways, either on the way to the mine or within the compound. T.C. Blundel, the Compound Manager at the Globe and Phoenix Mine, apparently did not understand what was happening in the rural areas, for he was puzzled by the desertion of labourers forwarded by Native Commissioner Taylor:

> Since Mr. Taylor recalled his head police boy Semunto ... a large number of the boys supplied by him have deserted, although none of them have made complaints to me as Compound Manager. They were all under contract for three months; most of them cleared after working a few days only, not even completing a month's work.[37]

It would seem that opportunity for these particular workers presented itself the moment coercion was removed.

The second set of causes underlying the decision to desert relates to work conditions. The reasons for these poor conditions have already been recounted, and need not be elaborated here. It is sufficient to note that sudden and violent fluctuations in the death rate, coupled with managerial indifference, could induce desertions so promptly and on such a scale that there can be little doubt that they represented a form of combination. Another illustration from the Ayrshire mine shows this clearly. Between August and November of 1904, the mine employed, on average, 1 300 workers. During these four months there was a considerable increase in the death rate, and forty-three workers died from pneumonia. At the end of October 200 workers left the mine, and the following month saw a further 300 desert.[38]

Desertions due to an increase in the death rate do not reflect simply a state of blind panic amongst black workers. It is significant that they left the Ayrshire *after* the end of the month, i.e. after pay day. Other instances show that where the manager or staff showed concern about the welfare of black workers, the rate of desertion was significantly lower.

When the industry was paralysed by the Spanish 'flu epidemic of 1918, many Africans deserted from unpopular employers: they had more than sufficient cause to desert, for in crowded compounds 7 per cent of all black workers died.[39] But even in these circumstances, this was not the blind panic implied by Gann and Gelfand;[40] for example, at the Falcon mine, 750 workers took the opportunity to desert, but at the Cam and Motor mine, where the management made considerable efforts on behalf of the workers, fewer than ten deserted.[41] Even in the midst of crisis, there is striking rationality in the response of African labour.

If these desertion rates can be largely attributed to the system of forced labour or bad working conditions, another consideration derived from a more lasting feature of the political economy. In many cases the reasons for desertion can be traced to the systematical and conscious attempts of workers to reach a market where their labour would fetch the highest price — a worker strategy directly opposed to the purpose of the legislation mentioned above.

These desertion patterns can best be understood when it is appreciated that the Rhodesian mining industry operated within the context of a Southern African economic system. The centre of this economic system and the most lucrative labour market for African workers from Central Africa was the Witwatersrand industrial complex. Individual state-economies within its orbit all had to compete, in varying degrees, with the Rand for their African labour resources. For most of the contiguous states it was a fact of economic life that most Africans would sell their labour in the Witwatersrand complex.

Rhodesia, however, differed qualitatively from most of these adjacent states. Not only did it have a sizeable and well established population of settlers who were anxious for their own economic advancement, but it also had its own mining industry, which was in the unenviable position of having to compete with the Rand mines for its African labour supply. To make matters worse, the bulk of the mines were situated in the southern half of the colony, in Matabeleland, very close to the direct labour-catchment area of the Rand.

These disadvantages were partly offset by some compensating geographical factors, the most important being that labour from Nyasaland, Portuguese East Africa and Northern Rhodesia had to make the long journey to the Witwatersrand through Southern Rhodesia. Thus, whatever the economic circumstances of Rhodesia, there would always be a certain number of migrants passing through on their way to the Rand.

Thus, in order to be able to sell its services at the highest price, labour from the territories to the north of Rhodesia, as well as from within the territory itself, had to journey hundreds of miles to the Rand. In general, the object of the migrant worker was to get as far south as possible. His ability to sell his labour in the highest market was directly proportional to the amount of savings (in the form of food and cash) which he could muster at the outset of his journey. The more money and food he commanded, the further south he could travel. The further south he could travel, the larger the wage packet he was likely to receive.

In this respect, the bargaining power of the worker in the labour

market depended on the extent of his initial savings. Those migrants who possessed neither food nor cash were forced to accept the 'facilities' (food and escorts) provided by the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau. In return for this assistance, the workers had to sign long-term contracts at low wages, and were drafted to the most unpopular Rhodesian mines that were suffering from 'labour shortages'. Many of these R.N.L.B. labourers used the system for their own ends by simply making use of the facilities for the duration of the journey, and then deserting at the earliest opportunity to continue the journey south.

Understandably, however, the majority of workers attempted to avoid the R.N.L.B. agents and make their way south independently. But, because of the limited amount of savings they possessed, they were forced to break their journeys south and take temporary employment in order to accumulate further food and cash. In some cases, workers would offer their services to African farmers in return for food only. More frequently, at the point where the labour routes entered Rhodesia, they would accept employment from white farmers, accumulate savings and head for the next employment centre to the south. Mashonaland farmers and mine-owners were aware of the fact that they had an assured supply of passing migrant labour, and lowered their wages accordingly. These lower wage rates on Mashonaland mines resulted in consistently higher desertion rates than those found in Matebeleland mines.[42] Having deserted from Mashonaland mines, many workers would make their way south to the Matabeleland mines, where the process would repeat itself as workers left for the Witwatersrand.

This process, and the 'stop-go' labour route, were so well known to workers that individual mines were chosen for their suitability as desertion points. The Jessie mine in the remote southern Gwanda district is perhaps the best illustration of this. Along with other mines in the dry Gwanda district, far from fresh produce markets, the Jessie had an extremely high incidence of scurvy amongst its labour force. Despite the bad diet, the manager was able to point to the fact that the mine had never suffered from a labour shortage.[43] This apparent paradox is easily explicable: the Jessie was the last stop of labourers in Rhodesia before they deserted and made their way to South Africa. For many years this 'drainage' from mines in the Gwanda district, like the Jessie, was accepted. By 1926, however, when Rhodesia had to compete not only with the Rand but also with the Copperbelt for its labour supplies, this systematic desertion could no longer be tolerated. In that year, the Premier gave the Native Affairs Department explicit instruc-

tions to exercise the greatest possible care before issuing passes for work in the Gwanda district.[44]

Hopefully it has been demonstrated that besides individual grievance as a cause of desertion, there were more deep seated rational and structural reasons for African desertion. Desertion was, in the bulk of cases, a conscious rejection of bad working conditions or an attempt to reach the best labour market in a system of coercive labour legislation. In these terms desertion emerges as one of the clearest expressions of worker consciousness.

Up to this point, broad patterns of worker response (withholding labour or desertion) within the mining industry have been singled out. The similarities of these responses lie in the fact that they demonstrate large-scale expressions of discontent. The control of expressions of discontent on this wide and diffuse level were dependent on the size, strength and efficiency of the state's coercive capacity. As mine managers were fond of pointing out, the ability to enforce the pass laws, for example, depended on the size of the police force in the mining districts.[45] In a territory controlled by a company-government, there was a constant desire to reduce administrative expenditure, and there were considerable reductions in the size of the police force during the period under review. It is largely for this reason that control of desertion or of the withholding of labour could never be complete.

Workers could, however, be more readily controlled and disciplined on individual mines through the use of the compound system. Within the confines of barrack-like accommodation, surrounded in some cases by barbed wire fences, a quasi-military system of labour discipline operated. Large numbers of black workers were controlled, marshalled and disciplined through the agency of the black compound police, suitably armed with *sjamboks* (leather whips). Underground control was effected through black *capitaos* or 'boss boys', who were in turn under the supervision of white miners.

The close supervision and discipline ensured through these more highly paid black intermediaries militated against more direct expressions of discontent. Given this repressive control of labour, one must seek the expression of worker discontent in the nooks and crannies of the day-to-day work situation. In many ways, the situation closely parallels that of a slave plantation, and the techniques of resistance that slaves developed: 'Side by side with ordinary loafing and mindless labour went deliberate wastefulness, slowdowns, feigned illnesses, self-inflicted injuries, and the well known abuse of livestock and equipment.'[46]

At least one of these techniques formed a central and continuous

problem for mine managers. 'Loafing' constituted such a central part of mine labour that methods of coping with it had to be entrenched in the system. The most important of these was the 'ticket system'. Workers contracted for the completion of a certain number of 'tickets', rather than for a specified period of time. At the end of each shift worked, the labourer's ticket had to be signed by the person in charge at the time. If the black miner's work had not been satisfactorily performed, the ticket was not marked, or was simply marked 'loafer'. Tickets marked in this manner were not considered as having contributed to the contract. Since no cash wages were paid on an unsigned ticket, the system was obviously open to considerable abuse, and in many cases the 'ticket system' was used to reduce the wage bill rather than to discipline reluctant workers. In any event, the ticket system did not eradicate the problem. In evidence to the South African Native Affairs Commission of 1903-5, the Rhodesian Chamber of Mines complained that: 'From the majority of natives of the town to obtain a good day's work is an impossibility. By a system of passive resistance they are able to defeat the objects of a master who deserves value for his money.'[47]

This situation did not improve, and a few years later the size of the problem became apparent. Thus the Selukwe District Mine Managers' Association, addressing itself to the Chamber of Mines, complained that: 'the daily average of loafers reaches as high as 20 per cent. That is to say, that the employers have to keep 20 per cent more boys on their books than are required for the proper working of their mines.'[48] By prodding the Chamber of Mines, the Selukwe Managers were, in the long run, hoping to get government action in the matter.

Indirectly, the state did respond to these problems on the mines after the Native Affairs Committee of Enquiry in 1910-11. In 1912, the Native Labour Regulations came into force, and it became possible to prosecute black workers for obvious forms of resistance. A list of the more 'common charges' brought against workers is revealing. Workers were charged who 'refused or neglected to do work', showed 'gross carelessness in handling tools', were 'impertinent' and 'wilfully destroyed compound huts and other property'.[49] The possibilities for legal action created by the 1912 Ordinance were not widely resorted to by mine managers. Managers found that successful prosecutions were not only hard to come by, but extremely time-consuming, and prosecutions declined in the following years.

While prosecutions declined, however, the techniques continued to play an important part in worker strategy — sometimes with serious consequences for management. During 1918, for example, when coal

from the Wankie Colliery was required not only for Central African industry but for ships of the British Navy requiring fuel at Beira, there was such a successful slow-down by black workers with grievances that the Administrator was forced to recommend that the manager be 'relieved from supervision of native labour'.[50] Though less dramatic, these forms of resistance leave little doubt about the existence of worker consciousness.

The strategies still do not give us a clear insight, however, into the sophistication of the perception of African labourers. It seems legitimate to ask to what extent the category of 'African worker' is in the mind of the present analyst rather than that of the 'workers'? To what extent is it justified to talk of 'African workers' as a class in what was obviously a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic compound setting?

It is certainly true that one of the most outstanding characteristics of the African labour force was its multi-ethnic composition, and ethnicity clearly played an important part in worker interaction. The problem is that consideration of ethnicity as the only factor has led to the over-statement of its importance in defining worker interaction. Thus, for example, one sociologist suggests of labour centres in South Central Africa that: 'ethnicity became a category of interaction defining appropriate modes of behaviour between people in situations where the transitory nature of social contacts entailed only superficial relationships.'[51] This observation does not seem to fit the case of workers in the major industry of South Central Africa — at least not in the present formulation. There are several reasons for this, two of which should be noted here.

Firstly, it underestimates the impact of the shared work experience within the context of compound discipline. Workers who are collectively housed, fed, worked and paid in a relatively closed environment have substantial interests in common for most of their working day. Secondly, not all contracts were short term. Certainly the mines had large numbers of short-term workers, but there was also a well established core of black workers whom the Chief Native Commissioner termed 'continual workers'.[52] Thus, while black workers had many interests in common, there were also significant differences between them other than simply 'ethnic' ones. This is best illustrated by examining the employees of the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau.

As pointed out earlier, R.N.L.B. employees were often drawn from the ranks of poorer peasants — for example, those with insufficient savings to get to the mines independently, or who came from far afield. As such, these workers and others, who in the early years were simply commandeered, were forced to contract themselves for lengthy periods.

Mine managers, on payment of a capitation fee to the R.N.L.B., secured their services for periods ranging from nine to twelve months. This capitation fee did not arise in the case of short-term independent labourers, and mine-owners were naturally anxious to re-coup it in any way possible. In practice, the outlay on capitation fees was re-couped by keeping R.N.L.B. workers on the lowest wage rate for their entire contract. In fact, R.N.L.B. employees formed a pool of cheap labour which acted as insurance for the mining industry against wage demands by other black workers. The bargaining power of the so-called 'voluntary' or 'independent' workers was limited because of the presence of R.N.L.B. workers.

From this it can be understood why it was that R.N.L.B. workers occupied the lowest social and economic rung in the compound hierarchy, and why, for quite different reasons, managers and fellow black workers perceived them in very different ways. The unfortunate status of the R.N.L.B. workers was apparent from the earliest days of the industry, and by 1910 it also became apparent to the Manager of the Bureau who

> regretted to report the complaint of natives on long service that many employers treated them differently to independent natives, apparently with a view to making the Bureau unpopular amongst recruits. The differences in treatment consist not only in paying Bureau natives a lower rate of wages, but also in using opprobrious terms and epithets in connection with these natives, for the purpose of making them a cause of ridicule to 'independent boys'.[53]

Thus, managers and miners used the R.N.L.B. employees as a scapegoat to divert worker hostility and divide the black labour force. In many cases this diverted aggression was only too successful, and the term which black workers applied to R.N.L.B. workers reveals that they were more than capable of interacting on a basis other than ethnicity. 'Chibaro' — 'slave' or 'forced labour' — the term used to refer to R.N.L.B. labour throughout Central Africa, reflects not only on R.N.L.B. recruiting tactics, but also on the social and economic status of these workers.

The fact that African workers were aware of stratification within their ranks did not preclude the possibility of their co-operating in order to achieve economic objectives for all workers. By illustrating this it can be seen that worker consciousness was capable of embracing all workers within an exploited situation.

In keeping with the mainstream interpretation of Rhodesian history, which suggests the slow evolution of political consciousness of

African workers, it has often been suggested that there was no industrial action before 1918.[54] In fact, the period before 1918 saw at least two strikes by African mine-workers in Rhodesia. To understand their background and causation, it is again necessary to see the Rhodesian mining industry within the context of the Southern African economic system.

Between 1899 and 1902 many workers in Southern Africa could not work on the Witwatersrand because of the South African War, and had to consider working on the Rhodesian mines. To the delight of the mine managers, skilled Shangaan workers from Moçambique came to work on the Rhodesian mines in considerable numbers. For once the southward flow of labour was stemmed, and there were even workers from Bechuanaland, Basutoland and the Transkei who worked on Rhodesian mines.

This temporary situation changed some of the labour patterns in the Southern Africa regional economy. But, while these changes were welcomed in Rhodesia, they did not meet with the same favourable reception in Moçambique and the Transvaal. The Transvaal mines did not want their labour supplies permanently threatened by Rhodesia, and the Moçambique administration resented the higher wages of Rhodesian mines which pushed up wages within their own territory.[55]

During 1901 discussions were held between all three parties over future labour allocations from Moçambique. Anxious to lower the wage bill on the Rhodesian mines (especially in the favourable circumstances of increased supply) and to accommodate the other two parties, late in 1901 the Labour Board in Rhodesia generally reduced African wages.[56] No sooner had this reduction been effected at the Camperdown mine, however, than 'all the natives struck work on account of the reduction of wages, and refused to start again until the Manager promised to pay the ordinary rates'.[57]

The composition of the African work force on the Camperdown mine is not known, but it is possible that there was a significant proportion of foreign workers from South Africa involved in the strike. It will be remembered too that workers imported from the Transkei caused 'disaffection' at the Tebekwe mine (see above). Other indications, however, show that local labourers were equally sensitive to the wage reductions made in the Matabeleland mines in October and November 1901. The reduction brought about such a dramatic fall in the labour supply that early in 1902 the old wage rates had to be restored.[58]

These events show that African mine-workers had considerable insight into conditions of supply and demand, and the effect that it had on wage rates. It is bizarre to suggest, as a 1906 Government Commis-

sion did, that: 'One of the chief causes of the shortage of labour is the failure on the part of the native to understand the state of the labour market — i.e. the law of supply and demand.'[59] The problem was not that the 'native' did not understand the law of supply and demand, but that he understood its functioning only too well. The Chief Native Commissioner should have been aware of this, since his attention had been drawn to it by individual African workers. At an *indaba* at Mpateni in 1899, one Mahlabatsha had pointed out to him that, 'they did not get so much pay when they went out to work at the call of the Government as when they went out independently.'[60] And at another *indaba* in the same year one Mpome had told him that, 'in Belingwe, they never received full wages, especially when they turned out in large gangs as they had lately.'[61] A clearer understanding of supply, demand and wage rates could hardly be expected.[62]

The fact that it was not simply wage rates, but wage rates within the Southern African economic system that influenced mine-workers is clearly evident from the second strike that we will consider. In mid-1904, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association recruited 5 000 workers in Nyasaland for work on the Witwatersrand mines. The first of these workers were taken to the east coast, whence they went by ship to Delagoa Bay and later by train to Johannesburg.[63] This was a very round-about route, and subsequent 'batches' of W.N.L.A. labourers were made to follow an overland route through Rhodesia. The lengthy overland marches necessitated stops in Rhodesia, and it would seem that labourers were sometimes housed in Rhodesian compounds overnight. These occasions must have given black miners the opportunity to discuss and compare conditions of employment in the respective territories.

It quickly became clear to Rhodesian workers that their wages did not compare at all favourably with those that were being offered to W.N.L.A. recruits. In 1906 passing W.N.L.A. recruits gave such a glowing account to Rhodesian workers of their employment prospects in South Africa that 'they caused a mutiny in the compound of a large mine'.[64] This strike obviously made a deep impression on the mind of the mine-owner, Col. Raleigh Grey. In the same year, Grey was made a member of the 'Native Labour Enquiry Committee', and thus it is not surprising to find in the report of that committee the view that:

> the practice of bringing gangs of labourers recruited by the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association in Northern Zambesia and territories lying to the north, through Rhodesia, is detrimental to Rhodesian industries, and is calculated to spread discontent among natives of Southern Rhodesia.[65]

This is yet a further indication of a well-developed worker consciousness, not in a vague, ill-defined way, but in such a way that it required mine-owners to take notice.

By systematically probing the response of African workers within the context of a specific industry, it seems possible to suggest that there was a well developed worker consciousness from the very earliest days of the mining industry. In settler-dominated economies with repressive labour legislation, it is, in the first instance, to the less dramatic underlying worker responses that we have to turn in looking for this consciousness. Important as they are, the activities of the Dance Societies, the Watch Tower Society and the I.C.U. do not represent the first signs of its development. Rather, they are simply a later and more articulate expression of discontent that was present throughout the history of the mining industry in Rhodesia.

APPENDIX I : RELEVANT INFORMATION ABOUT WOMEN REFERRED TO IN THIS TEXT

| | NAME | PLACE OF ORIGIN | OCCUPATION OF FATHER | EDUC (ST) | AGE | DATES | ACCOMPANIED BY | MONEY HOME? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Barendse,B | Marble Hall | Mixed farm | 8 | 19 | 1949-1963 | Alone | Occas. |
| | Barnard | North of Potgiet | Cattle farm | 8 | 17 | 1937+1938 | 3 sisters | Presents |
| | Bekker,T | Koringpunt(NTvl) | Cattle farm | 6 | 16 | 1939-1945 | Sister | Part |
| | Biddulph | Kranskop(SETvl) | Farmer | | 17 | 1941-1943 | Alone | Presents |
| | Botha,K | Middelburg | Dairy farm | 6 | 21 | 1941 | 3 Sisters | |
| | Bodenstein,A | Groblersdal | Tobacco farm | 6 | 16 | 1938-1941 | Sister+cousin | Presents |
| | Byrne,L | Pietersburg | Unemployed | | | 1939-1970's | | |
| | Derksen,A | Koringpunt(NTvl) | Cattle farm | 6 | | 1935-1939(?) | Initially alone | |
| | Du Preez,R | Near Randfontein | Mixed farm | 6 | 17 | 1931-1936 | 2Sisters | Yes |
| | Du Preez,SC | Roossenekal | Small farmer | 7 | | 1939-1941 | | Part |
| | Erasmus,F | Witfontein(NTvl) | Mixed farm | 6 | 16 | 1937-1938 | Friends | |
| | Ferreira,CC | Marble Hall | Bywoner | 6 | 17 | 1939-1941 | Sisters | Yes |
| | Grobler,A | Nylstroom | Crop farm | 6 | | 1937-1939 | Sister | |
| | Groenewald,B | Naboomspruit | Farmer | 6 | 20 | 1944-1952 | Friends | Half |
| | Greyling,A | Parys | Mixed farm | 6 | 20 | 1930-1951 | Sister | Presents |
| | Heystek,S | Swartwater(NTvl) | Cattle farm | 6 | 31 | 1939-1961 | 4 sisters there | Yes |
| | Horn,J | Rasolburg | Crop farm | 6 | 20 | 1938-1941 | Sisters | No |
| | Hough,B | Nylstroom | Farmer | 6 | 17 | 1940-1972 | Sisters | |
| | Hugo, | Leeuboskop(NTvl) | Farmer | 6 | 17 | 1952 | Friend | Presents |
| | Johnson | Frankfort | | 6 | | Approx.1940 | Friend | |
| | Kok,M | Jonkmansdrift(NT) | Mixed farm | 6 | 16 | 1936-1940 | Friends | Yes |
| | Lötter | Magoebaskloof(NT) | Potatoes | 7 | 17 | 1938 | Sister | Presents |
| | Oosthuizen,T | Leeuloop (NTvl) | Farmer | | 12 | 1929-1936 | Sister | Presents |
| L | Osmers,M | Makwassie(NWTvl) | Farmer | | 20 | 1933-1944 | | |
| | Riekert,dev | Settlers(NTvl) | Farmer | 6 | 16 | 1930-1979 | Sister | |
| | Smit,L | Boshoek(NTvl) | Brother farm | 7 | 17 | 1950-1953 | Sisters | Yes |
| L | Strydom,C | Pietersburg | Sheep farm | 6 | 16 | 1930-1933 | Friends | Clothes |
| | Swanepoel,M | Nylstroom | Cattle farm | 6 | | 1937-1939 | | |
| | Thorolt,M | Vereeniging | Bywoner | 6 | | 1939 | Friends | Yes |
| | Van Niekerk,M | Groblersdal | Tobacco farm | 8 | 16 | 1933-1941 | Sister | Presents |
| | Van Zyl,S | Potgietersrust | Mine | 8 | 18 | 1937/38-1945 | Sisters | |
| | Venter,T | Hatlabas(NWTvl) | Transport | 6 | | 1939 | Sister | Yes |

L=Letaba

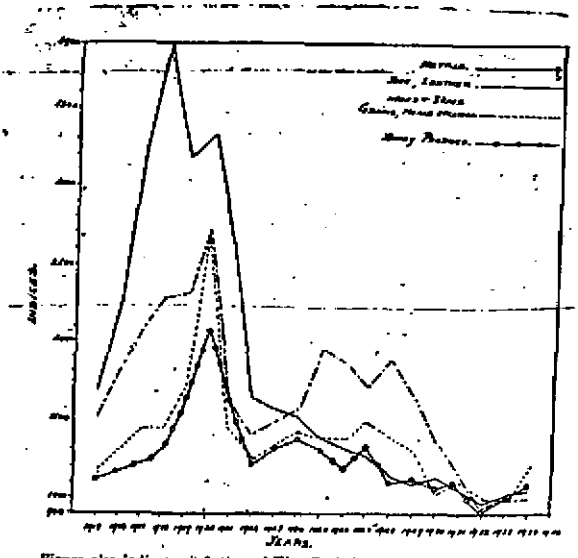


Figure also indicates inflation of War Period, and Heavy Deflationary Tendency since 1920.

Source: Van der Post, IP Economics of Agriculture, (CNA, Johannesburg, 1937) p. 509

Table 4. *Price index of select agricultural and livestock products (1936 = 100)*

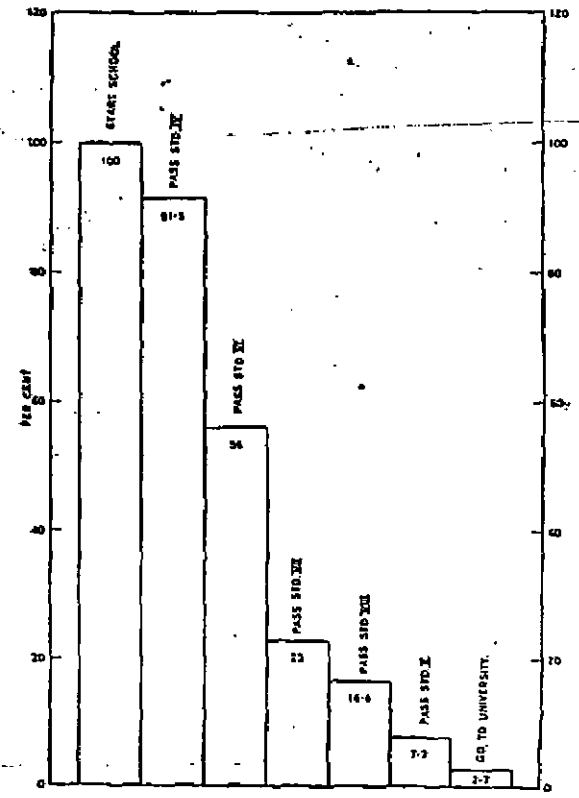
| Year | Wool (per lb) | Beef (per 100 lb) | Mutton (per lb) | Butter (per lb) | Maize (per 200 lb) | Wheat (200 lb) | Sugar cane (per ton) | Tobacco payment (per lb) | Good wine (per leaguer) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1939 | 84 | 132 | 130 | 130 | 119 | 125 | 101 | 160 | 91 |
| 1940 | 119 | 131 | 114 | 133 | 118 | 131 | 103 | 188 | 91 |
| 1941 | 102 | 138 | 120 | 135 | 144 | 137 | 105 | 205 | 109 |
| 1942 | 104 | 170 | 144 | 162 | 147 | 163 | 120 | 253 | 114 |
| 1943 | 129 | 197 | 184 | 181 | 200 | 179 | 119 | 284 | 132 |
| 1944 | 131 | 226 | 198 | 191 | 213 | 215 | 115 | 321 | 130 |
| 1945 | 132 | 220 | 204 | 221 | 233 | 215 | 125 | 355 | 139 |
| 1946 | 122 | 233 | 220 | 249 | 253 | 234 | 141 | 366 | 146 |
| 1947 | 169 | 225 | 232 | 257 | 300 | 242 | 168 | 424 | 202 |
| 1948 | 266 | 237 | 248 | 286 | 283 | 245 | 167 | 466 | 202 |
| 1949 | 342 | 243 | 258 | 302 | 293 | 257 | 186 | 452 | 202 |

*Source*: Department of Agriculture 1961: table 6, p. 11.

Source: O'Meara, D: Volkskapitalisme (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983), p. 186

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Diagram 1. Showing the number of children out of every 100 starting school who pass the various standards.




Source; Malherbe, EG: Education and the Poor White, Carnegie Commission v. III, (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932), p. 65