

Main theme: *Structural Changes and Impacts on Labour:*

Title: Now or never: the future of organised labour in Zambia's mining sector

by

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Since the end of Zambia's privatisation of the mines in 2000, permanent jobs have declined while short term contracts, precarious employment and retrenchments have increased. Just as global mineral prices fall, mining companies retrench workers and rehire only a few when prices pick up. The rest are unemployed, join the informal sector, fall into poverty, or engaged by mining subcontractors, on less favourable conditions. But this is likely to worsen for both workers and unions because less and less labour will be needed as mining companies mechanize their operations. The few highly skilled and highly paid workers that will be required will not need unions as they will most likely negotiate individual contracts. This paper investigates how workers understand and experience this uncertainty in their everyday discourses and practices, and the solutions they propose. The aim is to go beyond mere descriptions of collective labour weakness, precarity or exploitation and solutions advanced by experts to bring the voice of those affected- the workers to the fore front.

The paper shows that miners generally understand their uncertainty and what to do about it. While they appreciate the contribution of global economic forces to their uncertainty, they also blame it on their own union leadership who they accuse of selfishness and greed. It this (selfishness) they argue, which has led to union fragmentation and increased wrestling for members instead of recruiting new and unorganised workers. Next, members accuse their leaders of misappropriating union resources, through allowances and wages, and buying expensive personal to holder cars. Then, they are blamed for concentrating on fundraising undertakings i.e. selling of mealie-meal and grocery to workers, and seeking bribes from employers and banks. They are also accused of owning firms which are subcontracted in the same companies in which the members they represent are employed, and hence deemed incapable worker representatives. Lastly, they are accused of using the union as a platform to kick start their political careers, and once in government, turn against it.

So, in order to effectively respond to capital, labour must first be liberated from itself. This implies paying attention to internal governance, moral ethics, financial discipline, transparency and accountability, democracy and education of all leaders on union management. As often, union leaders are elected solely on the basis of their popularity. It was argued that a united and well organised union was the only one capable of withstanding attempts by capital to weaken it.

This paper is a result of a long-term PhD field research in Zambia. Between December 2016, and February 2018, I lived among miners' families and worked with miners at Mopani Copper Mines, in Kitwe and Mufulira. For nine months, I worked in the mines: three months above ground and six months as an underground miner. As a participant observer, I took part in various tasks such as lashing, painting, changing drilling rods, assisting in repairing or servicing heavy duty equipment, drilling and blasting, and hoisting of the ore. I also conducted a total of over 60 repeated interviews, informal discussions and interactions and attended several trade union meetings.