Worker agency in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid gold mining workplace regimes

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Worker agency in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid gold mining workplace regimes

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This paper locates the understanding of the organisation of work and worker agency on South African gold mines within the context of the racialisation and deracialisation of the economic and labour market strategies of the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid mining regimes. It argues that as much as racial and coercive labour practices profited the gold mining companies, they were not sustainable. The mineworkers were not passive acceptors of racial and coercive forms of labour control. The post-apartheid work order led to the restructuring of the gold mining workplace towards efficiency, productivity and equity. This signalled a shift from worker coercion to consent in the day-to-day running of the production process inside the pit. The paper calls attention to workers’ subjective orientation, agency and resilience to repressive and contemporary work structures – not just as recipients but also as shapers of such work structures within the politics, limits and contradictions of capitalist production systems.

Keywords: apartheid; democracy; gold mining; labour market; workers; South Africa

[Agence de travailleur sous la période coloniale, dans le cadre des activités aurifères pendant et après l’apartheid]. Ce document éclaire sur la compréhension de l’organisation du travail et de l’agence du travailleur des mines d’or sud-africaines dans le contexte de la ségrégation raciale et celui de la non-ségrégation raciale des stratégies économiques et du marché du travail des époques coloniale, d’apartheid et des régimes miniers après l’ère de l’apartheid. Il fait valoir que, au temps où la race et les pratiques de travail forcées profitaient aux compagnies minières d’or, elles n’étaient pas durables. Les mineurs n’étaient pas des accepteurs passifs face aux aspects liés à la race et à la contrainte en rapport au contrôle de la main d’œuvre. L’ordre sur le travail qui intervint après la période de l’apartheid a conduit à la restructuration du travail des mines d’or vers l’efficacité, la productivité et l’équité. Ce fut un signal pour un changement partant de la coercition des travailleurs à consentir dans la foulée et au jour le jour, à un processus de production à l’intérieur même de la fosse. Le document attire l’attention des travailleurs sur l’orientation subjective, l’agence et la flexibilité par rapport aux structures de travail contemporaines et répressives – et pas seulement en tant que bénéficiaires mais aussi comme innovateurs de telles structures au sein de la sphère politique, les limites et les contradictions des systèmes de production capitaliste.

Mots-clés : l’apartheid ; la démocratie ; l’exploitation des mines d’or ; le marché du travail ; les travailleurs ; l’Afrique du Sud

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This paper examines why and how race was used as a managerial, economic and labour market strategy to coerce African labourers to the needs of mine management. Further, the paper demonstrates the manner in which racial and coercive forms of labour control shaped worker struggles and identity in a racially repressive and despotic deep-level gold mining workplace. To achieve this, the paper draws on the work of a number of writers on the history of labour in South African gold mines and on the political economy of the South African gold mining industry. For example, the work by Gavin Williams on the making of the South African social, economic and political order has been particularly helpful in understanding the manner in which the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid regimes shaped gold mining labour market strategies and gold mineworker identities, and how, in turn, deep-level gold mining shaped state policies and capitalist relations of production on the Witwatersrand gold mines.

Williams’ (2003a) exploration of democracy as process sheds significant light on the manner in which democratic politics shaped the political economy of the South African mining industry (see also Lipton 1985, Wilson 1972, Wolpe 1972). Indeed, the attainment of a democratic labour regime resulted from a process involving a number of apartheid and anti-apartheid struggles, which shaped the politics of production in the mining workplace. For it was not simply that the apartheid regime was undemocratic in that it denied indigenous Africans both the right to vote in national elections and protection in a capitalist mining workplace (Williams 2003a, Posel 1987, 1991); it was also that colonial and apartheid policies defined and shaped economic strategies, identities and social relations in the gold mining workplace on the basis of race. As Williams (2003a, pp. 344–345) argues:

Colonial rule redefined state forms, social identities, gender relations, religious beliefs and class relations. Rail and road networks reoriented African producers and economies to changing global economic networks. Colonial economies subordinated African producers to the requirements of new, and often coercive, labour regimes and patterns of cultivation to meet the requirements of European-controlled railways, mines, farmers and plantations.

Furthermore, while acknowledging that the reconstruction of the gold mining industry led to the introduction of new working practices aimed at empowering underground mineworkers, Williams also raises an important question regarding black economic empowerment in the South African mining industry – ‘Who empowers whom?’ – and observes that this empowerment has largely benefited black elites (Williams 2003a, 2003b, 2005; see also Du Toit et al. 2008). This highlights the limits of a transformation agenda in South African workplaces. It can be argued that it is within the context of an alleged lack of meaningful transformation that the call for the nationalisation of South African mines could be understood.

However, even though he acknowledges the autonomy of African workers in resisting autocratic regimes, it is worth noting that Williams (2003a) does not articulate the underlying social factors through which workers manufacture resilience against repressive governments and coercive labour practices. While revealing that workplace relations have not improved significantly for farm workers despite a plethora of policies aimed at deracialising and transforming labour relations on wine farms, he does not adequately address the resilience of farm workers to resist and cope with this lack of meaningful transformation (see Du Toit et al. 2008, Ewert and Hamman 1996, 1999). Yet, this is not to minimise the merit of such research. On the contrary, research of this kind seeks to enhance our understanding of the transformation of the varied sectors of South African industry, in addition to helping, arguably unintentionally, in the identification of areas for further research, particularly those which are best investigated using ethnographic approaches focusing on worker agency.
Its shared thematic focus on worker agency notwithstanding, the present paper concentrates on reviewing the relevant historical/theoretical mining literature, the constraints of space preventing an extension of coverage to ethnographic material (for which see Phakathi 2011). It consists of four sections, including this introduction. Section Two provides a brief discussion of the manner in which colonial and apartheid regimes shaped the development of capitalism and worker agency in different South African gold mines. The third section presents an analysis of the various ways in which underground gold miners resisted, covertly and overtly, the repressive system of worker control. A fourth and concluding part discusses the economic, social and political factors that necessitated the restructuring of the post-apartheid South African gold mining workplace towards efficiency, productivity and equity.

Colonialism, apartheid and capitalism on South African gold mines

Securing worker consent is critically important to the achievement of organisational goals in capitalist modes of production (Burawoy 1979, 1985, Panitch and Swartz 1984), and there are a number of ways in which capitalists seek and secure worker consent. However, the very same means by which the capitalists seek to secure worker consent may generate worker resistance to organisational goals in that management, ironically, tends not to fulfil its side of the bargain (Thompson 2003, Vallas 2006).

In the colonial and apartheid years of gold mining, worker consent on South African gold mines was secured through racial and coercive labour practices. The day-to-day running of the production process was marked by antagonistic and despotic relations of production (Moodie 1994, 2005, Webster 1978), eventually leading to the breakdown of a racial and repressive industrial relations system and the creation of a new workplace order for a democratic society (Adler and Webster 1995, 2000, Von Holdt 2003).

To understand workers’ responses to new work systems on South African mines, one needs to locate such an understanding in the past labour practices of mine employers which were, in co-operation with the then government, developed to ensure the profitability of the gold mines. This paper locates such an understanding in the colonial and apartheid workplace order to highlight the ‘connection between workplace and society as well as the connection between past and present (and indeed the future) [and] … the dynamic interplay between order and disorder’ (Von Holdt and Webster 2005, p. 3) in the gold mining workplace. By historicising the gold mining labour control processes, this paper takes cognisance of ‘the role of the state in shaping worker agency, in this case the colonial and apartheid states, as well as the post-apartheid state’ in order ‘to describe more accurately the ebbs and flows of control and resistance and to point to the contradictions that emerge from such resistance’ (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010, p. 5).

Burawoy (1983, p. 1) points out that the understanding of the labour process should not be detached from its environment and its historical, ideological, political and economic elements:

The process of production is not confined to the labour process – to the social relations into which men and women enter as they transform raw materials into useful products with instruments of production, it also includes political apparatuses which reproduce these relations of the labour process through the regulation of struggles.

Burawoy (1983, 1985) identified a specific type of labour regime in Southern Africa called colonial despotism. Colonial despotism, he argued, was characterised by coercion over consent, white over black. The system of racial control in the gold mining workplace
could be summed up as an apartheid workplace regime – a workplace marked by racial managerial domination (Von Holt 2003).

Once gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand reef in 1886, the relations of production were not simply determined by technical factors but entailed the exercise of social and political power by the mining magnates over workers and the appropriation of the surplus value of their labour. To mine gold at a profit, the mining magnates – or the organisers of production, to use the words of Craig, Rubery, Tarling and Wilkinson (1985) – in collaboration with the state developed a variety of racial and coercive methods of labour control.

Apart from the creation of wage labour itself, the mining of gold presented other limitations for the mining magnates. These limitations were threefold. First, the production of gold had an extremely sensitive cost structure, and this made the realisation of profit very difficult. Second, the international fixed price of gold prevented mining companies from passing on any increase in production to the consumers. Third, the average gold content of the ore was very low (Richardson and Van-Helten 1982, Webster 1978, Wilson 1972.

In the aftermath of the diagnoses and assessment of the constraints of profitable mining of gold, the mining companies sought and devised ways and means to remedy the sensitive cost structure of gold mining. In order to reduce costs and increase output, the mining companies resorted to a system of cost minimisation (Johnstone 1976, Neube 1985). However, mine owners were caught at a crossroads, uncertain which road to choose. There were limits to the possibility of reducing capital costs in deep-level mining and in substituting capital investment for the purchase of labour power.

The companies needed labour that was ‘plentiful but cheap’ (First 1961). This presented the mining companies with a series of obstacles. Reducing labour costs also presented the mine owners with the problem of deciding whose wages were to be reduced, since the gold mining industry comprised a mixture of white and black workers. Realising that the white mineworkers were expensive and in scant supply, the mine owners decided to reduce the wages of the black workforce (Neube 1985, Webster 1978). The proletarianisation, control, and cheapness of African labour were secured through persuasive and extra-economic methods. To weaken the bargaining position of black mineworkers in the labour market and ensure the adequate supply of cheap migrant labour, the state and mining companies designed and put into practice an interlocking system of racial and coercive methods of labour control: the contract system, the pass system and the compound system, the recruiting monopoly, the maximum average wage system and the job colour-bar system.

Contracts, pass laws, and labour compounds

The mining capitalists, assisted by the state, instituted the migrant labour system which kept and controlled the mobility of African male workers in single-sex compounds for six- to eighteen-month employment contracts (Johnstone 1976, Allen 2003a, 2003b). The mine owners benefited both economically and politically from the combination of these systems. The pass system was instituted through a body of laws known as Pass (‘Influx Control’) Laws. The system was unified by the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act, as subsequently amended and consolidated (Humphries 1983, Davenport 1987, Davenport and Saunders 2000). They were intended to segregate the supply of labour to farming, mining, and urban labour markets. The mining industry organised its own supply of labour through a monopsony cartel. The compound system meant that complete surveillance of black workers in a closed environment was possible. It averted absenteeism,
managed the turnover of labour and protected the mine owners from desertion by workers seeking better opportunities outside the mines. It is estimated that in 1910, gold mines had an annual desertion rate of about 15% – about 30,000 out of about 180,000 black mineworkers (Johnstone 1976).

From an economic point of view, the contract and compound systems kept the supply of cheap labour in a state of equilibrium. The people in the labour ‘reserves’, within South Africa (in Pondoland in particular) and in British and Portuguese colonies (notably in Mozambique, Lesotho and Zimbabwe) incurred the costs of the supply of labour to the industry but at the same time earned cash income from the mines (First 1983). From a political perspective, the system split black mineworkers, thus encouraging compound inmate strife and division among workers on the basis of ethnicity and migrancy, whether they were ‘local’ migrants, from within South Africa or ‘foreign migrants’. Labour control on the basis of migrancy marked a divide and rule strategy, as it limited communication among the workers. As will be argued later in this paper, the system of labour control could never be total. Miners worked the system both on the compound and underground and could mobilise one another on mine premises.

The recruiting monopoly, ‘wage’, and ‘job’ colour bars
To secure sufficient cheap black labour and gain competitive advantage over other low-wage employers, the Chamber of Mines of South Africa – a representative management structure of mining companies formed in 1887 – established two types of recruiting institutions, which granted mining companies a monopoly over the recruitment of African labour. First, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) was formed in 1896 to recruit foreign labour in central and southern Africa. From the end of the South African War in 1903 until the start of the depression in 1931, and again after the end of the Second World War until the mid 1970s, the majority of mineworkers were from outside South Africa, and Mozambique was the largest supplier of labour (First 1983).

The mining companies kept the wages of black workers extremely low through a maximum average system, thus preventing any mining company paying wages exceeding the stipulated average. Fixed wages prevented mining companies from competing over the supply and demand of cheap labour. Johnstone (1976) described this as the ‘wage colour bar’. Moreover, the mining industry implemented a procedure called ‘the loafer ticket’. This stipulated that black workers were employed to perform drilling work. However, before these workers could do this work, they participated in other work such as shovelling and tramming, which was not stipulated in the contract of employment. Failure to drill a specified number of inches meant no pay for that particular shift (Ncube 1985).

The gold mining industry also implemented the job colour bar or the job reservation system embodied in the Mines and Works Acts in 1911 and 1926 (Davenport 1987). This method was distinct from the wage colour bar system in dividing the jobs of white and black mineworkers. Skilled work such as that of supervision, blasting and onsetting was reserved for white workers, and degrading and menial jobs were reserved for black workers (Johnstone 1976, Leggasick 1975). As much as the racial job reservation system was beneficial for mine owners and white mineworkers, they and the state were often at loggerheads over the impact of the job colour-bar system on mine production costs, output and profits. Between 1911 and 1969 the wages of white mineworkers posed a serious threat to the profitability of gold mines whereas the wages of black mineworkers remained low for the majority of the period. The price of gold was not increasing and was fixed against the dollar at US$35.80 per fine ounce from 1933 until 1968 (First
1961, 1983). The major part of the working costs was stores. Since mining companies did not control the price of gold on the international markets, this meant that increasing working costs could not be passed on to the consumer ‘and the combination of the fixed price of gold, heavy production costs and the low average grade of ore have meant that profits could … be secured [only] through low levels of costs and high output’ (First 1983, p. 10). Hence, the mining magnates were in continuing need of an abundant supply of cheap labour. The 1922 white mineworkers’ strike illustrates the contradictions of a racially repressive policy on the Witwatersrand gold mines. The white mineworkers successfully resisted the employers’ intentions to cut their wages and employ black workers in the skilled jobs exclusively reserved for white workers. As much as the racial wage and job reservation systems benefited the mine owners, it proved dysfunctional in the long run as it threatened the profitability of the gold mines (Davies 1979).

Worker agency in a racially repressive and despotic mining workplace

Despite their weakened bargaining power in the racialised labour market, black mineworkers were not passive in the face of a repressive labour regime in the mine compound and the underground workplace. Black mineworkers engaged in a variety of covert and overt restrictive practices against a despotic system of management control.

Covert forms of worker resistance


daily, hundreds of petty crimes were committed on the mining proprieties with the specific objective of rectifying the balance between employees and their employers. African workers constantly pilfered small items of mine stores – such as candles – or helped themselves to substantial quantities of detonators and dynamite which they used for fishing. Wage rates were altered on documents and hundreds of work and ‘skoff’ [meal] tickets forged by miners who sought to gain compensations for what they had been denied by the system.

It was the hidden or overt forms of worker resistance that the mine employers and the apartheid state often found difficult to detect and suppress, and out of which black trade unionism emerged (Allen 1992, 2003a, 2003b, James 1990). Black mineworkers projected their frustration against coercive or extra-economic methods by ‘working the system’ (Thompson and Bannon 1985), culminating in the development of informal or covert forms of resistance. Covert forms of resistance incorporated various practices and ways of coping with tight management control, coercive and despotic white supervision, and extremely hazardous underground working conditions. As Nichols and Armstrong (1976) discovered at ChemCo in England, there are various ways in which shop-floor workers resent management’s authority and the manner in which that authority maintains control over the worker’s working day. Industrial sabotage (Nichols and Armstrong 1976, Taylor and Walton 1971) is
one of the strategies underground black miners engaged in to cope with work and work relations in a despotic mining workplace. Industrial sabotage occurs in a situation in which workers cannot organise or bargain, [when] they tend to react in other ways ... individuals tend to destroy or mutilate objects or each other in the work environment. This is done either to reduce tension or frustration or, on the other hand, to assert some form of direct control over one’s work or life. Unplanned smashing and spontaneous destruction are signs of a powerless individual or group. (Webster 1978, p. 18)

It is argued that the hazardous working conditions of the underground mining workplace encouraged solidarity amongst miners, not only for the purposes of ensuring worker safety (see Fitzpatrick 1980, Leger 1992) but to avoid being exploited and manipulated by a despotic system of worker control. This is best illustrated by Gordon’s (1977) finding of the workplace culture of brotherhood in a Namibian mining workplace. Gordon (1977) discovered that through the work culture of brotherhood, black underground workers prevented competition, created interpersonal relationships and relieved pressures of workloads whereby if a particular worker worked hard, management would expect the same performance from other workers. A worker who did not conform to brotherhood norms was (and is) regarded as a sell-out/informer or non-brother.

According to Gordon (1977), brotherhood was the basis of solidarity among black mineworkers, not only in the underground mining workplace but also in the compound. It was established through forms such as friendship, kinship and tribal connections. It valued solidarity and self-respect. Through brotherhood, the miners rendered the coercion and abuse of labour control ineffective ‘because of the high level of resistance and solidarity [brotherhood] generates’ (Hodson 1995, p. 88). Social support from fellow workers has also been discovered in other workplace settings. For instance, Santino (1989) discovered that railroad porters, who suffered both racial and class-based degradation, engaged in supportive group activities to cope with a hostile and abusive environment.

The South African trade union movement and political liberation emerged in the context of these cultural formations and hidden ways of coping with work and management’s authority, or what Sitas (1985) calls defensive combinations rooted in the networks of mutual support (see also Delius 1989, Von Holdt 2003). Sitas (1985, p. 5) argues that

cultural formations that underpinned the union movement, although they originated as living arrangements and rural roots, were linked to production. It was in the workplace that contemporary worker leadership emerged, cutting across regionalism and ethnicity, uniting workers at the point of production.

In the view of Moodie (1994, p. 23), ‘informal networks of support among these workers gave them a degree of leverage against management, providing some protection against the worst depredations of work, supervisors and compound overseers’. From this perspective, the working-class culture is viewed as an empowering and mobilising tool for workers.

Moodie (1983, p. 182) goes on to say that ‘mine culture, for all its dependence upon mining as a form of production, is sustained and reproduced in the social structure which defines relations between management and miners, and in patterned personal interactions between the miners themselves’. For this reason, Moodie (1983) argued, the interactional reality of mine life should be studied in process and ‘if we do that, we discover a much higher degree of reformulation of self-identity in the mine world’ (Moodie 1983, p. 178), without which worker militancy, consciousness and black trade unionism would have not been developed.
Overt forms of worker resistance

While white mineworkers did engage in strikes (for instance the 1903, 1907 and 1922 strikes) if the employers failed to meet their demands, black mineworkers were also able to organise strikes in spite of their weakened position in a racial and repressive industry. During the course of the twentieth century, black mineworkers engaged in a series of strikes against the cheap labour system (Allen 1992, O’Meara 1975, Webster 1978).

This paper focuses only on the following African mineworkers’ strikes: the 1920, the 1946, the 1970s and the 1987 strikes. These strikes are significant to understanding the nature of labour–management conflict in South African gold mines for the larger part of the twentieth century. They highlight the power and resilience of black mineworkers, the majority of whom were not from South Africa itself (Crush et al. 1991).

The 1920 strike was the first large strike undertaken by black mineworkers. About 71,000 mineworkers participated in the strike for better wages, to lower prices in the compound concession stores and against the job colour-bar system. This strike took place after the end of the First World War when the national economy and the gold mines were hard-hit by inflation. The mine owners refused to increase the wages of black mineworkers in spite of inflation. The strike was short-lived and unsuccessful. Although the strike failed to pay dividends for the black mineworkers, it displayed the extent to which the African mineworkers had been proletarianised (Crush et al. 1991, Webster 1978).

The 1946 African mineworkers’ strike was also a response to rising post-war inflation and deteriorating conditions in the compounds. The African Mine Workers Union (AMWU) went on strike against the cheap migrant labour system (O’Meara 1975). The AMWU demanded adequate provision of food and a wage increase of R1 per day (Webster 1978). These demands were not accepted, and thus the AMWU called a general strike. It is estimated that between 74,000 and 76,000 black mineworkers participated in the strike for four days (O’Meara 1975, Webster 1978). The strike jeopardised production, as a number of gold mines were brought to a standstill. As O’Meara (1975, p. 160) notes, ‘monthly production fell between July and August on 31 of the 45 mines, with total monthly production brought down by 169,800 tons to the lowest level since 1937’. Although this strike did not improve the working and living conditions of the African mineworkers, it demonstrated that African mineworkers were not passive in the face of the gold mines’ despotic regime of labour control.

From the mid 1940s onwards, the African mineworkers’ strikes were not merely against the repressive mine labour regime but against the apartheid regime in general. In collaboration with various labour, political and community organisations, black mineworkers openly and massively resisted white power in the workplace and apartheid generally. Their struggle in a despotic mining industry took the form of social movement unionism (Lambert and Webster 1988, Scipes 1992, Seidman 1994, Webster 1988).

The 1970 strikes were characterised by the destruction of beer halls, offices and compound buildings. Mine management paid dearly as workers destroyed mine property and set alight the centres of managerial control. Mine management found it hard to suppress worker dissent. The strikes of this period destroyed the centres of labour and production control (Crush et al. 1991). For instance, at Anglo American’s Western Deep Levels gold mine:

The violent resistance of the workers disturbed production, which declined from 3.2 million tons milled in 1973 to 2.9 million tons in 1976. Gold production slid from 48,119 kilograms in 1974 to 44,532 kilograms in 1976 as the number of black miners declined from 15,494 in
1973 to 12,310 in 1975 when mine management complained of a general shortage of labour. This dramatic disturbance of mine discipline and labour supplies affected the mine’s profitability which fell by about R35 million between 1975 and 1976. (Hemson and Morris p. 7)

Despite the various repressive measures the mine managers devised to restore worker discipline, the turmoil in the mine compound continued, culminating in the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry between 1977 and 1981. The last of the six reports produced by the commission, was on ‘Industrial relations in the mining industry’. Collectively, these reports ‘had a major impact on labour relations in South Africa and the legal rights of black workers and trade unions’ (Crush et al. 1991, p. 24).

The Wiehahn Commission recommended that gold mines should shift away from coercion to negotiation by recognising black trade unions and incorporating black mineworkers in the official industrial relations system. In 1982, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was formed. The NUM made the most of the opportunity to transform the gold mining industry. For the first time, a black trade union participated in collective bargaining forums and negotiated agreements with employers. The NUM played a vital role in effecting change in an industry marked by racial and coercive labour practices for a century. In the 1980s, a considerable proportion of the African labour force had become ‘career’ miners: they spent more time working in the mines and less in the rural homestead. As a result, they found it difficult to tolerate the appalling working and living conditions in the gold mines (Crush et al. 1991, James 1990).


by late 1985, the NUM had a membership of 200,000 (100,000 paid up); one year later, the figures were 320,000 (and 180,000 paid up). ... By 1987, it had organised over half of the total labour force. ... Not surprisingly, the union made its most gains at those mines to which organisers were given access, where the union was granted facilities, and where it was able to obtain recognition agreements.

Despite the official recognition of black trade unionism, the various mining houses did not relinquish the racially coercive cheap labour practices. The 1987 mineworkers’ strike was a response to the mine management’s reluctance to improve the wages, working and living conditions of black mineworkers. This was the largest, longest and costliest strike in the history of the South African gold mining industry. Unlike the previous African mineworkers’ strikes, this was a more coordinated and focused strike. The mine managers tried all possible means to restrain the strike, but failed (Allen 2003b). Against all odds, the NUM was able to make its presence felt as the most influential and resilient trade union organisation in the history of the South African industrial relations system (Allen 1992, 2003a, 2003b, Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008).

The apartheid labour regime antagonised not only the relationships of white and black mineworkers, but also union–management relationships. For many years, South Africa’s labour–management relationship was plagued by a workplace culture of low trust – a zero-sum type of relationship because of the apartheid or colonial workplace regime. In the 1990s, the National Manpower Commission identified the following factors to be a major cause of poor economic and productivity performance in South African workplaces (Webster 1999a, 1999b): lack of management skills in leadership, mentoring, work
organisation and decision-making abilities; authoritarian and at times racist supervision on the shop-floor; a general lack of education and training of the workforce, which was seen to have a negative impact on skills acquisition, lack of competence/capacity among both management and union representatives in industrial re-engineering, and general absence of workplace democracy and inadequate worker participation.

This is precisely the challenge that had confronted the South African gold mining industry since the 1970s, given the legacy of the apartheid and despotic workplace regime that created a workplace culture of low trust between management and labour. The early 1990s economic, social, and political changes compelled the mining industry to transform work and work relations for a new post-apartheid workplace order which values worker consent over coercion.

The post-apartheid gold mining labour process

South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy and integration into a competitive global economy in the 1990s rendered the apartheid workplace regime obsolete (Webster and Von Holdt 2005). The 1990s was an era of low gold prices. South Africa’s gold mining sector went through a severe gold slump. The productivity of the gold mining industry was being threatened by the falling world price of gold, rising working costs, declining levels of gold production and shrinking levels of employment (Leger and Nicol 1991, 1992, Malherbe and Segal 2000, Nattrass 1994, 1995, Standing et al. 1996). A number of gold mines became marginal as they found it extremely difficult to mine gold profitably. This had serious repercussions for the country’s gold mining sector as a generator of employment and source of revenue not only for South Africa but also her neighbouring countries including Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana (Crush and James 1995, Harrington et al. 2004, Seidman 1993, 1997).

The gold mining crisis of the 1990s was a cause for concern not only for the mine employers but also for the state and organised labour. Drastic measures were required to deal with the crisis and restructure the gold mining industry in ways that could generate wealth, revenue and preserve employment. The challenge was the manner in which the restructuring of the gold mining industry was to be forged given the history of colonial and apartheid labour practices. The crisis and challenges of mining gold at a profit could no longer be offset by means of coercive, racial and cheap labour practices. The 1990s heralded a new labour regime on South African gold mines. Owing to the labour movement’s struggle against a repressive labour regime and apartheid in general, the NUM became an influential actor in the restructuring of the gold mining industry in the 1990s.

In 1995 relentless pressure from the NUM persuaded the mine employers and government to establish the Leon Commission of Inquiry into safety and health in the South African mining industry. This was the first and by far the comprehensive commission of inquiry to look into safety and health in the South African mining industry for more than thirty years. The recommendations of the Leon Commission culminated in the drafting of the Mine Health and Safety Act (MHSA) of 1996. For the first time in the history of the South African mining industry, this Act entrenched the right of workers to refuse to do dangerous work as one of the means with which to create a healthy, safe and productive mining industry (Leon Commission Report 1995).

In response to the falling international price of gold, declining levels of gold production, rising working costs and declining levels of employment, in 1997 and for the first time in the history of the South African industrial relations system, a tripartite structure was established whereby the mine employers, government and labour (led by the NUM), jointly
negotiated, at industry and shaft levels, a number of productivity agreements and developed a variety of innovative production systems and human resource management strategies geared towards improving productivity, competitiveness, employment, equity and skills development in the post-apartheid gold mining industry (Bezuidenhout and Kenny 1997, Dansereau 2006, Kenny and Bezuidenhout 1999, Webster and Omar 2003).

These mine-level productivity initiatives mirror the new models of work organisation and human resource management innovations widely introduced and implemented in manufacturing industries across the world (Appelbaum 2002, Appelbaum et al. 2000, Barker 1993, Gee et al. 1996, Horwitz and Smith 1998). As former chief executive officer of AngloGold Ashanti, Bobby Godsell, argued with regard to the restructuring of the gold mining workplace:

Work structures have remained remarkably unchanged for many decades because of static technology, the impact of apartheid and the previously closed nature – in times past – of the South African economy. We now face the transition from a Taylor-type of work structure or Fordism, as is called in sociology of work terms, to models more appropriate for an information-driven society. (cited in Webster et al. 1999)

In the 1990s, a number of gold mines reorganised work through new forms of working practices such as new forms of front-line supervision, teamworking and production bonuses linked to performance targets aimed at creating new kinds of workers who could identify with the goals of the company by expending rather than withdrawing effort at the point of production. This signalled a shift from worker coercion to worker consent in the day-to-day running of the production process. Phakathi’s (2011) study of worker responses to work reorganisation in a deep-level gold mining workplace revealed that worker consent to new working practices may embody new or ‘soft-touch’ forms of worker coercion due to the malign effects of new production systems such as the intensification of work in search of heightened levels of worker performance and workplace productivity.

While the NUM has played a significant role in the transformation of the mining industry to the advantage of its members, at shaft level it has had difficulty in effectively engaging mine management in areas relating to changes in the organisation of work. Contemporary studies on South African mines have shown that at shaft level the NUM has had difficulty in engaging robustly with management on issues pertaining to work reorganisation as a result of weak shop-steward leadership, characterised by internal conflicts, careerism, corruption, succession battles and tribalism or ethnicity (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008). For these reasons, Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) point out that the post-apartheid trade union leadership in the mining industry has been marked by tensions and divisions between workers and their shaft stewards.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the manner in which the racial labour practices shaped the political economy of the South African gold mining industry. As much as the colonial and apartheid mining policies benefited the mining capitalists, they were eventually not sustainable. The racially repressive systems of labour control generated contradictions and challenges for both the mining capitalists and the state. These methods failed to detect and suppress worker dissent. Underground workers were able to resist repressive management practices despite their weakened position in the labour market. Of significance here are workers’ covert forms of resistance, which proved instrumental to the formation of the NUM and
the demise of the apartheid workplace regime in the early 1990s. The post-apartheid work order and South Africa’s integration into the competitive global marketplace led to the restructuring of the gold mining workplace towards efficiency, productivity and equity.

The paper has highlighted the significance of worker agency in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid mining regimes. Thus demonstrating underground gold miners are not passive reactors not only in capitalist but also in repressive and democratic labour regimes as exemplified by the NUM. The paper calls attention to workers’ subjective orientation, agency and resilience to new work structures – not just as recipients but also as shapers of such new work structures within the politics, limits and contradictions of capitalist production systems – especially in the context of weak shop-steward leadership and failed state policies towards meaningful workplace transformation and empowerment of workers at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy (see Williams 2003b, 2005). Issues of employee welfare and racism still remain a cause for concern in the post-apartheid gold mining regime. What impact have new challenges in gold mining had on the day-to-day lived experience of mineworkers and mining communities? This is one of the questions that contemporary researchers and policymakers ought to ask and respond to in order to understand the political, social and economic impact of the post-colonial mining regimes on the quality of the working life of mineworkers and mining communities in which they operate. The manner in which the post-apartheid mining regime addresses the triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality is crucial if the proponents of the nationalisation of mines are to be silenced.

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