

In Search of Better Wages: A Challenge to Mining Capitalism and State Power, 1943

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Sir, wages paid to black mineworkers are intended to subject families
of the miners to perpetual poverty and slow starvation.
We demand a living wage!¹

Joseph Matsapa

Introduction

This article strives to provide insight into the economic and social frustrations experienced by African mine-workers at the Messina Transvaal Development Company (hereafter Messina copper mines) as a result of poor exploitative wages and service conditions. Through a number of labour laws, the South African government protected the mining capitalist company from labour demands which were seen as threatening not only to the mining company, but also to the mining tax revenue of government and the economic stability of the white community in the Soutpansberg District.

Between 1906 and 1943, three mine-shafts were established at Messina, Harper and Campbell. These mine-shafts were less than seven kilometers from each other. Each mine had its own mine-compound consisting of single and married quarters. By 1943 the company had an African work-force of 4 266.² The majority of mine-workers were

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1. South African National Archives (hereafter SANA), Transvaal Archives, Pretoria (hereafter TAB): Department of Native Affairs (hereafter NTS) 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, The Messina strike. The language used was *fanakalo*. *Fanakalo* began as an industrial creole language used as a means of communication in multilingual and multi-ethnic settings. Its origin was rooted in communicative necessity, but over time it became a language of instruction and command.
2. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, The Messina strike.

foreign migrants from Botswana, Nyasaland (Malawi), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Zambia. A minority of workers were recruited from the Soutpansberg District in the Transvaal. The labour unrest of October 1943 at the Messina copper mines will be researched against the background of corresponding incidents of labour strikes which were prevalent on the Witwatersrand between 1942 and 1946. In this instance, reference will briefly be made to the work of Peter Alexander.³

In *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*, T.D. Moodie gives a detailed description of the lives of black South African mine-workers, “written as far as possible from their point of view.” He also outlines the integrity with which these migrant workers, “disciplined and controlled as they were, retained their senses of identity, measuring them not only against those of the white men who employed them and those who supervised them but also against those black officials in the compounds.”⁴ His historical work is an interpretation of evidence from archival sources and oral information in the form of “... old men’s stories, young men’s reflections and the life histories of women.”⁵ This article will follow the approach taken by Moodie.

In *Chibaro*, published in 1979, Charles van Onselen presents mining history “from below”. Throughout *Chibaro*, capital accumulation and social control are dominant themes. The black mine-workers are portrayed as victims of the mining capitalists who were determined to extract maximum profits. Van Onselen’s black mine-workers engaged in activities such as loafing, strikes, as well as non-compliance with compound rules and regulations in order to challenge the authority of the mine-owners and management. This article will show that the situation on the Zimbabwean mines as outlined in *Chibaro* were similar to those that prevailed at the Messina copper mines.

Causes of the outbreak of the 1943 strike

In the two decades after the first Messina mine-workers’ strike of May 1919, the mine management consolidated its internal structures of labour control to suppress any attempts by African mine-workers to agitate for the formation of a negotiating labour forum. In June 1919, the clerical staff had approached the mine management with a proposal to form a negotiating forum. They expressed the hope that in due course such a forum would represent all the mine-workers employed at the

3. P. Alexander, “Industrial Conflict, Race and the South African State, 1939-1948.” PhD thesis, University of London, 1984.

4. T.D. Moodie & V. Ndatshe, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994), pp 1-2.

5. Moodie & Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*, p 2.

Messina mines. However, their request was rejected. Management indicated that the government would never agree to such a proposal.

Two major instruments were used to wipe out labour dissent. Suspected trouble-makers were either given a three months' notice of termination of service, or after the expiry of their labour contracts, their application for the renewal of their service contracts were rejected. This intimidation of mine-workers created the impression that the mining company had a satisfied labour force. However, in reality there were a number of deep-seated grievances among the workers. It was against this background that on 26 October 1943, the Messina mining company experienced its second major labour unrest.

The strike of October 1943 could probably have been avoided if mine management had not disregarded several events on its mining property. Firstly, on 17 August 1943, a petition signed by twenty-four African clerical staff members, four lorry drivers and several leading *boss boys* was submitted to the management office of the chief compound manager, Major R. John. The petitioners urged that wages of all mine employees should be determined by their educational background, experience and value to the mining company. In other words, they were against the application of the colour bar in employment opportunities, conditions of service and wage structures. They maintained that improved wage payments would go a long way to better their health and home environment. By home environment they meant the living conditions of their families in their respective homelands such as Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Mozambique, as well as the Soutpansberg in the Transvaal. They also complained that price increases of most basic food commodities had seriously undermined their already downgraded standard of living.⁶

As the African mine-workers' wage grievances increased and their attempts to secure wage increases, and to improve their economic and social positions, were met with repeated failure and repression, they became more militant. Their actions were broadened to focus upon the structure of oppression and exploitation embodied in the pass system, the contract system, the compound system, the recruiting system and the wage minimisation system which served to ensure the powerlessness and exploitation of the workers.

The petition was a clear signal that the African mine-workers who had limited access to management on issues which affected them,

6. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, Petition for better wages, 17 August 1943.

desperately needed some forum to air their grievances to the mine officials. For this reason they pleaded in the petition not to be regarded as agitators or disloyal employees of the company.⁷ Although the chief compound manager submitted the petition to the local directors of the company, an attempt was not immediately made to report back to the petitioners. According to A. Manthata, a clerk at the time office at Messina Number 5 Shaft between 1941 and 1960, this attitude created the impression that their pleas had fallen on deaf ears. As a result, the petitioners became disgruntled with management and embarked on a campaign to gain the support of other mine-workers in order to urge for improved wages.⁸

The second event was the arrival of Reverend Keith Nkabindi on the scene. Nkabindi, a preacher of the Methodist Church on the Witwatersrand, had joined the South African Communist Party (SACP) and later became an activist of the African Mine Workers Union (AMWU). It was in this capacity that he was deployed to the Soutpansberg district to help set up branches of the SACP and AMWU. Attracted by the teachings of Nkabindi, the Messina African clerical staff recruited him in March 1943 to take charge of the night school in Messina. Besides teaching his students subjects such as arithmetic, English, history and geography, Nkabindi also exposed them to the political ideology of the SACP and the work of the AMWU. The night school was established with the support of the chief compound manager, who was, of course, not aware of the role of Nkabindi within the SACP and AMWU. Half of Nkabindi's monthly salary of £4.10.0 was paid by the Messina mining company. The other half was paid by workers who attended the night school. In addition, the company also provided the night school teacher with free accommodation in the married quarters of its property, free food rations and a few huts which served as classrooms.⁹

Nkabindi's night school soon became popular, to the extent that even those who were initially sceptical about the need for night school lessons, also enrolled. M. Monnakgotla, an underground *machine boy* at the Number 5 Shaft and one of those who became students of Nkabindi, maintains that the interest in the night school even spread to underground and surface workers, especially those who had attended elementary

7. SANA: TAB: 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, Petition for better wages, 17 August 1943.

8. Interview with A. Manthata, interview conducted in English, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.

9. SANA: TAB: NTS 7686 186/332, Volume 2, Incidents leading up to the strike, 6 November 1943.

education under various missionary societies in Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.¹⁰

Nkabindi was aware of the human and economic exploitation of the African workers by the mining company. For this reason he did not limit his teachings to the prescribed classroom study material. In his teachings, he also endeavoured to spread and deepen the social, political and economic consciousness of the African mine-workers. According to J. Phiri, who was a clerk in the underground mine manager's office, this knowledge was an essential ingredient for the potential formation of a united workers' movement against the mine management.¹¹

Workers were taught that there would always be a clash of interests between the capitalist class (mine management) and working class. They were exhorted to seek better wages, security of employment and an opportunity to advance in life. Nkabindi warned the workers that the mine management would not entertain their demands positively without being subjected to sustained pressure. Instead, management would always strive to improve mechanisms of exploiting the means of production (in other words the mine-workers) to make maximal profits. Nkabindi constantly referred to practical examples of collective worker action by referring to the wage increments and better working conditions which were enjoyed by the white mine-workers at the Messina copper mines. He maintained that these gains were a direct result of the pressure of the South African Mineworkers' Union (SAMWU) on the Messina mining company. Manthata maintains that these lessons impressed the African mine-workers profoundly.¹²

A simple comparison of the wage structures of African and white mine-workers at Messina convinced the former that if no drastic changes were made to their wage rates, they would always wallow in abject poverty until the mine management no longer required their services. To avoid this scenario, Nkabindi urged the enlightened clerical staff to take the lead in mobilising underground and surface workers to form a powerful trade union which would then effectively challenge the economic and political monopoly of the mine management and State officials over them.¹³ He reinforced his teachings by distributing publications of the newspapers *Inkululeko* and *The Guardian* among the

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10. Statement by M. Monnakgotla, interview conducted in English, Nancefield Location, 16 March 1996.
 11. Interview with J. Phiri, a former grade 2 clerk at Messina Compound, interview conducted in English, 11 May 1996.
 12. Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.
 13. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Incidents leading to the Messina strike, 6 November 1943.

literate mine-workers. Both newspapers were actually espousing the ideals of leading African political and trade unionists such as E.T. Mofutsanyana, G. Makabeni and A.M. Maliba.¹⁴

Nkabindi also referred to the Witwatersrand where African mine-workers on the gold-mines were calling through their leaders upon the government to amend the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 in order to give African workers the same rights as white workers. The government, which supported the mining industry for financial and political reasons, was, however, not willing to grant African trade unions recognition.¹⁵ This attitude of the government was not accidental. Like mining companies, the government wanted to subject African workers to perpetual economic exploitation by maintaining the availability of cheap migrant labour which would always exceed the demand.

Indeed, the government had a long history of resisting attempts to recognise African trade unions. As late as 1938, the Minister of Labour had suggested that African unions could be granted “non-statutory” recognition. Following this suggestion, a conference was called to which interested stakeholders, excluding representatives of African trade unions, were invited. At this conference, the Department of Native Affairs made a bid to get control of the African trade unions. However, representatives of the South African Trades and Labour Council (SAT&LC) and representatives of Africans in Parliament rejected this idea and the scheme of non-statutory recognition.¹⁶

Again in 1940 the conference of the SAT&LC resolved that the government should give “trade unions of African workers the same rights as prescribed in the Industrial Conciliation Act for trade unions of European, Coloured and Indian workers”. Again government proponents sought to delay recognition of African trade unions by suggesting that European trade unions should be accepted as “trustees” of the African unions. African trade union leaders rejected the idea and stated that “trusteeship” smacked of exploited people. The African workers themselves knew their grievances as no European could.¹⁷

The question of whether or not to recognise African trade unions posed a serious dilemma to the Smuts government during the war years. Whereas African organisations demanded trade union recognition and

14. B. Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa 1930-1947* (Zed, London, 1990), pp 123, 129; Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.

15. *Inkululeko*, 4 December 1943.

16. *The Guardian*, 21 October 1943.

17. *The Rand Daily Mail*, 28 October 1943.

equality, the mining capitalists were opposed to it and preferred white supremacist supervision. The Chamber of Mines was concerned that even limited recognition would encourage the development of African trade unions, which would then spread to the mines. The Chamber was supported by D.L. Smit, Secretary for Mines, who wrote:

... it was in the interest of the State that mining costs should be kept as low as possible. In the event of the native labour employed in the mining industry becoming organised ... a probable result would be a substantial increase in wages, which would shorten the period during which mining could economically be continued.¹⁸

According to Alexander, in 1942 there were more militant strikes and “lost days” in South Africa than in any other year since 1922. This upsurge represented the most significant African challenge to white authority in twenty-two years. Probably as a result of this upsurge in militant strikes and objections by the Chamber of Mines, the government responded by dropping proposals for recognising African workers as employees and promulgated War Measure 145, which severely curtailed the activities of workers against their employers.¹⁹

In August 1941 at a meeting of the Transvaal African Congress, Edwin Mofutsanyana, a trade unionist, proposed the revival of the African Mineworkers Union (AMWU). The proposal was adopted. In the same year the AMWU was officially launched. S.P. Matseke was elected as president and James Majoro became the secretary of the union. The AMWU’s headquarters was in Johannesburg. Maliba, assisted by Nkabindi, founded branches of the AMWU in the far northern Transvaal towns of Messina and Louis Trichardt.²⁰

On the Witwatersrand, mass meetings of the AMWU were held at the Market Square in Fordsburg on Sundays, during which time mine-workers joined the AMWU. Recruiting membership compound by compound was not possible, because mine managers prohibited trade union activism on their properties. Wartime conditions such as inflation, scarcity of foodstuffs, the introduction of meat rations in the compounds and the announcement that cost of living increases would not apply to mine-workers as they were migrant workers, made African workers more militant.²¹ In January 1943, a wave of food strikes, not organised by the

18. Alexander, “Industrial Conflict”, p 152.

19. Alexander, “Industrial Conflict”, p 137.

20. *Inkululeko*, 6 March 1937.

21. B. Magubane, *The political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (New Monthly Review Press, New York, 1990), p 79.

AMWU, broke out at several mines on the Witwatersrand. “Wild-cat” strikes broke out at Robinson Deep Gold Mine, Langlaagte Estate and Nourse Mines. The mining companies and the government mobilised the police, who brutally attacked the picketers, arrested hundreds of African miners and crushed the strike.²²

In December 1942, the African Gas and Power Workers’ Union (AGPWU), whose members were employed by the Victoria Falls Power Company, submitted a wage demand of £1.15s a week. When the wage demand was rejected, the AMWU and the AGPWU urged W.B. Madaley, Minister of Labour, to refer the dispute to an arbitrator or to the Wage Board. In response, the government announced in February 1943 that the Witwatersrand Mine Natives’ Wages Commission under Justice Lansdowne would investigate wages and conditions of Africans employed on the gold-mines. The AMWU held meetings throughout the Witwatersrand at which mine-workers aired, amongst other things, demands for better wages, an end to assaults by white miners underground and the decline in the quality of food.²³ Manthata indicated that although the terms of reference of the Lansdowne Commission were limited to the mines on the Witwatersrand, the local leadership of the AMWU at Messina made written submissions to the AMWU.

Repeating the sentiments of the national leadership of various African trade unions, Nkabindi urged the Messina mine-workers to join the ranks of other mine-workers throughout the Union in pressurising both the bosses of the industries and the government to recognise African trade unions.²⁴ Information gained at the night school about the rights of mine-workers soon began to spread among the illiterate mine-workers as well. There were no formal mass meetings held for the agitation of the workers.

Dedicated compound police who played a crucial collaborative role in suppressing workers’ dissent were not at all impressed by the teachings of Nkabindi at the night school. More so, if the mine-workers were to achieve their “newly found” aspirations, the compound police stood to lose their enhanced social status within the compound community. Accordingly, the head compound police reported the communist propaganda of Nkabindi during night school classes to Major John. On 27 September 1943, Major John summoned Nkabindi to his office, read out a long list of his “mischievous activities” amongst the

22. L. Callinicos, *Working Life* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), p 112.

23. H.J. & R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969), p 570.

24. Interview with Phiri, Nancefield Location, 11 May 1996.

mine-workers and then summarily dismissed him from his teaching post. He was not given the opportunity to defend himself. Thereupon Nkabindi claimed a month's pay, in lieu of notice from the School Committee and this was paid by the mining company. He left Messina on 4 November 1943. At the recommendation of Major John, the Department of Native Affairs endorsed his pass as an "undesirable" in the Messina area.²⁵

Relations between the chief compound manager and African labour became increasingly polarised after the decision of Major John to dismiss and evict Nkabindi from the company. Some mine-workers tended to be more defiant towards the structures of management which were identified with Major John. Several incidents of violence against suspected informers were reported. However, the mine management moved swiftly to wipe out acts of defiance by giving the culprits two weeks' notice of termination of their service contracts.²⁶

The sudden removal of Nkabindi from the Messina copper mine by management in collusion with the office of the Native Commissioner for Soutpansberg was symptomatic of their deep-seated fear of any African organisation in the mining industry. Significantly the banning of Nkabindi from Messina served to sharpen the determination of leading mine-workers to seek justice. The seeds of dissent had fallen on fertile soil and the workers were determined to fight for their rights. The removal of Nkabindi from Messina caused Maliba to increase the circulation of *Inkululeko* and *The Guardian* newspapers among the workers in an attempt to keep them well-informed about efforts being made nationwide to obtain recognition of African trade unions.²⁷

In September 1943, apparently aiming to curb the growing militancy of the African mine-workers, Major John announced that the mine management was considering the possibility of granting all workers an increase of 6d per shift. At this stage no explanation was given to the workers as to how this wage increase would be implemented. The

25. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Report by Major R. John on Reverend Keith Nkabindi, 6 November 1943.

26. SANA: TAB: NTS 5124 234/313/C1, Termination of service contracts, 29 September 1943.

27. The readership of the two newspapers was largely from the poor working class. To reach this group, *Inkululeko* was sold at 6d in 1943. In an article entitled "Fighting fund", written by E.T. Mofutsanyana, it was revealed that it cost £2400 a year to print *Inkululeko* – £200 a month. Income from selling the newspaper was less than £750 a year, or £63 a month. The balance of the money was obtained by raising donations from the readership of the newspaper: *Inkululeko*, 4 December 1943.

impression gained by the workers was that it would be a once-off increase of 6d per shift. At the end of September 1943, when workers queried the exclusion of the promised wage increases from their monthly payments, the chief compound manager informed them that the mine management had not yet approved the recommended wage increases. He claimed that they still needed to make a detailed study of the impact which such a wage increment could have on production costs.²⁸

Then, on 12 October 1943, the chief compound manager announced that “the mine management had approved increments of wages only for clerks, compound police and *boss boys*”.²⁹ The wages of these three classes of workers were to be increased by an average of 6d, however, increases to maximum pay would only take place every three months in stages of 2d at a time.³⁰ If the aim of the mine management had been to cause divisions among the ranks of the militant African mine-workers, then they failed miserably in their designs. The immediate response of the underground and surface workers was one of anger and claims that: “We all work hard, but they [in other words, the clerks, compound police and team leaders] don’t work hard and yet they receive wage increases”.³¹ Beneficiaries of the announced wage increases condemned the mine management for this top-down non-consultative strategy and their failure to respond to the workers’ earlier petition. They accordingly informed Major John that the announced wage improvements, even if implemented, would not persuade them to abandon their struggle for better wages for all African mine-workers.³²

Because of the hard-line position taken by the mine-workers, the mine management decided to change their strategy to the wage dispute with underground and surface labour. On 22 October 1943, management informed its labour force that it had decided to speed up their quarterly wage increases with effect from the end of October 1943, by 2d, instead of 1d per shift, until the maximum wage was reached. In communicating this information to the workers, the chief compound manager chose a somewhat dubious channel of reaching out to the workers. He arranged with the head compound police to select fifteen African mine-workers who were considered to be bright and intelligent. As it turned out, the

28. *The Guardian*, 12 November 1943; Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.

29. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Informal Inquiry: Strike of Native Labour on Messina copper mines, 27 October 1943.

30. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 183/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, Incidents leading to the Messina strike, 6 November 1943.

31. *The Guardian*, 25 November 1943.

32. *Inkululeko*, 6 November 1943.

majority of those chosen were confidants of the chief compound manager.³³

Major John then explained the details of the approved wage increment to the fifteen chosen mine-workers in *fanakalo*. The selected representatives were instructed to explain the whole process to their fellow mine-workers. However, after a day or two, it became apparent to Major John that the wage increment concessions by management did not satisfy a great many workers.³⁴

It would appear that the wage increases offered, did not remove the general dissatisfaction about the wage structure among mine-workers because in effect it meant that those who had already reached their maximum wage levels would not gain anything. Of the 4 000 African mine-workers employed at the copper mines of Messina, Harper and Campbell, slightly over fifty per cent had already reached their maximum wages.³⁵ Secondly, because even those to whom the increased wages applied, notwithstanding the steps taken by Major John to explain the matter, failed to understand that they would only get the extra pay when their next increase fell due and even then the process would be completed in three stages.³⁶ Mine-workers who had already reached their top notch of payment were generally the experienced and skilled workers. They easily exerted pressure on the new inexperienced recruits to join them in defying mine management. However, Major John claimed that the main cause of the unrest was the propaganda of professional agitators and communists who were active in Messina.³⁷

Defiant mine-workers embark on strike action

It is clear that the exclusion of those mine-workers who had already reached their maximum notches became the immediate cause of the labour unrest. Late in the afternoon of 26 October 1943, the chief compound manager was informed by the head of the compound police that about 300 to 400 workers were having an illegal meeting in the compound. Upon arrival at the scene of the meeting, Major John was informed that the items under discussion were working conditions at the mine and the unsatisfactory wage structure. Joseph Matsapa, an

33. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Messina strike, 1943.

34. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Report by Major R. John to the Mine Secretary, 25 October 1943.

35. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Report by Major R. John to the Mine Secretary, 25 October 1943.

36. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Informal inquiry: Strike by Native Labourers at Messina copper mine, 27 October 1943.

37. *Inkululeko*, 6 November 1943.

underground worker, shouted: “Sir, wages paid to black mine-workers are intended to subject the families of the miners to perpetual poverty and slow starvation. We demand a living wage.”³⁸ John ignored him and instead reminded them that War Measure 145 outlawed all strikes by Africans and gave the Minister of Labour the right to submit all disputes to arbitration. Contravention of the measure was punishable by a prison sentence of three years or a fine of £500. However, because emotions were running high among the mine-workers, they were not prepared to listen to the chief compound manager.³⁹

At about 21:10, the mine-workers at the Messina mine-shaft, armed with iron bars and sticks, became more defiant and shouted at the compound police that they would not report for their shifts that night. Their chanting was accompanied by the beating of drums and tins. Attempts to pacify the demonstrators through the compound public address system proved futile. The workers went on a riot, smashing windows, burning chairs, and several compound police were beaten up. This situation prompted the management to call in the South African Police (SAP) to restore order. Towards midnight a certain Sergeant Jooste of the SAP and Captain Turner of the National Volunteer Reserve (NVR) entered the Messina compound with heavily armed men. The appearance of the armed party caused the rioters to retreat to their living quarters.⁴⁰

Under threat from some of the white overseers who were members of the NVR, some African workers who were engaged in the smelter section, power plant section, pump station at the Limpopo River and underground *boss boys* reported for work. However, because the mine-workers who were on strike were militant, they soon forced almost every worker to join them. At 06:00 on 27 October 1943, the mine-workers declared a general strike. Pickets armed with iron bars and sticks invaded all mine-work sections, assaulted those who had reported for work and forcefully compelled them to join the other strikers in the compound. The strike action by the mine-workers at the Messina shaft involved about 2 000 workers. The management endeavoured to keep the essential services going by using white employees.⁴¹ The strikers then dumped their work tickets in front of the office of the chief compound manager

38. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/322, Volume 2, Informal Inquiry, 27 October 1943. Language used was *fanakalo*.

39. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Telegram from Major R. John to Native Commissioner for Soutpansberg, 26 October 1943.

40. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Telegram from Major R. John to Native Commissioner for Soutpansberg, 26 October 1943.

41. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Strike of Native Labourers at the Messina copper mines, 1 November 1943.

and demanded the immediate adjustment of their wage structure as a condition of ending their strike action.⁴²

According to Joseph Matsapa (an underground mine-worker who later became a key witness before the Commission of Enquiry led by the Native Commissioner), there was no doubt in the minds of the strike leaders that if the unity displayed by white mine-workers through their trade union always succeeded in pressurising management to improve their salaries, then African unity in wage increase demands would undoubtedly also elicit positive results.⁴³

On the afternoon of Wednesday 27 October 1943, L.C. Liefeldt, the Native Commissioner of Louis Trichardt, arrived in Messina. His mission was to end the confrontation between the mine management and the striking workers. Unlike during the 1919 strike, the militant mine-workers this time refused to accept the Native Commissioner as a neutral arbitrator. Instead, they maintained that he was part of the State machinery which always supported the mining industry to ensure the exploitation of African workers as cheap labour. The Native Commissioner, nonetheless, urged the workers: “You must go back to work. You will get your increases of 2d.” To this prodding came a quick response: “Sir, we have been waiting for this for a long time. Now we are surprised that you tell us we will only get 2d. We want 6d. increase with immediate effect Sir,” to the applause of the rest of the workers.⁴⁴

Government mobilises police detachments

On the afternoon of 27 October 1943, the first detachments of police arrived from Pietersburg under the command of Captain L. van der Linden. Whilst the mine management and government officials were attempting to resolve the strike at the Messina compound, they received a report from M. Hutchinson, the compound manager at Harper Mine, which was about five kilometres from Messina that over a thousand workers were rioting and on strike there. The strike was clearly in solidarity with the Messina strikers. From the 1940s, the Messina mining company had provided its workers with a free bus service which commuted twice daily between all mine compounds. It was this transport service which the strikers used to spread information about their strike to all compounds. An SAP detachment under Captain

42. Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.

43. Interview with Joseph Matsapa, conducted in English, Nancefield Location, 12 June 1997.

44. *The Guardian*, 25 November 1943. The newspaper does not identify its source.

Van der Linden accompanied by the general manager and the chief compound manager hurried to Harper Mine to quell the strike. The response of the workers was the same: “immediate adjustment of the wage structure or no work at all.”⁴⁵

Whilst the officials were at Harper Mine, they received another message that a more violent strike had broken out at Campbell Mine, about ten kilometres from Messina. Upon arrival, the police and management found hundreds of truculent strikers at the headgear of Campbell Shaft threatening to wreck the plant if their compatriots who had gone underground at 15:00 were not hoisted to the surface. The strikers were armed with sticks, iron bars, spears and sjamboks. Once this demand had been acceded to, the striking mine-workers retreated to the compound.⁴⁶ When they were not served with their daily food rations, all hell broke loose. They attacked the compound kitchen and looted whatever foodstuffs were available. Compound police and several team leaders who were known to be harsh, as well as informers of the compound manager, were subjected to beatings and several were seriously injured. They were only rescued upon the arrival of a heavily armed detachment of the SAP and NVR who promptly arrested three of the alleged ringleaders. About a thousand workers were involved in the Campbell strike.⁴⁷

At all three compounds mine management and the Native Commissioner noted that almost fifty per cent of the workers were youths aged between 17 and 24 years and that they provided the most vocal element. It also became apparent to these officials that a small hard core group of men in their late forties were carefully prompting the rest of the strikers to reject negotiations with management and the Native Commissioner.⁴⁸ On the evening of Wednesday 27 October 1943, about thirty members of the NVR reinforced the SAP guarding strategic points at the Messina, Harper and Campbell mines.⁴⁹

On the morning of 28 October 1943, more police reinforcements arrived from Pietersburg and Pretoria respectively under the command of Lieutenant O’Brien and Major Van Staden. That afternoon a decision

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45. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, L. van der Linden to Deputy Commissioner of the SAP, Transvaal Division, 4 November 1943.
 46. Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.
 47. Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.
 48. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, L.C. Liefeldt, Native Commissioner for Soutpansberg, to the Director of Native Labour, 1 November 1943.
 49. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/322, Volume 1, L. van der Linde to the Deputy Commissioner, SAP Transvaal Division, 2 December 1943.

was made to end the general strike by force of arms. The chief compound manager received a list of alleged leaders of the strike at the Messina mine from his trusted compound police, who had carried out their own investigations. Then over 500 heavily armed SAP members entered the Messina compound and ordered all workers out into the open. With their guns aimed at the striking mine-workers, the police took 52 alleged leaders into custody without resistance.⁵⁰ At this stage, the chief compound manager echoed the utterances of the Minister of Native Affairs, Major Piet van der Bijl, by claiming that African agitators and communists in Nancefield Location had instigated the strike. He claimed that these “self-seekers” whose aim it was to be looked upon as leaders of the African people, exaggerated the grievances of the mine-workers and did all they could to create dissatisfaction and unrest. He scornfully implied that now that the strikers were confronted by armed police and soldiers, the agitators were conspicuous in their absence. The mine-workers were left on their own to face the consequences of their actions.⁵¹

However, evidence suggests that both the claims by Major Van der Bijl and Major John were unfounded and far-fetched. In the first instance, the strike of 1943 as a collective mode of labour resistance to capital, was more inclusive and overt. It was a deliberate attempt on the part of the workers to change the situation of exploitation, which had led to confrontation with the mine management. The strike aimed at achieving concrete improvements by way of better wages, rather than mobilising grassroots political support for any political party.

Relying on the support of armed police and soldiers, the Native Commissioner resolved to break the solidarity of the workers by ordering those who were prepared to return to work with immediate effect to step forward. A steady stream of workers went over to the “willing to work” group, until it became apparent that the movement was general and the strike was over. At this same “parade”, a party of over a hundred youths detached themselves from the others and declared that they were actually work-seekers ready to join the ranks of mine-workers if mine management dismissed the “wrongdoers”.⁵² The majority of these youths were later employed by the Messina copper mine, because the appearance of hundreds of armed soldiers and police had frightened many mine-workers from the Soutpansberg District to retreat to their respective homes in Venda. In the process they lost their possessions and wages due

50. *The Guardian*, 25 November 1943.

51. *Bantu World*, 20 November 1943.

52. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure A, The Messina strike, 6 November 1943.

to them.⁵³ The procedure of breaking up the general strike by show of armed force was repeated at Harper and Campbell.

Aftermath of the 1943 strike

Damage to company property during the strike included 72 glass panes broken, 6 metres of wire fencing broken down, 28 fire extinguishers and receptacles damaged, more than 5 000 kilograms of mealie meal destroyed, almost 200 kilograms of bread stolen and 12 bags of sugar stolen.⁵⁴ Criminal proceedings were instituted against 97 workers who were alleged to have played a leading role in the general strike. On 1 November 1943, the accused were brought to trial in groups according to the compound they came from and were jointly charged with initiating and taking part in an unlawful strike, or taking part in a continuation of a strike in contravention of Emergency Regulation Number 5(1), published under Proclamation Number 318 of 1942.⁵⁵

To prevent the possibility of a riot breaking out at the Messina Magistrate Court, a detachment of armed soldiers prevented people from entering the court to listen to the proceedings. Even the wives and relatives of the accused were barred from entering the courtroom.⁵⁶ The first group of 32 accused were from Harper Mine. The interpreter returned a plea of guilty, but at the close of the crown case, the defending attorney stated that the plea had been misunderstood and that what the accused had intended to convey, was that they admitted that they had not worked. They had been prevented from doing so by intimidation. The magistrate rejected this argument. Owing to time constraints, it was not possible to complete the hearing of cases against the remaining accused. They were remanded for trial at Louis Trichardt on 3 November 1943.⁵⁷

In sentencing the accused at Messina, the magistrate remarked that he took a serious view of their actions as they had been given every opportunity of returning to their work and had been promised by the Native Commissioner that their grievances would be thoroughly investigated. In persisting in their general strike action, they had not only caused a total stoppage of work on the mine, which was producing a strategic base metal for the war effort, but had also caused the

53. *Inkululeko*, 20 November 1943.

54. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure C.

55. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Strike of Native Labourers on the Messina copper mines, 1 November 1943.

56. *Inkululeko*, 20 November 1943.

57. *Inkululeko*, 20 November 1943.

government great expenses in bringing police and army detachments from Louis Trichardt, Pietersburg and Pretoria to Messina.⁵⁸

Of the 78 convicted mine-workers, 13 were found to be under 21 years of age and received sentences of 8 cuts with a light cane. The remainder were fined £9 or 3 months with hard labour. The convicted mine-workers were immediately discharged from the Messina mining company, which also recommended the immediate deportation of the convicted foreign migrant workers upon their release⁵⁹ (see Table 1).

Table 1: Territorial analysis of African mine-workers convicted for striking

Area	Number convicted
Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique)	39
Nyasaland (Malawi)	27
Transvaal	9
Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)	3
Total	78

SOURCE: South African National Archives: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure D, 18 October 1943.

Several of the convicted mine-workers had families occupying housing units in the married quarters at all three compounds. The Native Clerical Association successfully appealed to Major John to allow the families of the convicted workers to remain in these housing units for one month in order to allow them to seek alternative accommodation elsewhere. The concession by mine management on this issue illustrates that although the strike of October 1943 had been crushed, management would in future be willing to listen to some of the reasonable demands of its work-force.

Inquiry into the causes of the 1943 strike

Once the general strike was over, the Department of Native Affairs ordered the Native Commissioner for Soutpansberg to conduct an administrative inquiry into the causes of the strike, and to investigate and report upon the housing and feeding of the labourers as well. The Native Commissioner took statements in public from four African representatives from each of the three compounds.

58. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Strike of Native Labourers on Messina copper mines, 1 November 1943.

59. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Annexure D, 18 January 1943.

Joseph Matshapa, a Venda from Chief Mphephu's Location in the Soutpansberg District, was the first witness to appear before the Native Commissioner. Matshapa stated that he had been in the employment of the company for thirteen years continuously. For the first five years he had worked underground, earning £2.10.0 a month. Later he was transferred to the surveyor section where he earned £2.15.0, thus receiving an increment of 5s over a period of thirteen years of service. He also stated that he lived in the married quarters of the compound and during the first twelve months had to pay rent of 12s per month. Thereafter occupation of the house became rent-free. The food rations he received from the company was not adequate for his family. This situation was aggravated by food prices in the local shops, which soared alarmingly during the war years. He stressed that although he was against the violence which flared up during the strike, he whole-heartedly supported the general strike for better wages.⁶⁰

The second witness was Watch Kideon, a Shangaan from Mhinga's Location in the Spelonken District, who had worked for the company as a painter for 24 years continuously. Testifying before the Native Commissioner, he insisted that the high cost of living since the outbreak of the Second World War and the failure of the company to adjust the wage structures of African workers were the root cause of the strike. In support of his argument, Kideon stated: "... from Museker's store I bought the cheapest trousers at £2.15.0. Before the war, the same trousers fetched 8s. Although I do not pay rent for [a] mine house, I spend about £1 to £1.10.0 a week on food for my family." He maintained that he had voluntarily joined the ranks of the strikers.⁶¹

Ephraim Phiri from Nyasaland had worked for the mining company for 21 years and was now earning £2.15.0 a month. He stayed with his family at Nancefield Location and paid a monthly rent of 5s for the house he occupied and 2s 9d per month for water usage. To the best of his knowledge, the majority of mine-workers were not satisfied with their present wage structures. He urged the company to attend to this problem in order to improve labour relations at the mine.⁶²

Frank Meyambo was a Southern Rhodesian who stayed with his family in the married quarters of the mine property at Messina. He was

60. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Annexure A, Statement by Joseph Matshapa, 29 October 1943.

61. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Annexure A, Statement by Watch Kideon before the Native Commissioner, 29 October 1943.

62. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 1, Annexure A, Statement by Ephraim Phiri before the Native Commissioner, 29 October 1943.

appointed underground *boss boy* after serving only three years with the mining company. He ridiculed the workers for embarking on a general strike because he was confident that management would implement the promised wage structure.⁶³ The remaining witnesses all maintained that the basic grievances of the mine-workers were the failure of the mine management to pay them a living wage. In addition, promotions based on favouritism and the brutality of the compound police were cited as other causes of discontent amongst mine-workers.⁶⁴

The assertion by various African mine-workers who appeared before the Native Commissioner that the cost of living was too high, was actually confirmed by government statistical figures which showed that the wartime rise in the cost of living was over 5s in a pound. The mine-workers at the Messina mining company, unlike mine-workers on the Witwatersrand gold-mines, did not receive any statutory cost of living allowance per shift.⁶⁵ This was despite the claims by trade unions and welfare organisations that the actual increase in costs was much greater, especially for the lower income groups (such as those employed at the Messina copper mines). A preliminary report by R. Schumann, a statistician of the South African Trades and Labour Council, showed that in the Witwatersrand area, the increase in the cost of living was something like 9s 3d. Food prices had gone up by 10s to a pound, men's clothing by 19s and women's clothing by 21s 10d. Prices of all commodities were much higher in small urban centres like Messina, which were far from the Witwatersrand.⁶⁶

Leading enlightened Africans in Messina maintained that attempts by the government to impose price-control on basic foodstuffs were evidently not working. Profiteering continued and a great black market developed. A host of parasitic traders like Museker's and Limpopo Trading Store were making huge profits out of wartime conditions. The workers argued that the only effective response to this profiteering practice of traders was for the workers to launch a campaign for higher wages to meet the real increase in the cost of living – hence the demand for an immediate wage increase of 6d.

63. SANA: TAB: NTS 7863 186/332, Volume 1, Annexure A, Statement by Frank Meyambo, 29 October 1943. Note that other witnesses who appeared before the Native Commissioner, all alleged that Meyambo was an informer and was assaulted by workers during the strike because of this role.

64. SANA: TAB: NTS 7863 186/332, Volume 1, Annexure A, Statement by Frank Meyambo, 29 October 1943.

65. *The Rand Daily Mail*, 13 October 1943.

66. *The Guardian*, 28 October 1943.

A closer examination of the Messina copper mine wage structure for the African mine-workers between October 1939 and September 1943 (see Table 2) clearly vindicated the claims of the workers that there was very little upward movement by way of wage increases for the workers. The end result was that the majority, if not all of the African mine-workers, lived below the breadline.

Table 2: Comparison of African wages – October 1939 to September 1943

	October 1939			September 1943		
	Average number at work	Total earnings (£)	Average earnings (£)	Average number at work	Total earnings (£)	Average earnings (£)
Ore Breaking	757	1 545	2096	1052	2345	2229
Developing	43	86	2000	118	269	2280
Stopping	32	77	2406	-	-	-
Drainage	37	71	1919	52	116	2231
Milling	314	511	1627	338	683	2206
Smelting	153	279	2245	171	384	2246
Compound	131	277	2115	298	467	1567
Workshops	211	389	1844	263	536	2114
Drill Shop	24	56	2333	37	100	2703
Tramming	395	746	1889	527	1014	1924
Hoisting	64	162	2531	142	360	2553
Stables	35	42	1200	53	88	1660
Surveyors	42	76	1810	41	81	1976
Assaying	2	4	2000	3	6	2000
Draughtsmen	2	4	2000	1	2	2000
Sanitation	48	105	2188	62	175	2823
UD Workers ⁶⁷	99	214	2162	133	324	2456
Rock Drill	5	10	2000	5	11	2200
Sampling	19	35	1842	23	52	2261
Electricity	4	8	2000	3	7	2333
Water	2	9	3500	2	7	3500
Haulage	105	199	1895	83	167	2012
Timber	10	14	1400	14	22	1833
Transport	13	41	3154	12	45	3214

SOURCE: South African National Archives: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, 29 October 1943.

The Native Commissioner found no evidence to suggest that the general strike was engineered by professional agitators and communists as claimed by the chief compound manager. The twelve witnesses from the three compounds refuted the claim that the general strike was the work of outside agitators. The inquiry also found it difficult to establish a basis for comparison of wages paid to the mine-workers because of the

67. “UD Workers” refers to underground workers.

peculiar circumstances. Over 92 per cent of the Africans employed at the Messina copper mines were foreign Africans whose employment was restricted to the mine and surrounding farms.⁶⁸

The Native Commissioner found that the wages were considerably better than the average farm wages and taking the housing, feeding, medical and other facilities provided into consideration, they appeared to compare well with other smaller urban areas in the Union of South Africa. Although the Native Commissioner was of the opinion that there were no grounds on which representations could be made to the mining company to improve the wage rates of its employees, he nonetheless suggested that those labourers who occupied family housing units, should be allowed to do so rent-free. This suggestion was accepted by the mine management. The Native Commissioner also recommended that management should undertake to cook all food supplied to mine-workers. This would eliminate unnecessary expenditure on the part of labourers who lived in the single sex compound.⁶⁹

Because of the limited number of family housing units on mine property, some mine-workers had secured housing for their families at Nancefield Location. They now appealed to the Native Commissioner to prevail upon the mine management to subsidise their monthly rental payments. This would bring them on par with their counterparts who lived in family housing units free of charge after one year. However, the mine management rejected this request. They argued that such a concession could lead to a dramatic increase of workers living in the single sex compound moving out to Nancefield Location. This would decrease the company's control over its work-force.⁷⁰

Once the strike had been crushed, management and the government embarked on a campaign to destabilise mine-workers from reorganising themselves into any form of forum. This took several forms: those found guilty and convicted by the magistrate were dismissed with immediate effect; all meetings by mine-workers on mine property were prohibited; those who were suspected of having played a role in the strike but against whom no evidence could be found, did not have their contracts renewed upon expiry; unmarried team-leaders who had sympathised with the strikers were demoted, removed from huts and resettled in large barracks where there was no privacy; and some of the experienced mine-workers who had

68. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, L.C. Liefeldt to Secretary of Native Affairs, 25 November 1943.

69. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Informal Inquiry, 18 November 1943.

70. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, Informal Inquiry, 18 November 1943.

already reached their maximum wage rate were transferred to other mine sections where they found themselves under the supervision of harsh white over-seers. These strategies by the mine management, which were supported by local government officials, appeared to contain the work-force which had become militant.⁷¹ Mine management also beefed up its security system by curtailing outsiders' access to all its compounds. This was an attempt to keep out alleged communists and agitators.⁷² Nancefield Location residents responded by intimidating and harassing all compound police and suspected informers who entered the location for entertainment purposes or for visiting their concubines.⁷³

Conclusion

The 1943 strike broke out because of the refusal by mine management to accept the demands for wage increases. Although the workers' original demands were not met, there were a number of unintended outcomes. At the end of the strike, the company cancelled the monthly rental payments for family housing units occupied by some mine-workers. This was an admission that paying for this occupation was eroding the workers' wages. The company also undertook to cook all food supplies for mine-workers who stayed in the single quarter compounds. This reduced cooking-fuel costs on the part of the workers. On the other hand, mine-workers who were found guilty of engaging in an illegal strike, were convicted and upon their release from gaol, dismissed from work. Lastly the strike was bad publicity for the company. Both management and the workers would in future try to find amicable solutions for problems relating to wage increases.

Abstract

This article attempts to provide an insight into the frustrations experienced by African mine-workers at the Messina copper mines as a result of poor wages and service conditions. This led to a sustained deterioration in the social and economic position of the workers. Through a number of labour laws, the South African government had protected the mining industry from labour demands which were seen as threatening not only to the economic stability of the mining industry, but also to the mining tax revenue of the State. The article also attempts to prove that the outbreak of the 1943 strike at the Messina copper mines

71. SANA: TAB: NTS 7683 186/332, Volume 2, L.C. Liefeldt to Director of Native Labour, 15 November 1943.

72. Interview with Mashakgomo, Nancefield Location, 23 June 1996.

73. Interview with Manthata, Nancefield Location, 10 July 1997.

was a visible manifestation of a permanent alienation and conflict, a sign that the contradictions in the economic and social systems at these mines were growing and that the struggle between mine management and the workers was assuming a sharper and an irrepressible form. During the strike period, the government did not hesitate to use police and military force to compel labour to succumb to capital-State requirements.

Opsomming

Op Soek na Beter Lone: Mynbou Kapitalisme en Staatsmag word uitgedaag, 1943

Hierdie artikel poog om insig te bied in die frustrasies van swart mynwerkers in die Messina kopermyne as gevolg van swak betaling en haglike werksomstandighede. Dit het gelei tot 'n volgehoue verswakking in die sosiale en ekonomiese posisie van die werkers. Die regering het 'n aantal arbeidswette gebruik om die mynbou-industrie te beskerm teen arbeiders se eise. Laasgenoemde is nie net gesien as 'n bedreiging vir die ekonomiese stabiliteit van die mynbou-industrie nie, maar ook vir die belastingopbrengs wat die regering uit mynbou geput het. Die artikel bewys verder dat die uitbreek van die 1943-staking 'n sigbare manifestasie van permanente vervreemding en konflik was, asook 'n teken daarvan dat kontradiksies in die ekonomiese en sosiale sisteme by die Messina kopermyne aan die toeneem was en dat die stryd tussen mynbestuur en werkers besig was om 'n skerper en ononderdrukbare vorm aan te neem. Gedurende die staking het die regering nie gehuiwer om die polisie en militêre mag te gebruik om werkers te dwing om toe te gee aan die vereistes van kapitalisme en die Staat nie.

Key words

Compounds; labour; Messina copper mines; migrant mine-workers; mine management; Native Commissioner; South African Police; strike; trade union; wages.

Sleutelwoorde

Arbeid; kampongs; lone; Messina kopermyne; myntrekarbeiders; mynbestuur; Naturellekommissaris; staking; Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie; vakbond.