

AFRICAN ISSUES

Inside Mining Capitalism

This book was written as part of the WORKinMINING project at the University of Liège, Belgium. The project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 646802).

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AFRICAN ISSUES

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The Micropolitics of Work on the Congolese and
Zambian Copperbelts

Edited by
Benjamin Rubbers

 JAMES CURREY

This book was written as part of the WORKinMINING project at the University of Liège, Belgium.
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Cover image: Workers washing copper plates in a solvent extraction and electrowinning plant (photograph © Hérítier Amonda)
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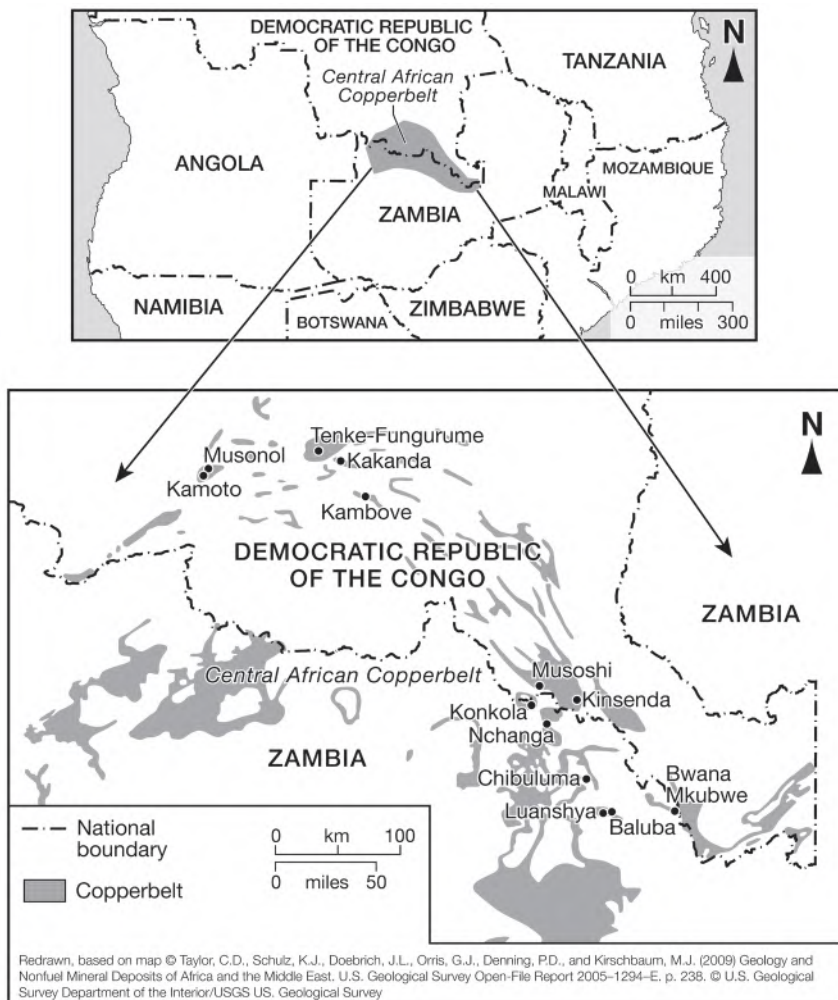
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ABBREVIATIONS

CNMC	Chinese Non-Ferrous Metals Company
CREG	China Railway Group
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Gécamines	Générale des Carrières et des Mines
HR	Human Resource
ICMM	International Council on Mining and Metals
MMD	Movement for Multiparty Democracy
MP	Member of Parliament
MUZ	Mineworkers' Union of Zambia
NRMWU	Northern Rhodesia Mine Workers' Union
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers (South Africa)
NUMAW	National Union of Mine and Allied Workers
ODO	Organisational Development Officer
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RAA	Rhodesian (later Zambian) Anglo American
RST	Rhodesian (from 1964, Roan) Selection Trust
Sicomines	Sino-Congolaise des Mines
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
UMHK	Union Minière du Haut-Katanga
UMUZ	United Mineworkers Union of Zambia
UNTZ	Union Nationale des Travailleurs Zaïrois
ZCCM	Zambian Consolidated Copper Mines
ZCCM-IH	Zambian Consolidated Copper Mines Investment Holdings
ZCTU	Zambian Congress of Trade Unions
ZIHRM	Zambian Institute of Human Resource Management



Map 1. Geological Map of the Central African Copperbelt. Based on map © Taylor, C.D., Schulz, K.J., Doebrich, J.L., Orris, G.J., Denning, P.D., and Kirschbaum, M.J. (2009) *Geology and Nonfuel Mineral Deposits of Africa and the Middle East*. U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2005-1294-E, p. 238. © U.S. Geological Survey Department of the Interior/USGS U.S. Geological Survey.

4

Union Elections: Marketing ‘Modern’ Unionism

KRISTIEN GEENEN AND THOMAS McNAMARA

This chapter explores the relationship between trade unionists and employers in mining companies in the Central African Copperbelt, and analyses the way workers perceive this relationship. To do so, it focuses on union elections, as it is during this period of heightened competition that trade unionists’ track records are discussed, assessed and finally valued or rejected. Our argument is that, although differences in union organisation on both sides of the border trigger a distinct electoral dynamism, they manifest similar power games, the same form of micropolitics of work. While on both sides trade unionists utilise repurposed discourses of union strength in their interactions with members, they are pragmatic in their dealings with management and justify this behaviour by claiming that this is the best way to deal with the Western and Asian managers that have been appointed since the mining boom in the 2000s. In their view, ‘modern’ unionism is primarily based on dialogue and conciliation, rather than on confrontation.

Far from being specific to the mining sector of the Central African Copperbelt, such a claim of modernity can be found in many places around the world (see Durrenberger 2017; McNamara and Spyridakis 2020). Botiveau (2013, 2017), for instance, has shown how the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa gradually adopted the workings and procedures of the companies it tried to fight, at the expense of a more militant stance. This copying of the bureaucratic system since 1994, as well as the adoption of soft rather than conflictual communication, was supposed to ‘modernise’ NUM as an organisation. This bureaucratic strategy proved effective in several respects for the union, in the face of the challenges it confronted, but also seriously deterred its members. This new unionism, it could be argued, is characteristic of our neoliberal area. As such, we may consider it an additional feature of the neoliberal labour regime described by Benjamin Rubbers and Emma Lochery in the first chapter.

The close cooperation between management and unions, however, is not as ‘modern’ as some may think. This conciliatory strategy – as well as the claim of modernity associated to it – has been favoured by state administrations, mining companies and some union leaders in Congo and Zambia since the beginning of African trade unionism in the 1950s,

and it has been immediately met by workers' own demands for a more confrontational stand. This observation calls for a more detailed analysis of the processes that shape contemporary union dynamics on both sides of the border. To do so, this chapter draws on intensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Kolwezi (Congo), Kitwe and Ndola (both Zambia) between 2017 and 2019. During this period, we followed union elections and electoral campaigns, attended union meetings, collected electoral materials and observed the ballot procedures. We also conducted interviews with trade unionists, managers and employees. Most informants were approached several times, and we spent a considerable time with them, including in their family environments.

Below we will first highlight the differences in the way union representation is organised in Congo and Zambia and point to the implications for the micropolitics of everyday trade unionism in the workplace. In the second section we show that, despite these differences, the moral discourses about trade unionists during elections are similar on both sides of the border. This is a parallel we seek to elucidate further in the third and last section, by focusing on the diverse means the management of mining companies use to control the unions.

Two Union Systems

At first sight, the dynamics of trade unionism in the mining sector in Congo and Zambia stand in stark contrast. In Congo, African unions have always been toothless (Poupart 1960; Banza, n.d.; Mangwaya-Bukulu 1970; Mbili Kwa Mbili 1970; Martens 1999; Butedi 2013). Although the existence of trade unions was legally authorised in the aftermath of the Second World War, their effective creation proved to be a long and complicated process. The reason for this slowness was that, in the view of colonial authorities, Congolese workers were not yet ready for the modernity of trade union politics (Poupart 1960: 59). Following a paternalistic approach to the issue, large colonial companies such as the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK) preferred to install *conseils indigènes d'entreprise*, in which workers' representatives were carefully selected by the employer, instead of autonomous trade unions (Dibwe 2001). While workers' representatives in these councils could make suggestions to improve living conditions in the camps, they were not allowed to organise the workers or to criticise the employer in public.

When, just after independence, trade unions were finally introduced, miners were slow to take part to the movement. A couple of years later, all the existing unions were brought together in a single union – the Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Zaïre (UNTZ) – under the control of the Mobutu regime, and all wage workers were considered as members. A check-off system was established to deduct their dues from their monthly salaries. Although the single union was occasionally used as a channel

to voice workers' demands, it was primarily a government technique to educate the workers, not a protest organisation (Banza n.d.: 133–34).¹

The political liberalisation of the 1990s saw the creation of myriad new trade unions. Today, according to the International Labour Organization (Cunniah 2010), there are more than four hundred unions in Congo. At least fifty of them – including about a dozen well-established unions – compete to represent the workers in mining companies and to collect their dues, which are still deducted from salaries by employers. As workers have no qualms in hopping from one union to another according to the prospects they offer, this competition is close to a free market. It has little to do with politics or ideology.

Across the border in Zambia, the union landscape offers a completely different picture (Parpart 1983; Cooper 1996; Larmer 2007). Like the Belgian authorities, British colonial authorities authorised trade unions just after the Second World War with the aim to channel workers' claims. Unlike what happened in Congo, however, the situation completely escaped their control. In a context marked by the presence of a strong white workers' union and the rise of settler politics, African workers seized this opportunity to create a union and defend their own interests. With its ability to organise mass strikes, the African Mineworkers Union, re-baptised the Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ), played a key role in the struggle for the independence of Zambia in 1964.

The dependence of the postcolonial state on copper revenues, however, encouraged assaults on trade union autonomy. During the Kaunda era (1964–91), MUZ was the only union in the mining sector, and its leaders were close to the ruling party. In contrast to their Congolese counterparts, however, they exercised only limited control over the union base. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the support of shop floor-based junior union representatives, mineworkers organised a growing number of wildcat strikes to protest against declines in their living conditions. They also joined, in massive numbers, the opposition movement which eventually brought Frederick Chiluba to power in 1991.

Similar to what happened on the other side of the border, the political liberalisation of the 1990s profoundly reshaped the union landscape in the Zambian mining sector. Neoliberal reforms removed the 'one-union one-industry' rule and shifted from industry-level to company-level collective bargaining. While MUZ had been the only mining union for decades, it was joined by the National Union of Mine and Allied Workers (NUMAW) and the United Mineworkers Union of Zambia (UMUZ) in 2003 and 2010 respectively. These unions, which have vague ideological identities, use gifts and financial services to recruit members from each other. In the course of the past two decades, they have increasingly attempted to use business generation as a way to mitigate the decline of miners' real wages: they set

¹ Articles about trade unionism in the Gécamines newsletter *Mwana Shaba* provide a clear illustration of this power rationale. See, for instance, Gécamines (1975, 1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1983).

up stores that sell essential commodities to miners on credit, or provide payday loans through a financial partner. They do so not only to support members and maintain their own financial viability, but also to support their own candidates during national government elections. Former executives of both MUZ and NUMAW have been elected into the governments of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD, 1992–2010) and Patriotic Front (2011 to present). When these officeholders headed the ministries of labour or of mines, they have focused on organising payouts for miners and mine communities when worksites were closed, employees subcontracted or salaries reduced.

The composition of the union delegations in mining companies reflects these differences between the countries. In Zambia, the three major unions have a union branch in each company; it consists of six delegates (the chair, the treasurer, the secretary and their deputies) elected by union members. Each company thus has three separate union delegations. During elections, unionised workers choose the candidates who will represent them on behalf of their union. When they need assistance, they will likewise address ‘their’ union. In Congo, on the other hand, twelve or more unions can be represented in a single company, and they are all grouped into one single union delegation (*délégation syndicale*). A union delegation is composed of a certain number of *délégués* (and their deputies) who represent different unions in the company in which they are employees.² They are selected from among the workers by a *permanent*, a union employee who supervises their union duties and participates in their meetings with management.³ During elections, workers can vote for a candidate belonging to any union. A remarkable consequence of this system is that, after having fiercely competed during the elections, the delegates from different unions are asked to work together in the interests of all the workers, no matter the union whose candidate they voted or to which their fees go. Similarly, when workers face a problem with their employer, they can request assistance from any *délégué*, even if they did not vote for his/her union during elections.

² The number of delegates (*délégués effectifs*) and their deputies (*délégués suppléants*) is proportionate to the number of workers at the company. At companies with 20–100 employees, workers are entitled to three delegates and three vice-delegates; at companies with 101–500 employees, they can have five delegates and five vice-delegates, and so forth. Thus, in a company of 3,000 employees, it is possible to find twelve different unions if each seat in the delegation is taken by a different union.

³ The *permanents* can be considered the equivalents of branch leaders in Zambia. In Kolwezi, however, *permanent* is only a part-time job: the salary paid by the union is insufficient and they must have other sources of income. During elections, the *permanent* in charge of the company decides the order in which the candidates will figure on the list. Only the first candidate is certain to get a seat if his or her union is elected. But sometimes unions proceed with the ‘harmonisation of the list’ after the election, that is, the rearrangement of the order of candidates on the list.

Both Zambian and Congolese delegates receive sitting fees for the union duties they fulfil. But the source and the amount of these fees differ. In Zambia, the fees are paid by the union, and the amounts are small. For a meeting between branch executives and shop stewards, for instance, the trade unionists receive US\$ 5, while for major events like national union elections, they are compensated US\$ 50 a day. In Congo, the sitting fees are paid by the company and their amount is usually more substantial. For the quarterly meetings, which can last several days, both delegates and *permanents* receive between US\$ 50 and 100 a day. For extraordinary meetings, which are organised by management to negotiate on important unexpected issues, the sitting fees can be even higher.

The way the union fees are collected is yet another major difference, one that affects the financial core of a union. In Zambia, where unionisation is a free choice, about 80 per cent of permanent pensionable miners are unionised. In Congo, although the law stipulates that a worker has the right – but not the obligation – to unionise and to adhere to his/her union of preference, in practice, many companies continue to apply the system of *adhésion générale* or general membership inherited from the past: workers are automatically unionised unless they inform management in writing of their wish not to join. However, only a very small number of workers bother to navigate the red tape and undo unionisation. The management of mining companies automatically withdraws the monthly union fee from the salaries of all unionised workers and divides the total among the unions depending on the number of seats in the union delegation they obtained in the elections. Unions that did not win any seats lose all contributions, regardless of the number of workers who voted for them. The only exceptions to this system are two Glencore subsidiaries, where workers are free to unionise or not. Interestingly, less than half of the workforce in these mining projects chose to unionise.

As a result, there is far more at stake during the elections for the Congolese unions than for the Zambian unions. In Zambia, income through membership is independent of the elections, which only affect the inner order: the election results decide whom gets which position inside the union's hierarchal structure. There is no financial loss, as the members pay their fees anyway. The only possible loss comes from workers who swap unions or stop being unionised altogether. In Congo, by contrast, it is the number of votes that decides whether a seat in the delegation is granted and, thus, a share in the totality of the union fees. The very survival of unions depends upon the number of *délégués* they have in different companies.

Unsurprisingly, the two systems trigger completely different electoral dynamics on the two sides of the border. Whereas in Zambia members of the same union compete to obtain a seat in the union delegation, in Congo members from different unions compete. In Zambia, the whole delegation is usually replaced after the elections but since the head office

takes care of the defeated delegates, this does not mean the end of their union careers. In Congo, if a union fails to obtain a seat in the union delegation, it loses everything, including its access to the company.

Electoral Discourses

Despite these differences between the two union systems, discourses during electoral campaigns are surprisingly similar; they are not that distinct from electoral discourse everywhere in the world either, for that matter. In Congo, electoral meetings take place either inside company buildings, following a schedule planned by the Human Resource (HR) department in advance, or outside, in bars and other venues. In the former case, trade unionists are impeded not only by strict time limits – with more than twenty unions competing, they are limited to thirty minutes per union – but also by the presence of HR officials which hinders the presenters from speaking frankly and obliges them to refrain from criticising other unions. For this reason, although these inside meetings are virtually cost-free, campaigning trade unionists usually prefer to gather workers outside company buildings. At these outside meetings, between twenty and two hundred people can show up. When the meeting is held in a bar, this involves spending money on drinks, but also on ‘transport’, an amount of money that always exceeds the actual cost of travel. As they are well known to most workers, the eligible *delegués* do most of the talking but the *permanents* also take the floor.

In Zambia, fellow trade unionists compete to obtain a seat in the branch of their union at the company. Zambian workers occasionally take the initiative to hear out the candidates, and call the candidates for chairmanship to campaign in their section well before the legislated campaign time. During the elections, members often vote on the basis of these preliminary and informal meetings. But other meetings are also held in bars for many weeks before the elections. Candidates speak to their co-workers, tapping into dissatisfaction with current union leaders and promising to raise wages and ‘be tough’ with management. They also stress their own leadership experience, often highlighting the time they have spent as scout leaders, church elders or volunteers.

The presenters’ aim in these meetings is, obviously, to convince the workers to vote for their union. In both countries, being an accomplished public speaker is a major asset. The scholarly literature has indicated the importance of the public performance of the trade unionists who present their programme to a crowd: clear and straightforward language is most effective in getting a message through, empty rhetoric and glib talk are pointless. The Railway Workers Union in Ghana, for instance, organised culturally inspired mass-meetings ‘with speakers trying to outdo each other in bravado’ (Jeffries 1974: 50; see also Jeffries 1975, 1978) to gather support from the workers, verbal skills and inspirational performances being crucial.

The discourse during the meetings touches upon different issues, some of which are double-edged. Take a union's track record, for instance. Some candidates put forward the long-standing existence of their union, which guarantees a professionalism that others cannot offer: 'just google our union's name' a Congolese *permanent* said to the crowd during a meeting to underline its seriousness. This seems to be the core cleavage in Zambia too. During a mass meeting in Kitwe, the more experienced candidates circulated posters that read 'We need Maturity and Experience' and 'Vote for Credible Leaders'. Echoing these messages, the Head Office representative preached: 'better the devil you know than the angel you don't'.

In Congo, it is not hard for well-established unions to bring down newer unions which are numerous and unorganised. During one meeting, Jacky, a *permanent* with an impressive track record, used vivid metaphors to illustrate how hard it is to cooperate with all the green trade unionists in a delegation:

They often just make a lot of noise, and although everyone listens to them, they do not achieve a thing in the end. Take two barrels, a full one and an empty one, and roll them down the streets. The empty one will make a lot of noise while rolling, and everyone will look at it, but it will have no direction, and zigzag its way down. The filled barrel on the other hand, will gently roll without making the slightest noise, no one will notice it, but it goes in a straight line right to its goal. So if you want to achieve something, you need very experienced unionists in the delegation, if not, you will not obtain any results.

Workers are receptive to such messages, and state that potential bargaining power is an important rationale in their electoral choice. At a post-electoral meeting in a Zambian company, one attendee explained why he had refused to vote for a younger man: 'I spoke to him and said, "you are a small boy, you are not a big man, the title you are looking for is fatter than you are, how will you fulfil your union duties?"' However, lengthy experience can also be tricky if the accomplishments of experienced candidates are poor. One Congolese worker stated that he would never vote a union that was present at Générale des Carrières et des Mines (Gécamines), 'just look at what happened to that company!' he exclaimed, in reference to the deep water in which it landed (see Rubbers 2013). To counter attacks from the experienced unions, the candidates of newly founded unions stress their clean and uncorrupted status and present themselves as 'a breath of fresh air' or deserving 'the benefit of doubt', to use the words of some Congolese *permanents*.

So the incumbent and the challenging delegates usually have conflicting discourses. Being a member of a delegation that has not achieved considerable improvements in labour conditions is definitely a drawback. In Congo, incumbent candidates who worked together during their previous tenure become divided while campaigning as they now compete among themselves. In these circumstances, some trade unionists

do not hesitate to pass the buck for the unchanged labour conditions to the fellow *délégués* of another union. In the words of one *permanent*, 'we failed because the other unions obstructed us'. The challenging candidates, on the other hand, get a free run at these meetings. They can afford to attack the delegation and cultivate an image as change agents. In Zambia, however, as the competitors are members of the same union, the head office attempts to discourage them from attacking their opponents. Rather, they prefer the campaigners to say nice things. A MUZ head office representative said: 'When you campaign, don't do politics, don't say bad things about the current executive, say what you will do. And tell the truth, don't say you will get a 100 per cent increment when we have never got that at Chambishi.'

The main topic during speeches and the Q&A that follows is the proximity of the candidates to management. While attending a meeting of an incumbent union, one worker asked out loud 'are you the union of Glencore, or the union of us, workers?' Challenging candidates about this perceived closeness to management acts as a strategy to undermine the candidates of the incumbent delegation. In Zambia, despite head office's instructions, those running against the incumbents can tap into a genuine stream of anger. Former executives claim that the current branch executives are unpopular because they do not communicate with members during the negotiations, instead 'they become very big when they get elected, they become like management'.

In both countries, this familiarity with the employer raises questions among the workers. Several candidates put forward their belief that the incumbent executives are corrupt and receive help from the company, either by being promoted past their station or by being offered cash. During a gathering in Zambia, a challenger mockingly proclaimed that 'As soon as we become executives, we will take that car', in reference to the car granted to the president of the union delegation. Indeed, being part of the union delegation or branch comes with benefits. These include not only attendance fees, but also a phone, call credit and a car. Whereas in Zambia, it is generally the union's head office that puts a car at the disposal of the branch chairman, free fuel included, in Congo, it is the company management that does so for the president of the delegation. On both sides of the border, the car regularly showed up in the discourses we captured during union campaigns. To the workers, it illustrates the proximity of the delegates to the management of the company, regardless of who granted the car. That a vehicle illustrates workers' remoteness from the union leadership reflects continuity from the time of industrial paternalism. Already in the early 1970s, one Zambian miner defined a trade unionist as someone he 'just sees move in a car' (Burawoy 1972: 79).

In Congo, where the mining company offers the car to the union delegation, this gift, or benefit in kind, could be viewed as what Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2001: 17) call an *investissement corruptif*, a favour that will bring a return in the future. A car enhances the grip the

employer has upon the delegation as it can be (temporarily) withdrawn as punishment whenever the delegates turn uncompliant. This is why Bernard, a Congolese *permanent*, is not in favour of this bonus. Ideally, he said, the union itself should offer its branch chairmen the car, as occurs in Zambia. Alas, it lacks the money to do so. Fully aware of the predicament it would put him in, the Congolese president of one delegation even refused to accept the gift. This was perceived by management as an act of insubordination and he was dismissed soon after. Most union representatives, however, show less aversion. When one union won the presidency of the delegation in a transnational mining company, the first thing its *permanent* did was to claim a car for his delegate, a benefit that had not previously been granted by that company.

In Zambia, the car serves as a way to discuss dissatisfaction with unions. It was frequently mentioned during informal conversations with union members. The chairman was constantly either using it or lending it to the head office and the members saw this as evidence that he was too close to the head office and to the company, rather than to them. Similarly, the *permanent* of a Congolese union explained why the incumbent delegation president failed to be re-elected thus: 'the car had aroused much jealousy, the workers saw it as a sign that the president was as thick as thieves with management'. When the election results were made known, the outgoing president had to hand in the car keys on the spot.

A 'Modern' Pact

In both countries, there is a long tradition of representing employer and employee as hand in glove. Unions under the Mobutu and Kaunda regimes in Zaire and Zambia respectively were already conceived as transmission belts whose aim was to educate the workers on industrial discipline and national development and, in return, to express workers' grievances to management. At that time, unions were already presented in official discourses as the 'partners' of the company and the government, which had the duty to act 'responsibly' – that is, to moderate workers' demands.⁴ Workers were frequently reminded during union meetings that their interests were not different to the interests of the company and the nation. This message was also conveyed to workers through company newsletters. A 1978 issue of *Mwana Shaba*, the Gécamines newsletter, stated: 'union representation involves the delicate mission of defending the interests both of the employees and the employer' (Gécamines 1978b: 10).

⁴ This alignment of unions with the interests of the employer and the state is characteristic of many authoritarian regimes, but not all (see, for instance, Nash 1993 [1979] on Bolivia and Von Holdt (2003) on South Africa). In liberal democracies, unions tend to defend workers more actively, even though their action is everywhere based on conciliation with management. By definition, unions are not revolutionary organisations.

Many actors in the union field seem to ignore, or to have forgotten, this past when they claim that the ‘modern’ trade unionist does not oppose management anymore, but collaborates with it to increase production, profits and wages. Both Western and Asian employers present management and unions as collaborators, not as opponents. This discourse enables them to posture as benevolent figures towards the workers. The manager from a subcontracting company went as far as to identify himself as a trade unionist: ‘the prime union is the employer himself’, he said without a trace of irony. It also serves to obtain the cooperation of union delegates and to keep them under management’s thumb.

This discourse is not only used by the management of mining companies, however. In Congo, many *permanents* feel that delegates should lift themselves above workers and avoid causing any turmoil. As one of them put it, ‘a modern union does not think with its muscles’. In his view, management should even have a say in the appointment of the president of the union delegation because ‘it is a very collaborative job, so the candidate must suit the employer’. By urging moderation and negotiation, the main concern of the *permanents* is to highlight the modern professional character of the union and to maintain the union’s access to mining companies. Indeed, many employers do not hesitate to tell *permanents* that they do not want unions with the reputation of being troublemakers.

Finally, union representatives can be called to order by state labour officials, who do not hesitate to remind them of their responsibilities. Immediately after the union elections, a Zambian labour officer advised the incoming executives thus:

Union negotiations today are about needs-based bargaining. We are not going to go to the management making demands, rather, we will present our needs. This is a modern system and we are now in partnership with management. So we must only go to the bargaining table after having increased productivity and we will see that the management will have to give us an improvement. We want a dialogue, a sensible one, not one based on unreasonable demands.

Of course, this discourse about management and unions collaborating on an equal footing does not deceive anyone. The president of the union delegation at a Chinese company in Congo explained that he was asked to address the Congolese HR manager as *partenaire* [partner], but that he was incapable of doing so: ‘after all, this man is my superior, and I cannot shake that image off. So I just call him ‘boss’ even if he consistently calls me “*partenaire*”.’ Unsurprisingly, talking on equal terms with the expatriate managers is even harder for him. From a strategic perspective, our informants had contrasting opinions about the opportunity to call executive managers *partenaire*. To most, being subservient to management is probably the best strategy to obtain improvements in labour conditions. Building on a well-established cultural repertoire in Central Africa, they do not hesitate to declare their

dependence on the 'boss' in the hope of putting him in a benevolent mood (see Bayart 1993, 2000; Ferguson 2013). The workers see right through his flattering discourse. Trade unionists and workers alike make jokes about it, and it certainly does not influence their behaviour during electoral campaigns. One informant, however, suggested that it is better to address the employer as 'partner':

I do it on purpose, this means that you will talk as equals, you do not put yourself in a subordinate position right from the start, and negotiating will become hard. You have to formulate your arguments very carefully, but beginning with 'partenaire' is a good start to get things done when you really need something; then you start the discussion at the same level. Even in communications by mail, it is better to use 'partenaire', for instance if you want to obtain some obsolete material (a vehicle, some batteries, an old fridge...) that the company is about to throw out. If you write 'madame, est-ce que je pourrais avoir...' you put yourself in a begging position, but if you say 'partenaire, ce vieux frigo me sera très utile...' you give him the impression that he is doing a favour to a friend by giving it to you, and this is what you want to reach. On top of this, the language use remains soft, not hard.

Not all trade unionists agree about the necessity of working in close collaboration with management. In the eyes of a Congolese *permanent*, such practices lead to unions that have 'lost all value, and even all sense'. He would prefer his *délégués* to keep their distance with the employer, but he acknowledges that this is hard to do, even physically. In some cases, the office of the union delegation is next door to the office of the HR manager, lowering the threshold and facilitating regular contact. The location of the union delegation's office at Gécamines is illustrative of this point. Previously situated next to the shop floor, a couple of years ago it was moved closer to the management's main building because trade unionists wanted to avoid what they called 'harassment' by workers. Some *permanents* do not like this physical proximity and advise their delegates to email their managers before popping into their offices; this is a matter of maintaining distance.

Some delegates would like to defend workers' rights more assertively. Being a vocal trade unionist is not without risks, however. It is not unusual for a union delegate to miss out on a promotion as a form of punishment, because he or she refuses to do the management's bidding. This is why, one Zambian head office representative explained, women with the requisite skills usually prefer to avoid union positions from the start, knowing it might hamper their career. In certain cases, a critical stance can become a pitfall: management sometimes offers trade unionists who fulfil their union duties with extreme dedication and expertise a promotion in order to neutralise them. To accept the offer, they must quit the union to focus exclusively on their new position, as the latter is incompatible with union duties.

Besides promotion, the money and the benefits trade unionists get from management also matter. Corruption is latently present on either side of the border. In both Congo and Zambia, the trade unionists receive sitting fees and travel allowances to attend negotiations in which they have very little bargaining power. After returning from a wage negotiation with almost no salary raise, they are often accused of corruption regardless of the truth of the accusation. This being said, the trade unionists themselves do not deny these accusations. In her book on the Zambian mining industry, Lee (2017: 140) notes that ‘some managers and unionists told me about giving and receiving bribes, even though both sides claimed that the money did not change their positions at the bargaining table’. In Congo, trade unionists openly talked about a corrupt practice, *le package*, when a fat envelope slides over the table at the fancy restaurant to which the employer has invited the trade unionists, one by one. In the eyes of the management, accepting this envelope inevitably means that the delegate will not make any claims and do all he can to keep the workers from striking. To the unionist, however, it is mere strategy. Some are expert at the game of *package*; they threaten management that, due to the harsh labour conditions, it is extremely hard to keep peace and that not only are minor improvements needed, but an extra envelope as well. Being a good trade unionist and a bribable one is not mutually exclusive.

To point out which goals are achievable, workers and trade unionists alike compare conditions at the different mining companies (Rubbers 2019: 14). Workers pay attention to the wage increases or bonuses obtained in other companies to push their union representatives to make new claims. It is often when these claims are not met that wildcat strikes break out (see Chapter 5). As far as trade unionists are concerned, it is first and foremost when they negotiate the company collective agreement that they refer to the agreements of other companies in an attempt to obtain similar labour conditions. Some trade unionists suggest that a collective agreement for the entire mining sector – with similar conditions in all mining companies – might be a solution, but the idea has not been taken up by the political authorities or the companies.

Nevertheless, today the primary goal of trade unionists is not to obtain salary increases for mineworkers. Confronted with repeated mass layoffs, it tends to be increasingly limited to saving jobs. As we show in the next chapter, trade unionists feel morally responsible for workers’ ongoing employment. Moreover, to the unionists, having saved jobs might guarantee a successful election outcome. This is at least what the experience of Didier, the president of the union delegation at a major company in Congo, suggests. Mass layoffs were threatened when production was put on hold for two years, but Didier convinced the employer to limit dismissals to one-fifth of the workforce and have the remainder work one month and take (paid) leave the next. In the following elections, Didier had no problem being re-elected and reinstalled as president of the union delegation.

Conclusion

Although the way union elections are organised is completely different on both sides of the border, the discourses of trade unionists and workers are strikingly similar. The workers perceive their union representatives as being close to management. Yet, this close cooperation is largely seen as business as usual, not as an anomaly against which workers should fight, and it does not really influence their voting behaviour. Rather, their voting rationale is based on the positive achievements of the incumbent delegates or on the popularity of their challengers. From trade unionists' point of view, working in close cooperation with management is the best way not only to take advantage of their function, but also to obtain better employment conditions for workers. Moreover, executive managers, union leaders and labour officials alike push them to adopt this subservient behaviour by presenting it as the right way for a 'modern' trade unionist to behave, especially when negotiating with foreign mining investors. In the name of the development of both the mining companies and the nation, union representatives are expected to refrain from asking too much during negotiations and do what is in their power to prevent strikes.

Not every trade unionist is pleased with this subservient behaviour and the control exercised by management on union elections. A Congolese *permanent* framed union elections as 'bogus elections', and one of his Zambian peers concurred, saying 'we have guided elections'. Some scholars argue that the privatisation of Zambian mining companies has diminished the power of the unions, leaving room for alternative civil organisations to fill in the void (Fraser 2010; Negi 2011). To be sure, repeated mass layoffs and the rise of subcontracting have weakened the unions. These new labour practices are not, however, sufficient to account for the power games characteristic of the union arena, which remains marked by logics of action that have a relatively long history in the two copperbelts.

Since the late colonial period, trade unionists in both countries have been pressured to act 'responsibly', that is, to not infringe on the interests of mining companies and governments by defending workers' interests. To maintain this cooperative behaviour, or to dismiss recalcitrant trade unionists if necessary, mining companies have since had various means, or government tools, at their disposal, such as sitting fees and other benefits in kind, promotion opportunities, or dismissing troublesome trade unionists for professional misconduct. Congolese and Zambian trade unionists have learned to deal with these constraints and to instrumentalise their dependent position to obtain personal advantages, to rule out competitors, and to win victories for the workforce. This is a pragmatic form of agency that is fostered by competition within the union field and that new foreign investors have to deal with. Of course, it facilitates their dialogue with union partners. It is not certain, however, that this is a very effective approach. After all, workers who are suspicious of senior union leaders can, on occasion, organise wildcat strikes behind their backs, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

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