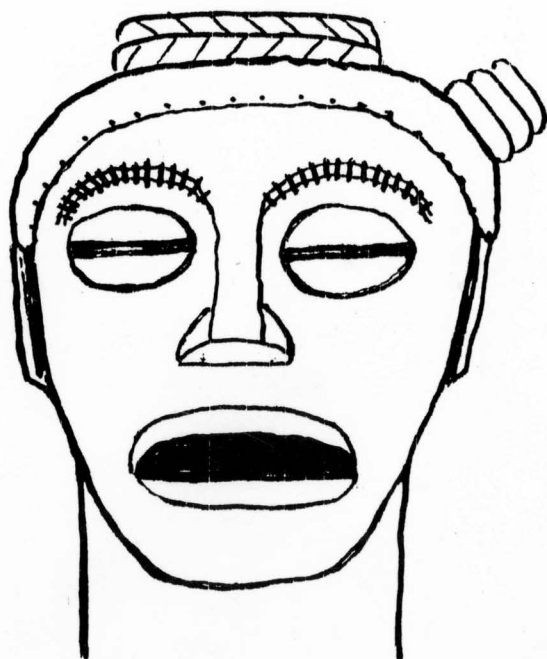


MILITANTS OR PROLETARIANS?

The economic culture of underground gold miners
in southern Ghana, 1906-1976

Don Robotham



CAMBRIDGE AFRICAN MONOGRAPHS 12



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with a foreword by Keith Hart

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Dr Don Robotham is Lecturer in Sociology and Social Work at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica (Mona). He obtained a Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellowship tenable at the African Studies Centre for the academic year 1987-88 during which time the Association of Commonwealth Universities made a grant to enable him to visit Ghana to follow up previous fieldwork. This Monograph resulted from his time as a Research Associate at the Centre.

J.B. Sender
Director

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Underground work is no good Oh! Is no good. True.

See: I lose my body all. (Miner, Tarkwa Goldfields, 19 May 1971).

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Foreword

Don Robotham's short monograph is more significant than its modest scope and tone might suggest to the unwary reader. It is a case study of class, ethnicity and nationalism in one of West Africa's few long-standing examples of industrial capitalist production. The history of Ghana's gold mines offers an important point of comparison with their better-known (and much larger) counterparts in South Africa. More generally, the development of capitalism and of associated class structures in Africa is illuminated by this example.

The issue is whether eighty years of mining has led to the emergence of an African working class in this instance. Robotham focuses on the question of class consciousness and concludes that it would be mistaken to suppose that Ghana's gold miners constitute a self-conscious proletariat in either a strong or diluted sense of the term. This conclusion contrasts with much writing on Africa by socialists who have been led by wishful thinking to assert both a powerful capitalist presence in Africa, and the emergence of working class consciousness as a significant political force.

Robotham's method is historical. He carefully charts the course of mine labour relations over five periods since 1906. The early colonial workforce was cowed into fearful passivity by an authoritarian mines management. The gold boom of the 1930s was the occasion for increased worker militancy. After independence in the 1950s, corruption and ethnic divisions were the main source of grievance. Today the miners show no sign of leading or even participating in any national working class movement.

This should not be surprising, for industrial capitalism has barely penetrated Ghana's economy. Almost two thirds of its population remain in a backward agriculture. The miners themselves are less than 1 in 200 of the labour force. Robotham's meticulous research into the miners' work conditions, struggles

and consciousness shows them to be realists. He suggests that their experience of society is a combination of pre- colonial rural structures and colonial administration, perpetuated by a nationalist post-colonial regime. Far from being ready to embrace socialism, they would probably be eager to be incorporated into a modern capitalist structure, if it were ever introduced to Ghana. The best framework for understanding their behaviour is the transition to capitalism, a process which still has far to go in West Africa.

This short account is part of a larger study based on anthropological fieldwork among Dagarti migrants to the gold mines in the early 1970s. The narrative draws to good effect on the personal reports given by the miners to Robotham at that time. The main innovation of this study is to situate this ethnographic investigation within a historical framework which allows the dialectical interplay of thought and action to unfold over an appropriate time period. There are many lessons to be gained by anthropologists, historians and political scientists from this impressive, understated analysis.

Keith Hart

University of Cambridge

CHAPTER I

Some Old Theoretical Issues

This monograph discusses the evolution of class relations and economic culture among the underground gold mine workers of southern Ghana over a period of 70 years from 1906-1976. It seeks to describe how the characteristics of the miners, mine work and mine life have changed over the years and to analyse how those factors have affected changes in consciousness.

In particular it tries to focus on an apparent paradox in the consciousness of the mine workers in the post-colonial period. This has been characterised by a high level of militancy and a very violent pattern of industrial relations in which a number of workers have been injured by the police. Most analysts of this experience have concluded that the workers have a militant working class or proletarian consciousness, even if only an 'incipient' one.¹

However, I attempt to put forward what appears to me to be a different view: namely, that the attitudes and actions of the workers, while without doubt having profound even revolutionary implications for the Ghanaian socio-economic and political system, were nonetheless essentially directed against the persistence of colonial and even pre-colonial structure and practice in the mines and the wider society. For want of a better word, the term 'colonial' is used to characterise this amalgam. Vacillation between participation in and

¹ Jim Silver, 'Class Struggles in Ghana's Mining Industry', *Review of African Political Economy*, 12 (May-August 1978), pp. 67-86; Miranda Greenstreet, 'Labour Conditions in the Gold Coast during the 1930s with particular reference to migrant labour and mines (Part I)', *The Economic Bulletin of Ghana*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1972); and, by the same author, 'Labour Relations in the Gold Coast with special reference to the Ariston Strike (Part II)', *The Economic Bulletin of Ghana*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1972); Piet Konings, *The Political Potential of Ghanaian Miners. A Case Study of the AGC Workers at Obuasi*, Research Reports No. 9, 1980, African Studies Centre, Leiden; Jeff Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles, 1870-1980*, Zed Books, London, 1984.

resistance to this culture and 'factory regime', to use Burawoy's important term, is the source of the social consciousness of the workers.²

Following Burawoy's analysis of the Zambian copperbelt workers, the argument is made that this outlook was principally directed against the failure to decolonise the mines radically. As such it was not an assault on capitalist relations of production and, for that reason, did not generate a *proletarian* class consciousness. It was an assault on the specific combination of pre-colonial relations and culture with colonial forms of capitalism which had developed particularly in mining over several decades and persisted in the wider society.³

These issues are of particular interest today because of the recent, and still continuing, large investment of \$ 200 million in the rehabilitation, modernisation and expansion of the mines by the Government of Ghana, the World Bank, CIDA and private Canadian, Australian and British interests from 1984-87. Under this programme expansion of output from the present levels of about 300,000 fine ounces of gold in 1986 to 1 million fine ounces per year in the mid-1990s is projected. This is likely to have the effect of considerably expanding the labour force as well as of altering the conditions of work and life in the mines of Ghana in the 1990s. In this context it is useful to take an

² For the idea of a 'factory regime', see Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, Verso, London, 1985. pp. 8-20.

³ Michael Burawoy, 'Another Look at the Mineworkers', *African Social Research*, 14 (December 1972), pp. 239-88; *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines*, Zambian Papers No. 7, 1972, Lusaka; and Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, especially Chapter 5, and page 81 footnote 112. There Burawoy wrote that 'the political circumstances of colonialism or apartheid in the nations of southern Africa facilitated the emergence of a coercive militaristic organization of work. It is interesting to study what happens to such a work organisation when the relations of political power between black and white are transformed with the attainment of national "independence".' See also, Charles Perrings, 'The Production Process, Industrial Labour Strategies and Worker Responses in the Southern African Gold Mining Industry', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1977) pp. 129-135.

overall look at the processes preceding this modernisation programme. How one evaluates the outlook of the miners is thus more than an academic issue.

Secondly, as is well known, one section of Ghanaian deep-level gold mining is very similar to that of the Rand. This is the Tarkwa complex which is a low-grade high-volume banket mine similar to those on the Rand although on a much smaller scale. Since 1973-74 and 1986 very important changes in the stabilisation, social and ethnic composition and skill levels of the workers in the Rand mines have taken place which are of profound significance for the traditional job reservation policies in the mines and for the socio-economic and political situation in South Africa.⁴

The similarities between Tarkwa and the Rand go beyond geology. In Ghana gold mining drew on many of the same rigid forms of industrial organisation and technology – a South Africanised Taylorism – and utilised black and white migrant labour. But despite efforts to introduce them in 1909, the industry there developed without either the influx control, pass laws or the single-sex male compound system of South Africa.

⁴ Fion de Vletter, 'Foreign Labour on the South African Gold Mines: New Insights on an Old Problem', *International Labour Review*, Vol. 126. No. 2 (March-April 1987), pp. 199-218. Alan Whiteside, *Past Trends and Future Prospects for Labour Migration to South Africa*, Occasional Paper, The South African Institute of International Affairs, Braamfontein, 1985; and, by the same author, 'The Future of Foreign Labour Migration to South Africa', paper delivered at a conference on 'The Southern African Economy After Apartheid', University of York, 29 September - 2 October 1986. Very important studies on this question have also been done by Pundy Pillay; by the Economic Research Unit, Department of Economics, University of Natal; by economists from SALDRU, Department of Economics, University of Cape Town and by the Centro de Estudos Africanos, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Mozambique. I am very grateful to Professor Francis Wilson for bringing this literature to my attention. See also Francis Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines, 1911-1969*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972; Frederick A. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold*, University Press of America and Dalhousie, Lanham, 1976; Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro*, Pluto Press, London, 1976; Charles Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa: Industrial Strategies and the evolution of an African proletariat on the Copperbelt, 1911-41*, New York, Africana, 1979.

Indeed, the system which has developed in Ghana is, in general, representative of the kind of mining organisation and experience also found in much of Southern Africa.⁵ An analysis of the Ghanaian case is thus of broad relevance to the rest of Africa. One very interesting question, for example, is the extent to which the Ghanaian experience can shed light on some possible problems which the workers in the mining industry might face in a post-apartheid South Africa.

This analysis, while pointing towards some of these issues, really seeks to discuss developments prior to this most recent period in the mines. Before we look at the material however, it is necessary to comment on some theoretical and empirical issues which will influence the analysis.

The first of these has to do with the concept of class consciousness. In general there are two differing definitions of class consciousness which are used in the literature. One definition, the minimum one, regards this simply as self-identification with a socio-economic group defined in terms of relation to the means of production and role in the social division of labour. A second, maximum definition gives the term essentially a political and ideological content: class consciousness is here regarded as the identification of a certain socio-political and ideological order with the interests of a particular class, in which the particular interests of the given class are regarded as expressing the general interests of civil society.

Clearly, what definition of class consciousness one uses is not an arbitrary matter and will have a major effect on how one analyses these issues. I adopt a maximum concept here and this perhaps may go a long way to explaining my conclusions. One consequence of such an approach, for example, is that

⁵ For example, there is still a certain amount of exchange of senior expatriate mining personnel: the current mine manager at Tarkwa Goldfields worked for over 20 years at the Roan Antelope mine in Zambia. See also the references to Burawoy and Perrings cited above.

class consciousness, being regarded as essentially a political and ideological matter, can never be solely generated by the class itself and by its local or national economic circumstances: it derives as well, as Max Weber long ago pointed out, from certain characteristics of the intellectual and political community.⁶

Thus a distinction necessarily arises between militancy and class consciousness – the presence of the latter probably implying the former, but not *vice versa*. As we shall see, this distinction has a particular relevance in the Ghanaian miners' case. Even after having made these difficult distinctions, it seems to me that it remains inappropriate to characterise the consciousness of the mine workers as proletarian, from either the 'minimum' or the 'maximum' point of view.

Another point on which it is important to comment briefly is the inherent limitations of a plant or sectoral analysis when discussing such issues. In their very nature, social outlooks are generated by forces broader than those which operate within the confines of a single sector of the economy, not to mention those of a single plant.⁷

Thirdly, and following from the above, the social and political character and general level of economic development of the society will seriously affect the specific features of a given class. In Ghana, for example, 69% of the population lives in the countryside and 56% of the labour force works in agriculture. There is a vast mass of small farmers, many of whom in the north are subsistence farmers, and who co-exist in complex dependent relations with

⁶ Max Weber, 'Class, Status, Party', in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1958. p. 184.

⁷ Clark Kerr and L. H. Fisher, 'Plant Sociology: The Elite and the Aborigines', in M. Komarovsky, (ed.), *Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences*, The Free Press, New York, 1957. pp. 281-309.

a stratum of rich farmer-merchants in the south and north.⁸

There is a large number of labourers in agriculture, but it is a moot point how many workers in agriculture are wage-labourers in appearance only. For many of them are farm operators, renting land on customary tenures, and do not produce surplus value. As far as the urban sectors are concerned, manufacturing is very poorly developed in terms of the level of the division of labour and of concentration, and is at most 9% of the labour force. A modern service sector barely exists and gold mining itself employs only 18,800 workers.

One is in fact today speaking of only four gold mines: Ashanti Goldfields, (55% state-owned and 45% Lonrho) which employs 11,000 workers; Prestea Goldfields which employs 4,000; Tarkwa Goldfields employing 2,400 and Dunkwa (the only surface-dredging operation) another 1,400. The latter three belong wholly to the Government of Ghana and are controlled by the State Gold Mining Corporation. They were, until 1988, operating under a management contract held by three major Canadian mining companies within the framework of the World Bank mining rehabilitation programme.

In other words, while class groupings exist, class formation, which some dispute exists at all outside of sectors such as mining, is socially and ideologically at a preliminary stage. This establishes an entirely different social framework for mining than that which exists, let us say, in Britain or South Africa and cautions us to maintain a sense of proportion when discussing these issues.

It is appropriate at this point to give some indication of what is meant by the concept 'economic culture'. By this term one is referring to the inner predispositions towards various types of economic activity which characterise

⁸ Kodwo Ewusi, *The Dimensions and Characteristics of Rural Poverty in Ghana*, ISSER Technical Publication No. 43, April 1984, Legon, Ghana, pp. 61-64.

the members of a given society – their 'natural groove' of economic activity. It includes what would normally be regarded as work ethic but tries to go further: it incorporates the favoured forms of economic enterprise, the usual forms of economic organisation, management and supervision (including patterns of the exercise and delegation of authority), division of labour, recruitment, training, promotion, operation, innovation, technology – the predispositions to the entire range of economic activity present in a given system, or in critical strata in the system, but with a focus on the enterprise itself.

The idea is that there is an underlying structure to these inner cultural predispositions (which is historically derived and rooted in economic and political relations and deeper values) as there is, for example, in the case of the political culture. Externals of policy and formal administration may change. Yet this economic culture will display a certain intractability and still incline broad strata to act 'naturally' in particular ways in the economy and so thwart or advance specific policy directions.

The economic culture will thus have the capacity to resist the introduction of new forms of economic activity and methods of work, either actively or passively. This will be so because these cultural predispositions operate locally and from 'below', while the new methods frequently come from 'above' or 'outside' and challenge the privileges, power and status relationships in the system at the middle, local and top levels. Also such methods, simply by being new, disrupt old routines. They really require different kinds of 'economic personalities' to implement them and, if they are to succeed, have to find a way to generate such personalities.

In the above senses then, it is being argued that the general economic culture in Ghana and the particular one in mining pose serious problems for the emergence of proletarian or any other kind of class consciousness in the

country.

The final preliminary point concerns the role of ethnicity, localism and regionalism. Given new force by modern economic and political processes and by the harsh economic and political crises faced by Africa since the mid-1970s, these factors have affected the outlook and behaviour of the labour force in important ways.

Notwithstanding all of the above, it is still of value to look at the relationships of workers in the gold mining sector by itself and the attitudes which these have generated over a number of years, and this I now propose to do. I will be concentrating more on the Tarkwa and Prestea area, rather than on Obuasi where the concessionary powers held by Ashanti Goldfields were great and gave them far more control over labour. In order to facilitate the analysis I will divide the period between 1906 and 1976 into five broad phases in which conditions on the mines and the social outlook of the work force have varied significantly. These phases are: 1906-24; 1925-31; 1932-45; 1946-57; and 1958-76.

The first phase is the period of the so-called 'Jungle Boom' – the beginning of the deeper shaft sinking and of the forced migration of underground labour from the north. The second is the period of economic crisis. The third is the phase of the 'Second Gold Boom'. The fourth is the phase of post-war stabilisation and unionisation; and the fifth that of economic crisis, Africanisation and political independence. Let us look at the first period.

CHAPTER II

The Jungle Boom

In discussing this phase from 1906 to 1924 it is important to remember that gold mining in Ghana considerably predates this period. First of all there are the numerous low pits in the area of south-western Ghana which remind us that traditional techniques of mining for the trans-Saharan gold trade go back at least to the 15th century, if not long before.⁹ Also modern large-scale mining in this area dates back to 1878, connected with the efforts of the French adventurer Bonnat. In those days there were no modern roads and rail or river transport was very limited. The equipment for mining had to be transported partly by canoe and by head over a distance of 50 miles up from the coast.¹⁰

In this early period also, the ethnic composition of the labour force was substantially different from what it later became. Data from 1904 for example indicate that as much as 38% of the labour force in the mines in this initial period were Fante, followed by 16% Asante. The Kru from Liberia made up 14% and the Yoruba 7% of the labour force. Thus contrary to popular present-day perception, the modern gold mining industry did not begin as one using primarily migrant labour from the north. On the contrary, in this initial phase slightly over 56% of the labour force were Akans from the south and south-west – the local area where the mines were located. The southern workers

⁹ T. F. Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, Longman, London, 1979, pp. 37-70; also, by the same author, 'Introduction: The Historical Background to Akan Gold-weights', in Christine Fox, *Asante Brass Casting*, Cambridge African Monographs 11, African Studies Centre, University of Cambridge, 1988, p. 4.

¹⁰ Geo. Macdonald, 'Gold in West Africa', *Journal of the African Society*, June 1902; J. A. Skerthly, 'A Visit to the Gold Fields of Wassaw, West Africa', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, No. 48 (1878) pp. 274-283.

were particularly well represented on the surface.¹¹

This then was the context in which the first phase of mining developed in the twentieth century. It was part of the same general process which led to the development of the Rand mines and indeed some of the companies and shareholders involved were the same. There was even a phase of the importation of Chinese workers in Ghana at the same time as the Chinese slavery controversy in South Africa.

Like the South African industry, the fortunes of gold mining and thus the size and experience of its labour force were dictated largely by global economic forces. In this period of the turn-of-the-century gold rush and the Boer War, the African labour force in the mines increased from 12,465 in 1905 to 18,466 in 1910. By 1903 there were already 29 mining companies with 87 mines listed.¹²

The number declined gradually during the First World War to 15,002 in 1917 and then collapsed to 9,775 or 53% of its pre-war peak in 1920. The emergence of Britain as a debtor nation and the movement off the gold standard in 1919, combined with the reparations problem of Germany after the war and the so-called 'gold famine', led to a further expansion. In 1922 the labour force rose to 12,140. But thereafter the effects of the post-war depression and of a severe financial crisis began to be felt. Many mines were forced to cut back, wages went down and the work force declined yet again to 9,135 in 1925. Thus after an initial period of sharp rise, this phase ended with the labour force actually being 3,330 less than it was twenty years earlier.

¹¹ *Report on the Mines Department for the Year 1903-4*, Waterlow and Sons, London, 1904, p. 30.

¹² *Report on the Mines Survey Department for the Year 1902-3*, Government of the Gold Coast, 1903, Schedule B, pp. 10-11.

The structure of the labour force must also be remembered. The point is that the majority of black workers (on average 60%) worked on the surface. This was largely due to the fact that the mines were not yet extensively electrified and were heavily dependent on wood for fuel. This wood not only had to be cut but also had to be transported by rail to the mine. In addition some mines, such as the famous Ashanti Goldfields, because of the graphitic nature of the rock in which the gold was deposited, were extremely dangerous and prone to collapse. Supporting the rock by timbering was essential. This too made great demands on timber from the surrounding forests and contributed to the relatively greater size of the labour force on the surface compared to that underground. It also tended to increase the percentage of the labour force recruited from the immediate area of the mine.

In the early years of mining then this 'fuel labour' (including loaders, stackers, line pickers and line maintenance men) was the critical group of workers on the mine, able to bring its entire operations to a halt.¹³ The mines had no particular difficulty recruiting workers for this kind of work since there was already a well-established local tradition of wood cutting and working, although cocoa, which was expanding at the time, pushed labour costs up. Where the problems of course arose was with the underground labour force, especially as the levels at which mining was done sunk deeper and deeper.

This is where the northerners came in. In August 1905 the Secretary for Mines sent an urgent telegram to Watherston, the Lieutenant-Colonel in command of the northern administration which was still not a civil one. Indeed, it may well have been significant that it was Watherston, the first Director of Surveys of the Gold Coast and the man responsible for the first

¹³ G. Keith Allen, 'Gold Mining in Ghana', *African Affairs*, 57 (1958), pp.221-240.

mines survey between 1902-1903, who had been transferred to the north.¹⁴ Watherston sent a military party out to Navrongo in the FraFra area (on the border with Burkina Faso in north-central Ghana) in November of the same year and cabled the mines that labour would be forthcoming.¹⁵ At the same time, due to the colonising activities of the French and their taxation and military draft policies, large numbers of Mossi, 'Wangara', Baule and other peoples began to cross the borders of Ghana in search of work. Thus began the long saga of the northern migrant worker in the gold mines.

These workers were specifically recruited for underground work. Between 5,000 and 6,000 came down in this period on three, six, nine and twelve month contracts. Initially, under Watherston, they were simply conscripted directly by British officers and force-marched south. For example, in May 1909 on orders from Watherston, Captain Warden obtained 540 men from the Bimba and Kubori area near Gambaga for the mines, using such methods.¹⁶

But despite all the military precautions only 254 of the conscripted men arrived in Tarkwa. On 27 June another 153 fled and by the end of June only 27 men from this batch remained on the mines. Using the same methods as Warden, Lieutenant Jackson brought down a re-supply of 162, composed of 62 Mamprusis and 101 Dagombas. They arrived on 1 July but within a week they too began to desert and by the end of the second week in July all had departed!

Later, with the development of a civil administration in the north and under Guggisberg, the recruitment system was refined to the District Commissioners

¹⁴ Watherston was, as is well-known, succeeded by Guggisberg who, also as Governor, went on to administer a major labour migration programme for the mines.

¹⁵ Ghana National Archives [hereafter GNA], ADM 56/1/3, Chief Commissioner Northern Territories [CCNT] to Secretary for Mines, Tarkwa, 8 November 1905.

¹⁶ GNA, ADM 56/1/5, Watherston to P.C. Gambaga, 3 May 1909.

instructing the chiefs (many of whom had been recently appointed by them) to provide a certain number of workers on pain of being fined or imprisoned or removed. The chiefs were paid 5s. 'headmoney' for each man recruited in the north and 7s. 6d. after the worker had arrived safely in the mine. The men were collected and marched down under military escort in gangs of about 25 with a local headman who was to have authority over them on the job in the south.¹⁷ Initially there were only men but in 1921 Guggisberg suggested that 15% of each gang could be female in order to encourage labour stabilisation, but this did not actually happen at this time.

The data we have indicate that there were almost equal numbers of northerners from British as from French controlled areas (19% and 18% of the labour force respectively) and that by 1924 these northerners together comprised 37% of the labour force. Data for six years later suggest that the ethnic groups from the north which predominated were those closer to the headquarters of the northern administration in Tamale and who were politically and militarily weakest: the so-called 'Grunshi' (that is, Issala and Kasena from the Tumu area) at 12% were by far the largest group of all Ghanaian northerners in the mines; they were followed by Dagomba (4%), 'FraFra' (that is, Tallensi and others), Builsa (from the Sandema area) and Busanga (3% each).

Thus again, the popular idea that the mines underground labour force was always exclusively northern and primarily Dagarti is not correct. In this first period, Dagarti, Wala and Lobi accounted for a grand total of 3%, with the Dagarti by themselves accounting for 0.02% of all Ghanaian northerners in the mines.

¹⁷ Roger Thomas, 'Forced Labour in British West Africa: The Case of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, 1906-1927', *Journal of African History*, 14. 1 (1973), pp. 79-103.

It is important to recall what the technical level of the mines was in this period. It has already been pointed out that there was little electrification. More important from the point of view of the levels of skill of the underground workers, was that there were no pneumatic jack hammer machine drills. These were first introduced in Ghana in 1925 and until 1932 43% of all ore was obtained without the use of such machines.¹⁸ The ore was obtained by means of hammering steel moils into the rock by hand. Processes later taken for granted, such as the hosing down of dust and rock, were still done by means of a can or bottle of water which the workers carried at their side. From time to time workers would take some of this water into their mouths and spray it into the holes, after removing the steel moils. There were no lamps. Light was provided by the workers themselves who carried two candles in a home-made lantern made of 'tinapa' tins with string through the top to hang them on the walls. As in South Africa, the 'hammermen' who did this work at the stope also were called on from time to time to do shovelling, timbering and other forms of semi- and unskilled labour. Black workers were not permitted to blast until 1935. They worked barefoot on a seven day working week of 56 hours. They slept in huts, on the ground.

How were they paid? The system was basically the familiar one of deferred payment which was used throughout the mining world in Southern Africa. While on the mines the workers were supplied with goods from the company stores. At the end of their contract, they were given a certain proportion of their pay, less the value of what they had consumed. The remainder was repatriated to the District Commissioner in the workers' village in the north who disbursed it to each man as he returned. One purpose of this system was to funnel some money into the north in order to entice more workers to the

¹⁸ *Annual Reports, Mines Department, 1925-26 and 1932-33, Mines Department, Tarkwa, Ghana.*

mines in the south and to foster a labour market. As the Secretary for Native Affairs explained in 1930:

The withholding of a moiety of the labourers' pay has been the practice for many years. The system encourages thrift, and the boys have at the end of their contract quite a nice little nest egg which makes them all the more welcome on their return home and, as Captain Ardron points out, such gives a fillip to recruitment for the mines.¹⁹

The proportions that were deferred varied: in 1922 in two of four gangs from Abosso and Abontiakoon only 22-25% of the remainder of wages was paid in the south. For two of the gangs at Prestea mine the figure was 50%. In general about 57% of all wages was absorbed by advances for supplies, although in at least one case this rose to 71%. Overall between 21-34% of wages ended up being paid in the north. This turned out to be below the original target set by the colonial authorities which was 40%. Wage levels for these northern migrant workers were less than £ 2 per month or less than 1s. 3d. per shift. Yet the workers had been promised a minimum of 2s. per shift increasing to 3s. 6d., one District Commissioner in the north complained.²⁰ This exposes another reason for the migrant labour programme: to reduce wages, especially after the war.

Managerial and senior technical positions were of course reserved for whites, and supervisory and skilled labour the preserve of so-called 'second-class Europeans'. Semi-skilled and clerical labour on the surface was for southerners, and unskilled manual labour underground – the lowest of the low in the then existing Gold Coast colonial mining hierarchy – was the lot of the black population from the north.

¹⁹ GNA, CSO 1358/30/7 Secretary for Native Affairs to Colonial Secretary, Accra, 11 September 1930.

²⁰ GNA, ADM 56/1/256, H.C. Branch, Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, to CCNT, 18 October 1922.

An unusually rigid hierarchy of authority was established in the workplace, in which physical and verbal abuse, corporal punishment and fines were common as forms of labour discipline.²¹ All of this was reinforced by the segregated living arrangements of the different groups: bungalows for the 'masters' and huts for the 'boys'. It is in this period that the basic colonial structure of work and authority and some of the fundamental features of the economic culture in the mine, were established.

In other words, in this period we are dealing with migrant underground workers who are doing unskilled general labour in the mines; who are by and large experiencing underground labour for the first time; who are working in forced labour on very short contracts in a rigidly authoritarian work organisation; who receive very low pay, large parts of which are deferred; and some of whom, at the end of the contract, are repatriated to their villages in the north.

But because at this time the majority of the labour was not migrant, or where migrant, not indentured, the entire system of residence which the workers experienced was different from that in Southern Africa. There were already in existence mining villages and communities which did not fall under the control of the mining authorities. Moreover, despite the drafting of a Mines Labour Ordinance, with its own Certificate of Registration based on the Native Identification Labour Passport of South Africa and with proposals for a Native Labour Bureau in 1909, in the end no compound and pass law systems were established.²²

²¹ GNA Tamale, ADM 1/23 Sub-Enclosure 2 to Enclosure 10, Gold Coast Confidential, 30 October 1909.

²² GNA Tamale, ADM 1/24, 'Extract from Notes of a Meeting with the Wasaw District Mine Managers' Association held at Tarkwa, 19 May 1904', and 'Sir John Roger to the Rt. Hon., the Earl of Crewe, K.G., 30 October 1909.' Enclosure 15 in Gold Coast Confidential, 30 October 1909.

Thus although every effort was made by the mines to segregate the Ghanaian northern workers by ethnic group and to contain them within the official mines villages and to appoint a 'Zongo manager' to control the 'unofficial' village, the northern workers so housed were a minority of the total work force which remained outside of this system of control. From the very beginning many workers lived on the mines with their wives and children, unlike the single-sex compounds of South Africa.

Typical was the situation at Tarkwa where, apart from the European area on the hills (Senior Staff segregated from 'second-class European' on a higher hill), there was both a mines camp as well as a so-called 'native village' on the lowlands. In the mines camp, the population was estimated at 6,000 in 1910 but only 2,500 were registered on the books of Taquah mine as employees. Several workers lived in the 'native town.'

Many colonial reports of the 1920s deplore the growth of communities in the mines,

where the population of private persons, who have no direct connection with the Mining Industry and who have leased sites and built houses at their own expense exceeds, in some cases greatly exceeds, the population of private persons actually employed in the Mines.²³

Sir William Simpson himself, in his second Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Mines in 1924, gave a detailed account of the polluted water supplies and the filthy sanitation in the swamp-like conditions of Tarkwa and provided this description of Abbontiakoon compound, presently adjacent to Tarkwa Goldfields:

The Abbontiakoon Compound in which the Northern Territory men have been housed is about 350' in length and 150' in width. It is a large enclosure open at one end, having on three sides a continuous line of huts

²³ GNA, ADM 56/1/383, J.C. Maxwell, Officer Administering the Government, to the Rt. Hon., L. S. Amery, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies, 3 November 1925.

with a central line of huts jutting out near the middle. The floors are of earth and not prepared by hardening. There are no beds, and there is a general absence of light and air. They are occupied by Northern Territory men, who in their own are agriculturalists, and however bad their own houses may be, they are at least for many hours of the day in their fields with plenty of air and sunlight. It is absolutely essential that these huts should be remodelled and made healthy.²⁴

At Fanti mines where 'back-to-back' huts had been built by the mines and rented at 2s. 6d. per month, these were described as 'mean hovels built of wattle and daub and roofed with plantain leaves'. At Prestea, later to be regarded as a 'model mining village in the tropics',²⁵ the mines village of 9,000 (work force about 2,000) is described as having been allowed to mushroom in the usual way 'and the result is a crowded insanitary area'.²⁶ A yellow fever epidemic broke out in 1910 and mortality from this and other causes was very high, reaching 10% in Tarkwa in 1924 and leading to the suspension of migrant labour indentureship.²⁷

The interesting question is: what was the reaction of the underground workers to these conditions? Although strike action by Kru and other workers went back to the nineteenth century, there is little evidence that this was the prevailing form of action in this period. On the contrary the main response was that of fear. As one Provincial Commissioner noted in 1923:

²⁴ Sir William Simpson, *A Report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the Sanitary Conditions of the Mines and Mining Villages in the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, Crown Agents for the Colonies, London, 1925.

²⁵ Walter E. Masters, 'A Model Mining Village in the Tropics', *The Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, Vol. XXII, No. 10, 15 May 1919. pp. 89-93.

²⁶ Dr Thos. E. Rice, 'A Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Certain Mines in the Gold Coast Colony and Ashanti.' GNA Africa No. 966 Confidential, No. 9, 'Medical and Sanitary Matters in Tropical Africa,' November 1911.

²⁷ W.A. Simpson, *Sanitary Matters in Various West African Colonies and the Outbreak of Plague in the Gold Coast*, (London, HMSO, 1909); Sir William Simpson, *A Report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the Sanitary Conditions of the Mines and Mining Villages in the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, (London, HMSO, 1925).

25 labourers sent to the mines. It is most difficult to get men to go down to the mines, so many men have now come back and told their brothers about the large hole in the ground that I feel sure the time is coming when men will not volunteer. They don't mind work but they are undoubtedly frightened to death at the idea of going underground ...

The C.C. & Actg. D.C. motored to Demon and had two hours of fishing but with no luck, afterwards five repatriated mine boys were interviewed, they all told the same story about their fear of the big hole ...

To Kutiga via Botuvo, all the people met except those men that ran away from the mine labour gang; I had a long talk with these people about labour & they all say they are afraid of the large hole in the ground, there is in my opinion, quite a lot in what they say, also of course their dislike of going down south when they have all they want here ...

The number of labourers that die at the Mines is very considerable, recently four names have been sent here with a request that the next of kin be paid the amounts due to each. Getting these men, the news quickly spreads all over the district & I am afraid that any future recruiting would be difficult. At least fifteen have died from here within the last year ...

Another labourer died at the mines, £ 8 10s. 7d. for next of kin. I hope I am not asked to send labourers to the mines.²⁸

The main form of action which this attitude engendered was running away, 'desertion' as it was called. For example in the case of the 540 men recruited by Warden mentioned above, only 254 arrived at Tarkwa, the rest disappearing at night along the way in spite of the military escort. Towards the end of the following month another 153 fled from the mine itself and at the end of the month only 27 remained from this batch. Likewise, of the 62 Mamprusi and 101 Dagomba men brought down by Lieutenant Jackson to replace the above run-aways, not a single one remained after a fortnight.

Sometimes the efforts at forced recruitment led to more serious incidents. For example at Uwa in 1925 as the result of such an attempt 'the war cry was

²⁸ GNA, ADM 67/5/4, Yendi Diaries, 1922-27. For further reports that 'they hate underground' see *ibid.*, Deputy CCNT to CCNT, 29 November 1922; also GNA Tamale, ADM 1/24, 'Report on the Northern Territory Labourers Employed on the Mines from October 1908 to December 1909', Sub-Enclosure to Enclosure 2 in Gold Coast No.11 of 5 January 1910.

raised and he [the D. C.] and two constables were fired on with a few arrows'. The villagers fled across the border to the French-controlled area at Po, but were returned.²⁹

²⁹ GNA, ADM 56/1/510, Quarterly Reports of the Northern Province, 1924-1927.

CHAPTER III

Economic Crisis

The situation began to change in the second phase, between 1925 and 1931. This period marks the first case of a serious riot by northerners and southerners on the mines, at Prestea in September 1930, in which a management party shot 8 workers, one of whom subsequently died. What led to the arousal of the workers and brought about this change in behaviour in a work force which had appeared docile or had hitherto seemed to express its resistance chiefly by running away?

I believe the answer to this question is to be found in the particular economic crisis into which the mines had been plunged in this period. After the war there had been a steady increase in the costs of supplies and machinery for the mines. The price of gold was fixed and the mines had little room to cut costs other than that of labour. This they proceeded to do but there were limits. The cocoa farmers who were rapidly expanding their farms at this time, paid 5s. per day. Also, there was no compound system and pass laws to coerce labour. Wages of shovelmens were reduced from 2s. 3d. to 1s.3d. per day; wages of timbermen cut from 2s. 6d. to 1s. 9d.; wages of machine drivers from 6s. 6d. to 2s. 3d., and that of unskilled general labour on the surface was reduced from 1s. 9d. to 1s. per day. But even after this maximum had been squeezed from black labour, there still remained a substantial cash flow and cost problem.

This partly had to do with the banks. They financed the mines on a two-weekly system of advances for operating capital. However this was rationed in proportion to the quantity of gold produced by the mine in the previous fortnight and consigned to the bank. Any accident or drop in production could lead to an immediate drop or worse in operating capital.

The crisis was such that every single mine in Ghana in the period experienced bankruptcy and reorganisation and refinancing, some more than twice (one, Prestea, four times). For example in June 1927 Taquah and Abosso Consolidated had to be refinanced as Taquah and Abosso Mines Limited, but on 9 September 1928 this, the oldest mine in Ghana, folded. Another case is that of Abbontiakoon Mine Ltd. which experienced a strike led by hammermen in September 1927, over failure to pay wages. Somehow the money was found and the dispute resolved. But it folded in December of the same year. In June 1928 it reappeared as Akoon Syndicate Limited, operating 'on tribute' [ore-sharing]. This also failed and by 1930 it had become incorporated within Amalgamated Banket Areas.

These developments are reflected in the figures for the labour force. During this period the labour force was cut by 41% to 7,165 workers in 1931. This was primarily a cut in surface labour. For example at Prestea the surface labour force declined by 55% while the underground work force actually increased by 19%. The mines tried to safeguard their key production workers underground. But those workers who remained were subject to sharp wage cuts and long delays in the payment of wages. The crisis was such that these cuts and delays in payment were experienced by white workers as well, though to a lesser degree.

This is the situation which precipitated a number of strikes at Prestea and Ashanti Goldfields in 1925, at Kayiankor and Abontiakoon in 1927, and again at Ashanti Goldfields in 1928. Events came to a head at Prestea in 1930.

To understand what occurred one has to understand the system of payment of wages which developed in the mines at this time. As a method of trying to ensure a continuous supply of workers, the mines had established a ticket system. Initially, under this system, a worker could not collect any pay until he had completed a booklet of 30 tickets, the equivalent of 30 days work.

However, this did not succeed in compelling workers to work for a continuous 30 days. Another system was then devised: this was not to pay on any complete booklet until the following six days of a new month was worked. If the last day of this extra six days fell on a Monday, then workers were required to work another six or seven days before collecting their pay. In other words, to get pay for the previous month, one had to work two weeks into the following month. Workers thus always had a minimum arrears in wages at the mines of two weeks.

A natural outgrowth of this system was the practice whereby the mine acted as a bank for the workers until they were ready to return to the north. Under these systems mines came to owe workers as much as four months' wages at a time. Clearly at the root of all of this was the liquidity crisis of the mines, who thus received involuntary interest-free credit from its workers.

The crisis arose when even such schemes were not enough to tide the mines over. Moreover, when this was combined with abusive behaviour on the part of white employers with a South African background (which had often been docilely accepted in the past) an eruption of protest was likely to occur.

Such a state of affairs developed at Prestea mine on Saturday 13 September 1930. It arose directly out of a failure of the mines to pay a majority of the workers who turned up at that pay day with full books going back to before 23 August. Able to pay off only 203 of these workers, the European timekeeper Best, himself owed a number of months salary by the mines, threw away the tickets of the unpaid workers and simply slammed the pay window shut.

Two days after this incident, on Monday 15 September, the underground workers on the first shift went on strike without notice. They used force to prevent other workers from going to work as well as to thrash blacklegs (the word used by the colonial officials themselves) coming up from the late

Sunday night/Monday morning shift. Despite the efforts of the underground and mine managers, the workers refused to return to work until they were paid the wages owed to them. However, in a meeting with the underground manager Brown, they were almost convinced to return to work when Best came upon the scene and immediately an uproar ensued and the strike continued.

Best left the site of the meeting and went to the village master's office to which he was followed and where he was apparently stoned by the workers. A crowd continued to abuse Best from outside the office which was near to the mines village and some distance from the shaft top where the European bungalows were located. After being held under siege in this office for some three to four hours, Best, who had telephoned several times to the mine management for help, was finally rescued by a party of armed European mining officials. While returning from the office to the shaft, they were followed and stoned by a large crowd of workers. After warning shots were fired and not heeded, members of the rescue party fired into the crowd, wounding eight workers.

Later on that night the District Commissioner for Tarkwa, who had been informed of the strike by the mine manager, arrived in Prestea. Early in the morning of the 16th police reinforcements also arrived from Sekondi. The District Commissioner, the Police Superintendent and the Secretary for Mines proceeded to hold a meeting with the workers and, after some negotiations, succeeded in persuading them to return to work. The conditions were that Best would be removed, that a portion of the wages owed would be forthcoming on the following Saturday and that a government official would be present at the pay-bill to see that it went smoothly. Finally, it was agreed that the men who had been injured in the incident would be given sick leave with pay until able to resume their jobs.

Thus by 17 September normality had been restored and on Saturday the 20th, 904 workers turned up and were paid in full. This was about four times the number paid on four previous pay-days and totalled 96% (£ 2,880) of all the money owed to the workers.

In the period of 7-9 October 1930 an inquiry was held into the disturbance (under the Fires and Occurrences Ordinance!). W. W. Kilby, the Acting Deputy Provincial Commissioner, Western Province, who was the sole inquirer, found that while the Europeans shot directly into the crowd, no single individual could be held responsible. He was unable to make any comment on the state of labour relations on the mine because no ordinance existed in the Colony at the time which specifically provided for the investigation of labour disputes. This in itself was a sign of the relatively low level of consciousness and activity of the workers up to that point. In the end the men who had been shot were awarded £ 210 in compensation by the company, acting under pressure from Lord Passfield, then Secretary of State for the Colonies.³⁰

Some disarming testimony by workers at the Kilby inquiry, gives us an idea of the thinking of the workers at the time. For example, Bedari Fulani, a hammerman, and leader of the strike testified thus:

Mr Best is unpopular because he doesn't pay us. We want to catch him because he doesn't pay us. Mr Best didn't want to come out of his house because he was afraid to face the people. The people had sticks and were making a noise. They wanted to flog Mr Best because he was spoiling the whole place. He throws away our tickets.³¹

This certainly represents a new turn in the outlook and attitude of the workers towards members of management. In a notorious incident of the flogging of a number of Mamprusi and FraFra workers in 1909, for example,

³⁰ W. W. Kilby, *Enquiry into the Wounding of Eight Africans at Prestea on 13 September 1930*, (Kilby Report) Sessional Paper No. 19 of 1930-1931, Gold Coast Legislative Council.

³¹ *Kilby Report*, Evidence of Bedari Fulani, p. 14.

there is no record of open resistance. On the contrary, it was only after strenuous private interrogation by the Acting District Commissioner that the workers were persuaded to name the European supervisor and headman involved.³² Now, 21 years later, the workers were themselves seeking to flog a supervisor.

Also it appears from the manner in which the actual strike was called two days after the event and as the midnight Sunday/Monday shift was coming up from underground, that some amount of premeditation and planning went into the action. A critical factor here was the nature of the Prestea mines village which was a classic case of one whose population way exceeded the mine's labour force and which had long failed to be brought under the control of the mine-appointed European village master. Many workers had family living with them in the village which they now had to support, in addition to family at home. The compound was the workers' base of operations throughout.³³

At the same time a number of limitations have to be noted. In the first place the action was a defensive one, a reaction to steps taken by management after a series of similar provocations, rather than a demand on management initiated by the workers as such. Indeed, Best had done the same thing more than once before with no apparent repercussions. On the day in question Best discarded 'dozens' of tickets at least two or three times before there was any response.

Secondly, it focused not on the level of wages nor the system of deferred payment, but on the 'abuse' of it. Indeed the evidence was quite explicit that

³² GNA Tamale ADM 1/23 Sub-Enclosure 2 to Enclosure 10, Gold Coast Confidential, 30 October 1909.

³³ See Barbara Jane Little Parpart, *Labour and Capital on the Copperbelt: African Labour Strategy in the Northern Rhodesian Copper Mines, 1924-1964*, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation Boston University Graduate School, 1981), for an analysis of the solidarity created in the compound in addition to the workplace in the case of the Copperbelt workers in Zambia.

the cause of the strike at Prestea was not an objection on the part of the workers to the system of payment. 'I understand from the District Commissioner, Tarkwa', wrote the Secretary for Mines, 'that it is the method of paying the native employees at the Ariston mine which is considered in some quarters to be the primary cause of the strike. This is not so, for the method adopted at Prestea is very similar to that in vogue on other mines in the Colony.'³⁴

Thirdly, it attacked Best and his immediate African subordinates Gariba, Blankson and Williams, who together were held personally responsible for the abuses, and did not attribute the problems to management as a whole. Prior to the incident Best had instituted a 'system' to detect fraudulent tickets: he simply seized tickets he thought to be fraudulent without any hearing or appeal of the matter. He was also the person who had instituted a system of intelligence gathering through the watchman Gariba and the other headmen. 'The introduction of this system', wrote Kilby, 'more or less coincided with the financial difficulties of the Mine, and it is conceivable that some workers may have connected it with the failure to pay their wages.'³⁵ One of the main demands was for their removal.

Fourthly, although 904 workers appeared to be paid on Saturday 20 September after urgent steps had been taken by the mine to secure funds, the estimate of the number of participants in the strike, siege and march by the workers at its height was 300-400 people. Even then, it had been necessary to resort to a deception in order to mobilise the workers: a rumour was spread

³⁴ GNA, CSO 1567/30/41, Secretary for Mines to Colonial Secretary, 29 September 1930.

³⁵ *Kilby Report*, p. 2; see also GNA, CSO 1567/30/27, E. O. Rake, Provincial Commissioner, Western Province, to Colonial Secretary, 20 September 1930, where he stated that 'the object of the first attention of the strikers was Mr Best the timekeeper, whom they imagined responsible for the withholding of their pay'.

that there would be a special pay-day on Monday and that the workers should turn out at the time-office to be paid, rather than go to work.³⁶ Still, unity had to be partly enforced by beating and intimidation of strike-breakers. The extent of vacillation was such that the strike was called off and on, no less than three times throughout the Monday.

Finally, it is apparent that there is a sharp contrast between the workers' hostility to the mines police and their generally welcoming attitude to the colonial police and to the intervention of the District Commissioner. Indeed, the action was not sustained beyond the day and was called off on the promise of the District Commissioner that full back pay would be forthcoming in five days' time and that some arrangement would be made to remove Best and company from direct contact with the workers. Perhaps the last word on the attitudes engendered by this period is best left to the Secretary for Mines:

The recent outbreak at the Ariston Mine [Prestea] has proved that the native mine employee has learnt the value of a strike as an economic weapon to further his own interests and the threat was openly made by the strikers that on the next occasion they would take care to be armed.³⁷

³⁶ Evidence of John Ahanta, Dixon Appolonian, John Edward Borsah storekeeper UTC Prestea, John Austin Forson general police, *Kilby Report*, pp.10-33.

³⁷ GNA, CSO 1358/30/34, Secretary for Mines to the Colonial Secretary, 18 November 1930.

CHAPTER IV

The Second Gold Boom

Such an evaluation perhaps proved more prophetic than its author intended. Important new factors began to operate to bring changes in this our third period. The key events here were the British devaluation in 1931 followed by the American two years later. This sent the price of gold up from \$ 20.67183 to \$ 35.00 per fine ounce. As a result output of gold in Ghana soared in 1930-31 alone by 31% to 218,494 fine ounces. By 1936-37 this had risen to 461,621 fine ounces, and by 1942 to 885,712 fine ounces, the second highest level ever reached by Ghana.

The first result of this was of course a very sharp increase in the labour force. By 1936-37 this had risen to 27,091 workers. It reached 39,952 in 1941-42, declining during the war to 24,589 in 1944-45. In other words, there was a more than five-fold increase in the mines labour force in this period.

The increase in surface labour was slightly higher than that of underground labour and the former slightly outnumbered the latter at the end of this period. It was also at this time that the mines labour force became predominantly northern, and that amongst Ghanaian northerners the Dagarti became the largest single group. For example in 1929 all northern workers (that is, including 'French') comprised 41% of the labour force. By 1934 they had increased to 55.5%. Of some interest too is the fact that the non-Ghanaian northerners (chiefly 'Wangara', Mossi and to some extent Baule, but also small numbers of Gurma, Zaberima, Kotokoli and Kabure peoples) increased to become the majority amongst all northerners and, at 30%, the largest single grouping in the labour force on the mines by 1934.

As far as Ghanaian northerners were concerned, the Dagarti increased to 10% of this group in the labour force, the Issala and Kasena together went up

to 14% and the FraFra and Busanga to about 5% each.³⁸ As a whole, these northerners became 25% of the labour force by 1934, declining slightly to 21% in 1939. The decline reflects an interesting side point: it was due to the re-entry of Asante workers into the labour force at Ashanti Goldfields, especially as surface workers (see Table 1). Because of its wide powers over its 100 square mile concession and the high grade of its ore, this company continued to rely on cheap 'fuel labour' until some time after the other mines had been compelled to extend electrification and mechanisation.

This brings us to the third point. In addition to an expansion and ethnic change in the labour force, there was also a sharp change in its level of concentration over the period. Despite the reopening of six previously worked mines, the development of open cast mining at Marlu in Bogosu North, the extension of operations to Oda in western Akim and even the opening of a mine at Nangodi in the far north, production was dominated by four big companies. One centre was Ashanti Goldfields at Obuasi. The other three were in the Tarkwa and Prestea area. Together these mines produced 65% of tonnage and 73% of ore. Another four mines, two of them in Tarkwa, accounted for 30% of tonnage and 23% of ore. This tended to produce one large concentration of workers in the Tarkwa area.

With this concentration went other critical changes which took place in the labour force in this period and which led to changes in action and attitude. This had to do with the growth of a significant minority of skilled, semi-skilled and supervisory workers from among the black work force and was connected to the technical revolution which occurred in the mines in this period and which was an outgrowth of the introduction of jack hammers.

³⁸ *Annual Reports Mines Departments, 1924-25 to 1933-34*; A.J. Murray and J.A. Crockett, *An Interim Report on the Prevalence of Silicosis and Tuberculosis Among Mine Workers in the Gold Coast*, (Accra, Government Printer, 1941), Table II.

Table 1. – Ethnic Composition (%) of the Mines Labour Force 1924-25 to 1933-34, and July 1939 (Gold Mines Only)

Ethnicity	1924-25	1928-29	1933-34	July 1939
Northerners	18.7	25.4	25.5	20.7
'French'	17.7	16.0	30.5	29.5
Fanti	16.7	20.2	16.6	} 24.2
Ahanta/Wassaw	12.0	9.9	9.7	
Ashanti	11.3	12.6	7.5	
Yoruba	12.9	8.8	4.9	5.5
Other (Kru)	10.7	7.1	5.3	9.1
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
All Mines	(15,301)	(11,353)	(19,882)	(27,818)
Gold Mines	10,338	7,792	10,452	27,818

SOURCE: A. J. Murray and J. A. Crockett, *An Interim Report on the Prevalence of Silicosis and Tuberculosis Among Mine Workers in the Gold Coast*, Accra, Government Printer, 1941, Table II; *Annual Reports Mines Department, 1924-25 to 1933-34*, Accra, Government Printer.

NOTE: Fanti, Yoruba and Kru indicate the overwhelming majority of the member of the groups so designated, but not all.

One way to appreciate this change is to look at the capacity of the power plants in the period. Generating capacity increased from 16 kilowatts in 1933-34 to 62 kilowatts in 1937-38. By 1945-46 it had reached 209 kilowatts. In 1932-33 the mines were dependent on 10 steam engines. By 1945-46 52 such engines were providing 44 kilowatts to the mines and there were another 172 transformers. Oil and diesel locomotives and air compressors were introduced

after 1933 and the number of electrically driven pumps increased from 67 in 1932 to 258 by 1938. Only 2 electric winding engines operated in 1932. By 1938 there were 34 such machines.

At the root of all of this was the pressure to reduce costs during the preceding period as well as for more powerful machines to sink shafts and raise winzes at a deeper level. The invention and deployment of the new machine drills with hollow bits through which jets of water were sprayed, as well as diesel technology, were the major breakthroughs here.

Through these processes a new skilled tier of machine drivers and their assistants arose from the ranks of the workers. In sharp contrast to the situation in South Africa, black workers had been permitted to blast from at least the 1920s, although 'under close European supervision'. After 1935 blasting certificates were formally introduced and black workers from the hammerman group were trained to become blastmen, thus leading to the expansion of the skilled group.³⁹

In addition, a transformation in surface labour occurred. From a mass of 'fuel labour' groups of fitters, electricians, pumpmen and other maintenance workers arose. The same processes took place in the Mills which were expanded and modernised at this time, and among clerical workers. To this one must add the definite tendency of many mines to advance black workers to the position of so-called 'African Headman', replacing white labour with black, at a lower rate of pay of course. Such a process reached a high point during the Second World War when most white workers went home to enlist and some mines were kept going largely by their black work force alone. The era of the black bossman had arrived.

³⁹ Sir William Simpson, *Report to the Secretary of State*, p. 8.

This process of enskilling (or, if looked at in the longer run from today's viewpoint, of eventually transforming all workers to the same general semi-skilled level) was connected to the growth of stabilisation of the labour force. An average of 20% of the labour force at the eight largest mines were skilled by 1941. The average figure of those with a minimum of five years continuous employment at the same mine, was lower – 6%. But this varied between categories of workers and with mines. For, example, an average of 23% of all blastmen on these eight major mines, had a minimum of five years continuous service on the same mine. At Ashanti Goldfields this figure rose to 41%. At Amalgamated Banket Areas in Tarkwa 19% of the machine drivers were in this position. And it has to be taken into account that this is a minimum figure, pertaining to continuous work on the same mine. It grossly underestimates the actual mine work experience of the labour force which had developed by that time. Many accounts make it clear that quite a few workers had, by this time, been in surface and underground mining continuously for over 15 years.⁴⁰

Perhaps even more critical, were forces let loose at the community level: one is referring here to the complete loss of control of the mines over the residential life of the miners. This became the era of the 'mushroom village', of the proliferation of villages newly created by mine workers themselves and which named themselves accordingly – Charliekrom and Kwamenakrom, Effia Nkwanta, Atuabo, Brahobobum and Bankyem (Cassava), to mention a few.

They were the despair of the colonial officials. A Senior Health Officer described the situation near Bibiani mine thus in 1938:

Vested interest of house owners in the congested old town, and in the numerous hamlets that have sprung up throughout the Mining Health

⁴⁰ A. J. Murray and J. A. Crockett, *An Interim Report on the Prevalence of Silicosis and Tuberculosis Among Mine Workers in the Gold Coast*, Accra, Government Printer, 1941.

Areas are strong.

Any possible sleeping place is at a premium and the rents are the highest I have yet encountered. The cause is fairly obvious. The mine employs roughly 4,000 labour and houses 240. The remainder have got to obtain housing as best they can. During the last six months over 1,000 extra mine labour have been taken in at Bibiani and no housing provisions made for them. It is like trying to pour a quart into a pint pot.⁴¹

According to another description of the mushroom villages in 1936, they contained 'numerous hangers-on, pensioners, traders etc ... and they are scattered over a wide area, in many cases without direct road or rail communication with District Headquarters'.

By 1939 Captain Dickinson, the first Chief Inspector of Labour, found that the situation had so deteriorated that nothing short of the appointment of a special District Commissioner and a programme of demolition was required. He wrote:

The most urgent problem to be faced in regard to labour conditions on the mines is that of the dreadful mushroom villages to be found on the outskirts of concessions. Originally, these were probably collections of temporary shacks erected for an emergency. After all, the labourer had to go somewhere for shelter but gradually a permanent village arose of badly constructed hutments [sic] built on no particular plan. No regard was had to layout or to the providing of incinerators or other sanitary structures. Some of the places are now large towns housing as many as 1,500 or 2,000 people and the conditions are appalling. It is in such villages where discontent originated and where the agitators, thieves, gold receivers and other undesirables congregate.⁴²

Therein, Dickinson went on, an entirely new attitude was fostered amongst these workers:

⁴¹ GNA, CSO 716/33SF2/16-18, Deputy Director of Health Services to the Director of Medical Services, 'Bibiani (1927) Ltd., Housing of African Labour', 17 October 1938.

⁴² *Report on the Labour Department for the Year 1938-39 with which is incorporated the Report on a Preliminary Survey of Labour Conditions in the Gold Coast*, Accra, Government Printer, 1939, p. 27.

We have amongst the Africans in this country a due proportion of rogues, thieves and other undesirables, and many of them are experts in the art of serving up 'humbug' and a quiet insolence which can be most exasperating.⁴³

Strikes may be expected from time to time, Dickinson felt, but the key to minimising them was to control the mushroom village without delay. Not the legalisation of trade unions (that did not come until 1941), but the establishment of what the Governor called 'a modified compound system' (and another official, a 'demi-semi-compound system'!) and a system of government-recognised 'tribal headmen', was the answer devised. Thus after 1938 any dispute between workers and management was first to be brought by workers to their respective headman, who was a community-based figure, frequently a former mine or government employee not presently employed at the mine and, indeed, not necessarily resident in the same community as the worker.

Such headmen had existed long before and had been resorted to, mainly by management, in labour disputes prior to this. Now Dickinson, head of the newly created Labour Department, proposed to formalise this as a system of industrial relations. Doubts were expressed by other colonial officials whether such a system would have any value for controlling skilled labour. But it was recognised that while it may not be able to prevent industrial disputes, it could certainly help to divide and defeat them, given that 80% of the workers were unskilled general labourers, freshly from the north and still with a sense of obligation to traditional authority.⁴⁴

This was the background to the situation which engendered that 'quiet insolence' which so infuriated Dickinson. Given the sharp rise in the cost of

⁴³ *Annual Report Labour Department*, 1938-39, p.34.

⁴⁴ GNA, CSO 716/33/92, Secretary for Native Affairs to the Colonial Secretary, 5 August 1938.

food, clothing and rental in this period and that many workers had their families with them; and given that on the other hand the mines clung steadfastly to the wage cuts which had been implemented during the downturn of 1924-31, a turbulent period of industrial relations was probably inevitable. The mines did not see any reason to increase wages when cocoa was in depression and an abundance of labour became available from sources within and without Ghana. Between 1933 and 1946 thirty-one strikes were recorded in the gold mines, an average of two per year. A new phase in thought and action had clearly arrived.

Most of these strikes (twenty-two) involved the underground workers; nine of them were led by the machine drivers; sixteen of them were the work of skilled workers alone. All of these strikes were offensive strikes: that is to say strikes called on the initiative of the workers around some new demand being made by them; not at all like Prestea in 1930 an outburst in response to some action taken by management. They peaked in number in 1937. With the establishment of the Labour Department in 1938 there was a lull, but they resumed in 1940. The climax came with the shut-down at Ashanti Goldfields in 1945 and the first multi-mine strike in 1946 and the formation of the Mines Employees Union.

The nature and range of the issues over which action was taken were also broader: the abolition of deferred payments; wage increases; shorter working hours; more jobs; better machinery; lower rents and better housing – demands around these issues are all recorded for the period. In other words, more typically working class issues, raised from the point of view of the immediate interests of the workers; not migrant-labour-type disputes about abuses of the deferred pay system which, in fact, implicitly recognised the legitimacy of such a system. Most striking of all was the change which now came over the workers in their attitude to the colonial state.

For a number of reasons the state was compelled to intervene in the disputes of this period, more or less openly on the side of management. In some cases it was by calling out the police to reinforce the mines police in protecting strike breakers, as at Ashanti Goldfields in 1934. In others, it was by utilising the headmen to attempt to mobilise the unskilled workers against the skilled, as the District Commissioner tried to do, again at the Obuasi Ashanti Goldfields, in the 1935 strike. On yet another occasion, the Chief Commissioner for Ashanti simply instructed the Asante lawyer Asafu-Adjaye to desist from acting on behalf of workers in 1935.

Other cases of state intervention involved employing secret police to ferret out 'ringleaders' of strike action and egging on the mines management to dismiss them. Finally when all else failed, resort was had to mass police action against the workers, as at Bibiani in 1938. Thus in this phase the state abandoned (or was compelled by the level of activity and awareness of the workers to abandon) its paternalistic stance of the previous period.⁴⁵ This open partisanship of the colonial state radicalised the workers and pushed them towards the nationalist movement which was itself on the verge of an important experience – the cocoa hold-up of 1937-38.

What is more, the first signs of organised representations began to occur in this period. The practice developed of workers choosing 'spokesmen', not necessarily fellow workers or if workers not necessarily involved in the dispute. Letters setting out their grievances and their demands were now written to management. When this practice inevitably led to victimisation,

⁴⁵ For the most extreme case of partisanship by the colonial state, see GNA, CSO 162/34/63A, Assistant District Commissioner, Wassaw-Aowin to the Provincial Commissioner, Western Province (Confidential), 19 October 1937; also GNA, CSO 162/34/59 and GNA, CSO 162/34/39B, Petition of Headmen to His Worship the District Commissioner, Obuasi, Eastern Region Ashanti, 8 March 1935.

resort was had to lawyers, the first group of workers to retain them being those of Ashanti Goldfields in 1935. At the same time, because of the greater organisation and determination, strikes lasted longer in this period, one eleven and another eighteen days.

But two limitations stand out unmistakably: the saliency of the bonds of ethnicity and of the specific occupational group. In at least three cases where strikes occurred the accounts record that the groups of workers were ethnically uniform. This applies to the very turbulent strike of 'fuel labour' at Ashanti Goldfields in 1934 in which 67 workers were arrested and charged under Section 264 of the Criminal Code. All were dismissed for striking, 60 were fined 13 shillings each and the leaders sentenced to terms of imprisonment. The Chief Commissioner for Ashanti reported to the Colonial Secretary that the 'strikers are Wangara'. Again, in the eleven-day strike of machine drivers at the same mine in 1935 it was reported that it involved 'mostly Kado boys'. At Abontiakoon in February 1937 a strike of hammermen and machine drivers was also said to be 'mostly Wangara'. How many more cases of industrial action had an ethnic base is not known.

Even more significant than ethnicity however was the tie between members of the same skilled occupational group. Every single strike of this period, even when it appeared otherwise, was really the work of a single occupational group. This was as true of the 'fuel labour' strike in 1934 as it was of the machine drivers' in 1935. Another example was the drill sharpeners at Taquah and Abosso in 1934 who struck for lower rents – an issue which greatly affected all, including people who did not work at the mines. But they made not the slightest attempt to mobilise the mass of 1,463 surface or 1,715 underground workers at that mine, nor to involve the wider community.

Again we have the example of the 14 mechanical shovel drivers at Marlu mine near Tarkwa who accepted collective dismissal rather than agreeing to

the dismissal of their three alleged 'ringleaders': they made no attempt to mobilise the other 2,079 workers at Marlu to join the strike. Even the Gold Coast Mines Employees Union, first formed in 1944, was not the first mine workers union registered in Ghana. This honour belonged to the Gold Coast Certified Engine Drivers' Union, registered in April 1945 and restricted to that category of worker only.

Here the exception, the eleven day 'general strike' at Ashanti Goldfields in March 1935, proved the rule. It was begun by 60 machine drivers seeking to reduce their hours of work underground. It was only on the third day that, by threats and intimidation, the machine drivers were able to force the entire underground work force not to go below. But it was close. Only some last minute strong-arm tactics by the machine drivers against the other more than 2,000 workers at the very shaft top itself, saved the day.⁴⁶ Even then no attempt was made by the machine drivers to present the common grievances of the work force as a whole. The upshot was that strikes were short and the strikers eventually isolated and defeated.

This is why it seems inappropriate to speak of the emergence of class consciousness in this period, even if one accepts a minimal definition of that slippery term. Not even 'underground consciousness' seems to have existed at this period nor even yet a 'northern consciousness' *à la* Ladoceur.⁴⁷ Better to limit oneself to the recognition of the emergence of a 'craft consciousness' and leave it at that!

⁴⁶ GNA, CSO 162/34/39A, District Commissioner, Obuasi to the Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, 19 March 1935.

⁴⁷ P. Ladoceur, *Chiefs and Politicians in Northern Ghana*, (London, Longman 1979).

CHAPTER V

Trade Union Nationalism

After the Second World War the situation in the mines changed further, partly due to the war itself and the processes that took place at that time. Several northerners had served in the war and the country, especially around the Sekondi-Takoradi area, had been extensively involved in the war effort. An entirely new spirit spread abroad which greatly strengthened the hold of nationalism over the general citizenry, including the mine workers.

This is a period of upsurge of nationalist politics and of political agitation and organisation beginning, for the first time, to impinge directly on the miners in a major way for the first time.⁴⁸ It is therefore somewhat artificial to analyse the outlook and actions of the miners in this period without regard to this overall context, so different from the pre-war situation. Nevertheless, this is what we shall proceed to do, recognising the inherent limitations of such an analysis.

For the mines themselves the ending of the war brought little economic respite. Although the sterling price of gold increased in 1949, the accumulated wartime and post-war inflation swiftly overtook any gains. Mines which were closed during the war reopened but were faced with severe pressures on their costs of production. Further concentration of ownership and the decline in the number of mines, especially through the expansion and consolidation of Amalgamated Banket Areas at Tarkwa occurred but could not resolve the difficulty. The mines labour force contracted further from about 24,589 in 1945 to about 20,089 by 1955.

⁴⁸ Actually, political and trade union agitation among mine workers goes back at least to the activities of Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League, who were active at Tarkwa, Prestea, Marlu, Bibiani and Obuasi in the 1930s.

To deal with this situation the mines made an unusual modification of their standard approach to labour. In addition to trying to increase their supplies of migrant labour (a dubious proposition in the Ghanaian context where alternative sources of employment were available) they moved to a policy of trying to increase labour productivity by better training, organisation and more stabilisation of the labour force.

This process had a particularly sharp effect on underground labour. For example, between 1948 and 1958, 1,873 black workers were awarded Certificates of Competency in Blasting Operations entitling them to become blastmen and eventually bossmen. A total of 169 obtained the Winding Engine Drivers' Certificate – to fill the highest paid position in the black underground work force, one which before the war had been reserved for white workers. In the same period 115 Winch Drivers' Certificates and 220 English Speaking Certificates were handed out to black workers. A substantial upgrading of the qualifications and the authority of black workers thus began to take place.

But this process was not limited to strengthening the skilled workers underground. Promotions of workers to supervisory positions previously held by whites also began to take place. Mines Rescue Brigade Certificates, a qualification necessary to become what was now called Assistant Shift Boss (previously held *de facto* by blacks under the rubric 'African Shift Boss' or 'Section Headman') became legally available in Ghana for the first time after 1948. Fifty-eight Africans succeeding in obtaining this qualification over the next ten years. Amalgamated Banket Areas was the first to make these appointments in 1949-50. Shift Boss Certificates also became available to mine workers for the first time in this period and by Independence in 1957, 27 mine workers had graduated with this grade.

This process was accompanied by a junior staff and worker compound housing construction programme on the mines and the demolition of some of

the worst housing in the mushroom villages. This programme had begun at Bibiani in 1938-1940 when 259 new rooms had been constructed and 395 derelict 'swish' huts demolished, under pressure from government health officers. After the war this was speeded up in all the major mines and by 1947 Amalgamated Bantustan Areas were housing 70% of their workers in mines compounds.

The mines also made efforts to expand recruiting in the north and to strengthen the ties of the workers with traditional authorities by encouraging visits of chiefs, especially when industrial disputes threatened. Although Bolgatanga in north-central Ghana was the main recruiting centre, the bulk of the workers continued to come from the north-west – Dagarti. By 1950 Dagartis were 22% of the black labour force at Prestea, for example, only exceeded by the Fante/Ahanta grouping (largely surface) at 25%, and followed by the Mossi with 9%. By 1964 Dagartis had become, at 26%, the largest single ethnic group on the mine.

A main element in the approach of the mines was to encourage the elaboration of a system of compound chiefs for each resident ethnic group. A whole complex now sprang up with a *Biepole Na* or *Samaree* (Hausa for headman) – chief of the young men – (Twi – *Nkwankwaahene*) who was responsible for adjudicating local community disputes and clashes between workers of a particular ethnic group and the local traditional authorities or the state. Alongside him was the *Daburu Na* – chief for women's affairs. His duty was to adjudicate marital disputes, especially charges of adultery which were quite frequent in the mines. Then there was the *Makazie* – the female chief, who looked after the problems of the women, introducing new wives brought down from the north to the ways of mining communities and the south. Finally, there was the *Biebile Na* – the chief for the young ones, the one who arranged dances and other amusements for the workers in the compounds.

Combined with these efforts to strengthen traditional ties were the productivity programmes introduced by the mines after 1950. This involved bringing production engineering consultants from South Africa and Zimbabwe and instituting a programme of 'scientific management' in the mines.⁴⁹ An entire reorganisation of the managing system now took place starting with the establishment of Planning Departments. Time and motion studies soon followed and standard complements for each job were devised and rigidly adhered to.

The basic idea was to standardise and systematise the smallest details of work routine based upon extreme job fragmentation and a 'Manual of Standard Practice'. Thus an attempt was made to standardise stoping and workplace conditions; to set up norms for equipment and materials usage; and to set up a system of 'planned preventative maintenance'. The whole of this imposing array of Taylorism was to be regulated partly by the Planning Department and by a bonus system designed to raise productivity norms gradually over a period of years.

As a result of this system bonus payments to certain categories of underground workers increased substantially. Those for machine drivers at Amalgamated Banket Areas, for example, reached 7s. per day, the second highest on the mines, exceeding that of the Senior Headmen supervising them. Labour turnover was reduced to 33% for this same mine. On the average it declined from as high as 90% in 1948 overall, to about 46% by 1957.

However in this general programme of stabilisation it is of interest to note that the surface workers were the ones who achieved the higher levels of stability. In 1955 for example, data from the five major gold mines indicate

⁴⁹ H. H. Fraser and O. E. A. Somerset, 'Scientific Management Principles Applied to West African Mining', *Transactions of the Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, 67 (1957-1958), pp. 285-348; 481-95; 643-50.

that 17.6% of the surface workers had more than 10 years service on the mines, compared to 5.4% of the underground. Another 24.6% on the surface had over 5 and up to 10 years service, compared to 12.6% of the underground workers. In other words, fully 42% of the surface were relatively stable workers, in comparison to about 18% of the underground.⁵⁰

It needs to be remembered that the above processes were really a continuation of tendencies which had begun before the war. This is especially true for the rise of 'African Shift Bosses' and the consolidation of the skilled surface workers.

It also needs to be pointed out that the programme of raising the levels of qualification and authority of black workers were not simply introduced voluntarily by the mines immediately after the war. On the contrary, their first approach was to try to replace black skilled workers with returning white workers both on the surface and underground. In fact if one looks at the data they reveal that 808 white workers were awarded Blasting Certificates and 89 obtained Winding Engine Drivers' Certificates in the same period discussed for blacks above. Indeed, nearly twice as many Mines Rescue Brigade Certificates for the post of Assistant Shift Boss were granted to whites than to blacks (105:58).

The protest of the black workers in the first all-mines strike of 1947 and the upsurge of the nationalist movement with the subsequent appointment of a Commissioner for Africanisation in 1951 encouraged a different attitude. Under the intense pressure of costs the new approach was adopted.

This provides the background for an understanding of the outlook and actions of the workers in this period. For example, so acute did this issue of

⁵⁰ *Report of the Gold Coast Mines Board Of Inquiry 1956*, (Accra, Government Printer, 1956), Appendix 8, pp. 114-115; *Annual Reports Mines Department*, 1955-56.

the relations between white supervisors and black workers become, that it in effect provided the occasion for the formation of the union in 1944. As the Union's official biographer wrote:

It happened at the Electric Shop, Abosso, where the European foreman was harassing the African employees under him. One man, a European foreman, who was not older than most of the employees and whose business acumen fell below the ability of some of the Africans of that department was lording it over them.

Among the sufferers were those who had seen ten, twenty and thirty years service with the industry; yet years in the eyes of this white electrician were nothing; not even efficiency – the criterion by which every prospective employees squares [sic].

The idea of a strike presented itself: it appeared as the only means whereby they could draw the attention of the management toward their great handicap; and by unanimous decision the electrician shop workmen resolved not to attend until the foreman – a Mr Barker, was removed.⁵¹

Thus was the typical craft strike launched at Taquah and Abosso. It was confined to the electric shop workers and lasted three weeks. It resulted in victory for the workers and the departure of Mr Barker. It was this victory which emboldened the workers and which led them to organise all of the departments, surface and underground by 4 June 1944. Thus the oldest mine in the country – Taquah and Abosso – became the first plant to be unionised. From there the union was spread to the other mines with very great difficulty.

According to Blay, up until 1946 'the affairs of the Union did not matter to 90% of the miners, whose cause it had come to fight', although by 1948 the Labour Department set the official figure for membership of the Gold Coast Mines Employees Union at 15,500 i.e. three times the size of its nearest rival, the Gold Coast Railway Employees Union, and thus the largest union in the country. What the difficulty was becomes clearer when we look at the composition of the union executive. President was J.N. Sam, electrician; Vice-

⁵¹ J. Benibengor Blay, *The Gold Coast Mines Employees' Union*, (Ilfracombe, Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd., 1950), p. 11.

President, J.K. Oblie, fitter; Secretary, S.M. Bissah, electrician; and Treasurer, J.A. Eshun, head moulder. All were from the surface, were long serving skilled workers in supervisory positions (Eshun, for example, had worked at Taquah and Abosso for 39 years), and all were southerners. Taquah and Abosso mine was heavily over-represented.

Thus the union was organised and controlled by this particular stratum of the labour force. Where it brought in northerners, these were men like Musa Busanga, an 'African Shift Boss' who had been at Taquah and Abosso for 29 years; or Musah Dagarti, a truck headman of eleven years standing, and a Dagarti Chief at Amalgamated Banket Areas. Not only were unskilled workers unrepresented, but the critical bossman/blastman/machine driver grouping, which had led so many strikes before and during the war and who were the natural leaders of the underground workers, were also omitted from the leadership.

Apart from ethnic factors the union leadership's occupational position gave it a different approach to disputes from the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled underground workers'. The union leadership had risen during the war but now felt themselves threatened by a reversal in their fortunes following the return of white miners. During the strike of 1947 they focused on the issue of the colour bar, abusive language and workplace assaults from white to black, salary and fringe benefit (for example staff housing) differentials between white and black workers for the same jobs. One of their main demands was for 'first grade workers', 'senior responsible headmen' and 'recognised clerks' – all those earning more than 5s. per day – to be put on a monthly salary as staff. They continued: 'We do not consider it proper for these headmen to queue together with their men for their pay, and we also think that such

practice makes the enforcement of discipline on the boys very difficult.⁵² The solution to their economic problem was upward mobility.

No such option was of course available to the mass of underground workers. They had no choice but to seek wage increases, reduced hours of work, better living and working conditions on the basis of the jobs they were presently doing and the pressures which the cost of living put on people in their social position. Status mobility did not appeal to them and indeed in their everyday working life they came up against the very same members of their union executive now acting in their role as supervisors. They grew to dislike and distrust them even more than they did the mines management. Ethnic divisions between them fed this distrust for the *Kambonga* [northern ethnic slur for southerners] headmen, surface workers and union executive.

Thus many workers refused to pay dues out of fear that the executive would defraud them, and were extremely suspicious of their negotiating with management on their behalf. 'We represent a very angry mob', the Union President Sam explained plaintively to the Gorman Commission arbitrating at the first all mines strike in 1947, 'and any decision we make on their behalf must be a sensible one otherwise we may lose our lives when we go back.'⁵³

They had their own approach to industrial action, different from the debating society style of the union executive. The Labour Department officer for mine workers I.G. Jones himself narrowly escaped being beaten by the underground workers. It was only by a great show of force by the police at Tarkwa courthouse that they were prevented from massing on Mr Justice Gorman, the High Court Judge sent out from Britain to arbitrate, on Sir

⁵² J.N. Sam, 'Notes of a Meeting between the Representatives of the Gold Coast Chamber of Mines, and the Delegates of the Gold Coast Mines Employees' Union, Held at Tarkwa on Thursday, 31 July 1947, at 10.00 a.m.' Reprinted in Blay, *Gold Coast Mines Employees' Union*, Appendix V, pp. 59-73.

⁵³ Blay, *Gold Coast Mines Employees' Union*, p.141.

Roland Burrows, the lawyer for the Chamber of Mines, and on Duncan Sandys, the Chairman of the Board of Ashanti Goldfields. They refused to return to work in order to permit the Commission to sit and all the efforts of the executive, the Commission and the state were in vain. They insisted that the leadership should demand strike pay from the mines, as 'this strike was not of our choosing; they could have avoided it but they challenged us and we did it, and so the burden is on them and they should pay us for the days we have been on strike'.

It now seems that a real 'underground' and 'northern' consciousness and action, distinct from the nationalist outlook and behaviour of the southern skilled surface workers, had begun to emerge.

This attitude was strongly influenced by the success of the railway workers following the Korsah Inquiry award of June 1947. This granted wage increases to railway workers, among other 'unestablished' and daily paid government workers, which were made retroactive to 1 January 1946. Many railway workers were northerners and relatives of mine workers. Quite a few of them lived in Tarkwa, a major railway centre in its own right and only 55 miles from Sekondi-Takoradi. There was no stopping the underground workers now.

They told tales of the railway worker who chewed and swallowed a note, washing it down with a glass of whiskey, 'to please my heart, which had longed all these years for something ... I send this £ note to my heart through the process it had just passed to gladden and cool it down'. Others recounted how 'my brother at Takoradi showed me £ 60 and said, 'This is back pay and what are you getting?' ... if I do not get this back pay my heart will be unable to sleep'.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Blay, *Gold Coast Mines Employees' Union*, pp. 116 and 193.

This resulted in the first all-mines shut-down in 1947 in which the underground workers won some of their demands. The mines conceded wage increases for skilled and semi-skilled workers; a reduction in working hours from 48 to 45 per week; 14 days annual leave which could be accumulated over three years; sick leave with pay; gratuities for retiring workers of at least 5 years service; and six months back pay. The headmen and surface workers were also granted wage increases but not to the level they desired and were not put on staff. A check-off system of dues payment was refused.

But with the cost of living rising this victory did not for long satisfy either the surface or underground workers. Suspicious from the very beginning, the latter became increasingly alienated from the union leadership as the mines changed course and separately began to reclassify headmen as Junior Staff, to build separate housing and recreation facilities for them and to encourage them to break away from the union and to form Staff Associations. Cases of fraud involving the union executive and dues, as well as the pressure brought to bear by the supervisors during the establishment of the scientific management programme, further alienated the underground workers.

In 1951 they removed Sam and replaced him with Daniel Foevie, a younger, more radical skilled worker and the delegate from Marlu, who now became President General of the union. In 1955 under pressure from the underground workers and having helped the CPP to a crucial victory over its rivals in the 1954 elections and with a President with high party connections, a strike was called.⁵⁵ Given the rhetoric of the elections, the workers had anticipated strong party backing. In fact Nkrumah was opposed to the strike. It lasted 100 days and only came to a favourable conclusion after the personal

⁵⁵ Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana, 1946-1960*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 352 fn. Austin records how the northern mine worker vote helped the CPP to defeat the Asante-based NLM party at Obuasi, Ashanti Goldfields in 1954. The CPP also swept Tarkwa.

intervention of Nkrumah who provided the mines with a subsidy of £ 200,000 to meet the wage demands. The CPP did not wish any mass upheaval to mar the transition to Independence.

CHAPTER VI

'Ghana Time'

In this situation the country made the transition to Independence. The most striking feature of the outlook of the miners was the manner in which the attitudes and actions of the older, skilled, mainly surface and southern workers, had begun to diverge from those of the northern underground worker. The programme of production engineering and training had greatly strengthened the leadership levels of the underground workers – especially the blastmen and the machine drivers. At Ashanti Goldfields between July and October 1955 for example, 61% of the underground workers received incentive bonus payments, compared to 28% of the surface workers. Among the underground workers an elite had definitely emerged which was able to articulate their grievances and mobilise them for action. This divergence between surface and underground worker was to come to a head in the post-colonial phase.

Although output expanded to an all-time high of 915,317 fine ounces in 1960 (63% of which was produced by the mines which became state-owned in the following year), the economic situation continued to deteriorate for the mines in this period. This applied in particular to the low-grade ore mines in the Tarkwa area which had been receiving a state subsidy since the war years. The traditional squeeze of the gold mining industry – long periods of fixed prices in which costs of equipment and materials rise rapidly, leading to pressures from a work force (now substantially stable) for wage increases – posed a severe threat to the profitability of the low-grade mines.

What is more, given the political situation, one approach to this problem – technical modernisation – was unlikely to occur. Proper research facilities had never been established in Ghana which technically had always been dependent on the facilities of the Rand mines. The high costs of production of the mines,

the low fixed price for gold and the uncertain political and labour climate combined to make it impossible to raise foreign capital for a modernisation programme.

Thus the mines resorted to ineffectual cost-cutting exercises which were often counterproductive. Equipment was run down and the whole programme of maintenance and tight management control established in the fifties, was allowed to fall into abeyance. The labour force on the surface was reduced, so that underground workers came to dominate the work force. Then the underground labour force was also cut, or cut itself by the low wages offered. Thus many work groups fell below their complement as laid down in the Manual of Standard Practice which itself became a dead letter. After the initial rise, productivity plunged.

Instead of the proper three shift cycle covering stoping or development, blasting and cleaning, the 'innovation' of the blasting 'mini-shift', tacked on to the end of the first shift, was introduced. Discipline on the late night cleaning shift sharply deteriorated, workers coming off as early as 10.00 pm and 11.00 pm in some cases. With low wages and a rising cost of living workers morale steadily deteriorated.

By 1960, the year of record output, many mines were on the verge of closing and were only dissuaded from doing so by government subsidy and political pressure. It became fairly clear that if capital for modernisation was to be raised, it would have to come from the Ghanaian state. Thus when in 1961 the Nkrumah government went on the London Stock Exchange and offered to buy out shareholders in the Tarkwa-Prestea-Dunkwa-Bibiani complex of five gold mines at a favourable price, (Konongo was added in 1963) they were met with eager acceptance. The State Mining Corporation was set up to manage these mines amidst loud official declarations of a new day dawning for the mines, the workers and Ghana. A subsidy of £ 1 million for the state-owned

mines was announced in the 1961 Budget.

Indeed, a 'new day' had certainly arrived for some. The programme of Africanisation was speeded up. With British and Canadian technical assistance Ghanaian mining engineers were trained and deployed. Accelerated promotion was granted to bossmen some of whom, including quite a few northerners, became full Shift Bosses and Mine Captains for the first time. Programmes of training were also expanded for blastmen and machine drivers and general literacy courses were introduced in a night school system.

Most important of all were the changes which occurred at the management level. While individual mines continued to be managed by expatriates the holding company itself was put under Ghanaian management. A system was set up whereby all senior administrative and technical personnel were employed to the holding company and not to the individual mine where they actually worked. And in keeping with the philosophy of the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) union representatives were appointed to the Board. With this came a movement of Ghanaian personnel into the 'European compounds' on the high ground overlooking the mines, to the 'European clubs' with their golf courses and tennis courts, and to Government Hill and official cars – the inevitable Mercedes Benz and Peugeot.

As is well known this was a nationwide process in Ghana at this time. However in the mines, where the gap between black migrant worker and white 'second-class European' not to mention white management, had been particularly huge and the symbols of these distinctions (the 'bungalow' versus the 'compound', for example) particularly vivid, the changeover was especially dramatic. The climax came when Foevie, the union General Secretary, was appointed Managing Director of the State Gold Mining Corporation in 1964.

While these developments affected the workers in the state-owned mines most directly, they also impinged on the workers at Ashanti Goldfields which,

as a high-grade ore mine, had remained privately owned. For example, it was during this same period that the Industrial Relations Act of 1958 and its amendment of 1960, which in effect banned strikes, was passed. This law established a national system of industrial trade unions with a closed shop system united from above into a Trades Union Congress. When to this was added a compulsory check-off system, the unions' finances and the salaries of its officialdom were guaranteed. The union bureaucracy now became completely independent of their membership, partly a branch of the party and state apparatus, partly a centre for their personal networks and ambitions. In the same spirit the Budget imposed the notorious compulsory savings levy on all workers which was deducted without consultation in 1961. The resistance of the Sekondi-Takoradi railway workers to this and the imprisonment of union leaders under the Preventive Detention Act had an indirect impact on the mine workers. They had always been close to the railway workers and these events severely affected their support for the regime, which had always been somewhat tentative and conditional.

The same general approach came to prevail on the mines. A harsh and dictatorial line, equalling anything adopted in the colonial days, was taken with the workers by Foevie. He berated them for malingering, theft and ingratitude in the face of the large subsidy being provided by the state. He rejected all demands for increased wages on the ground of the poor state of the mines' (and the government's) finances. He manipulated local delegate elections and disregarded all notions of union democracy, shamelessly exploiting ethnic and occupational divisions for his own ends.⁵⁶ One of the main charges of the workers against him was that he surrounded himself with his fellow Ewes and put control of the mines and the union into their hands.

⁵⁶ Jeff Crisp, *Story of an African Working Class*, pp. 132-147.

This approach of the state, even before the advent of Foevie, had already begun to infuriate the underground workers. In Bibiani, a state-owned mine, the first political strike of mine workers directed against the Nkrumah regime, broke out in 1963. A so-called 'miscalculation' of the workers' bonus resulted in lower pay packets than expected. The workers cried fraud, it being widely known that pay clerks, in collusion with some workers, frequently switched bonuses from one worker to another and 'split the difference'. Defying the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act, 1,500 workers downed tools and demanded a rectification of the 'error'. Most ominous of all for the regime was that they also demanded the permanent banning of all local union and CPP officials (often one and the same set of persons) from the premises of the mine. It does not seem unreasonable to claim that this marked the beginning of a new turn in the workers' outlook.

This situation was aggravated by the fact that, while preaching austerity and sacrifice to the work force, the new management continued to enjoy a high lifestyle at the mines' expense. Corruption became rampant. After further strikes at Obuasi and Konongo the situation exploded at Tarkwa in 1965, on the eve of the overthrow of the regime. Foevie raged at the workers and threatened them with mass eviction from mines housing and with mass dismissals for refusing to accept a new bonus system which would have reduced wages. Backed by the state, he got his way temporarily. However the workers held out and the bonus scheme had to be abandoned. With its popular base severely eroded, the regime itself fell in less than six months.

A revealing commentary on the difficulty of decolonisation and on the socio-political situation into which the workers had fallen in the post-colonial society was that, to their dismay, the regime of Foevie in the mines survived the fall of the Nkrumah regime. Bitter disappointment rapidly set in, not with this or that regime, but with what the workers called 'Ghana time', as opposed

to the good old 'Gold Coast time': in other words with the whole historical project of nationalism and nationhood. A real 'consciousness of disillusion' began to take root.

This was an attitude whereby everything from Independence was denigrated and the colonial period glorified. Young workers born just before Independence in 1957, could spend hours in the seventies singing the praises of 'Gold Coast time', the time before the Fall. They condemned 'Ghana time', the era of the power of money and the corruption of all that men held sacred.

During the colonial period the issue of racism and nationalism had, over a period of time, become uppermost. This was especially the case among that skilled tier of surface workers who launched the union and provided its first leadership. Now, in the period of independence, the issue of corruption began to supersede all other issues.

In the eyes of the workers, all governments were corrupt; all managements were corrupt; all supervisors were corrupt; union officials especially were corrupt. The corruption was widespread and endemic: big, medium and petty; each according to his need.

The behaviour of Shift Bosses, for example, was regarded as one (by no means exceptional) instance of everyday corruption. They controlled the assignment and promotion of underground workers. But it was well known, one worker said, that 'when you be hard worker 'self, they don't mind you, unless you "know something" ... to go and "climb the steps" [to their offices] and "do something" [bribery].'⁵⁷ Innumerable and far more vivid tales of corruption at all levels were told at every opportunity; tales involving girlfriends, fees, mines supplies, mines housing, union officials who 'chop' union dues, and concerning the entire operations of the enterprise, indeed of

⁵⁷ Loco Guard, Tarkwa, 7 April 1971.

the society.

Thus a profound cynicism towards their jobs, employers and the society at large developed in this period. It led to and was reinforced by periods of wild and violent eruptions of labour disputes in which management ran for their lives and the workers beat and humiliated any union, office or management personnel unlucky enough to be caught before the police and army reinforcements arrived.

This attitude which had developed towards the end of Nkrumah's rule was intensified under the NLC and Busia regimes. During the long stagnation and decline of the Acheampong period, the situation eased somewhat, as the price of gold went up significantly and two large wage increases in 1974 and 1977, each of about 300%, were granted to the workers. But the calm did not last as the underlying grievances of the workers remained unresolved.

This very deep alienation led to an effort by the underground workers to develop their own local level leadership, to organise 'machine drivers' groups' and 'shop stewards' associations' and even to form their own breakaway union. In 1969 Augustine Dagarti, a worker at Prestea who had been victimised for challenging the management and the union bureaucracy, defeated Williams, the southern union leader for the headship of the local branch of the union. But given the low levels of literacy of workers until recent times, such efforts at self-leadership posed and still pose serious difficulties.

The situation also poses a major (but not insuperable) challenge to any effort, especially one directed by the state, to develop a programme of modernisation and efficiency, such as the one embarked on in 1984. The wounds left by over 90 years of mines labour have not healed and those of the last 20 years remain particularly fresh and deep.

Perhaps the best way to end this section is to quote one of those spontaneous leaders which the underground mine workers increasingly began to throw up from below after 1966, at that same Prestea, scene of the strike and siege of 1930. The machine driver, Augustine Dagarti, was addressing a meeting of workers, called by themselves, during the strike over the failure to pay bonuses in May 1968, referred to above. As usual, severe rioting had broken out and the workers hunted and beat the Mines Secretary, the Accountant and Union Chairman. The Minister of Mining and the General Secretary of the State Gold Mining Corporation, were only saved from the same fate by the arrival of the police. At a subsequent meeting, berating the officials, now tamed and seated on the platform as 'guests' of the workers, he said:

It is true that underground workers are fools. We should all be satisfied if we are told that we are fools. When these Union men went to the meeting, what did they bring you? They had brought so many grades to the surface workers and what about the underground men? Now, when anyone tells you that underground workers are fools, you have to agree with him. When the doctors are cutting our legs and hands, when we are dying underground, then these men are safe on the surface. Where are the grades for underground labourers – the truckmen, the machine drivers, the senior headmen and Charge Hands? Now it is for us to show them that we are not fools!⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Recent Disturbances at Prestea, Parts I and II*, (Accra, Ghana Publishing Corp., 1968), p. 18.

CHAPTER VII

Opposing the 'Chiefs': Corruption and Consciousness

Have we, at last, arrived at proletarian class consciousness? Silver thought yes, although he added that this was a 'defensive' consciousness.⁵⁹ By this he seemed to mean that it was able to resist impositions from the state and the IMF but not able to transform the society. It was, he claimed, 'a militant class consciousness.' But, 'as yet, it is a defensive consciousness, disruptive, but not linked to any socialist tradition in Ghana.'⁶⁰

He went on to add:

Though not yet ready to lead the struggle for socialism, the mine workers will certainly block any of the many so-called 'development' programmes, such as the IMF strategy about to be implemented in Ghana, which would make them victims rather than beneficiaries.⁶¹

This prophecy has proven to be somewhat mistaken. Since 1983 one of the most extreme and consistently implemented IMF programmes have been carried through in Ghana. As was pointed out at the beginning, a substantial expansion and modernisation programme for the mines has gone forward under the auspices of the World Bank, within the framework of this IMF programme, with limited worker resistance.⁶²

The question naturally arises how it could have those limitations to which he referred if at the same time the outlook of the underground workers was appraised at such a high level. The answer seems to be that it was the militancy which was high, but not necessarily the class consciousness.

⁵⁹ Jim Silver, 'Class Struggles', pp. 67-86.

⁶⁰ Silver, 'Class Struggles', p. 67.

⁶¹ Silver, 'Class Struggles', p. 68.

⁶² There was a strike at Ashanti Goldfields in 1986 which significantly reduced production.

This is not only a definitional problem. For even if one only has a minimum definition of class consciousness as a sense of identity with a socio-economic group defined in terms of relationship to the means of production and role in the social division of labour, major difficulties still remain in characterising the outlook of the mine workers at that time as expressing a high level of proletarian class consciousness. It is these difficulties which forced Konings, for example, to speak of the mine workers having only 'an *incipient* working class consciousness', [my emphasis] and to attempt to discuss the reasons for this 'underdevelopment of class consciousness.'⁶³

All commentators agreed that the mine workers did not feel any particularly strong bond (even, Konings claims, a general populist one as 'poor people') with the rest of the Ghanaian working class. The workers' approach was a fairly strongly apolitical one.

Even more revealing was the fact that nearly every single strike since 1947 (and there were 20 in the period 1956-60 alone), was a single-plant strike, relating only to a single mine. Even the 100 day 'general strike' of 1955 really began as a strike at Ashanti Goldfields alone. In fact, in a significant minority of cases these were 'craft strikes' of the pre-war type where a minority of workers, frequently machine drivers or blastmen, took action on a grievance specific to them and then compelled the rest of the work force to join in. In 13 out of the 20 cases mentioned above, and in every case of upheaval since Independence, the strikes have been called by the underground workers acting alone.

For example, if one considered the wave of 14 strikes and industrial action in the gold mines between 1968 and 1971, not one of these involved more than a single mine. This is conspicuous because the issues which arose were

⁶³ Konings, *Political Potential of Ghanaian Miners*, p. 105-6.

not peculiar to a single mine; and also, because the level of militancy – up to and including kidnapping of management personnel, threats to dynamite the court house at Tarkwa, extensive beatings of senior staff, use of bows and arrows and other weapons by the workers – reached an unequalled height. To my knowledge only one sympathy strike has ever taken place: at Tarkwa, Prestea and Konongo over the shooting of workers at Obuasi in 1969. In this case the ground had been particularly well prepared by the recent shootings and tear-gassing experienced by the Tarkwa and Prestea workers themselves at the hands of the police in 1968 and 1969.

Looking more closely at the six strikes by the Tarkwa workers between January 1968 and June 1969, the following features seemed to stand out.⁶⁴ Five out of the six had to do with economic questions and the one that did not concerned the reinstatement of eleven workers dismissed in one of the previous strikes. In none of them were any attempts made to mobilise support from surface workers who numbered up to 1,200 at Tarkwa. Indeed, some of these actions were directed at some of the surface workers, namely those in the Labour Controller's office. In no case was any effort made to mobilise support from another mine, say Prestea workers who were about 12 miles away on the train line. In every one of them the action erupted spontaneously. And in all cases the issues were personalised to specific individuals who were held to be 'spoiling' the mine. Violence against these persons was the almost inevitable result.

The first strike, on 11 January 1968, concerned the non-payment of bonuses to underground workers. All 1,800 underground workers stopped working. They then marched through the mine compound breaking office windows, beat the Labour Controller (the officer in charge of bonus payments) and wrecked a

⁶⁴ The best accounts of these strikes are contained in Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class*.

company car. Three months later, on 4 March, they marched into Tarkwa town to the headquarters of the State Gold Mining Corporation (SGMC), demanding the removal of the Labour Controller. Again, the workers failed to achieve their objective.

Four months later, on 28 June, the same issue was reopened. This time the workers severely wounded the Underground Manager and the Assistant Mine Secretary and a number of senior staff. The Mine Manager's house and the senior staff canteen were looted. The SGMC Managing Director was seized by the workers, dressed in a miner's kit and paraded before the assembled workers, Chinese 'dunce cap' style. In October the underground workers again took action, successfully demanding the reinstatement of the group of workers dismissed in the previous fracas.

In January 1969 strike action was again taken and violence resorted to by the workers. This concerned the famous 'fence' case. The management claimed that workers were clocking-in, then leaving the shaft, or going underground and returning before completion of their shift. They decided to construct a security fence around the shaft top and to man the gates with security guards. The workers' response to this was to tear the fence down in the full view of management.

Six months later the 'war' of Tarkwa erupted. It was initiated by a dispute over the question of compensation to be paid workers who were discharged for medical reasons. Workers discharged with a diagnosis of tuberculosis received less than those with a diagnosis of silicotic-tuberculosis, for which working conditions in the mine could be held responsible. The workers demanded the removal of the Welfare Officer and the doctor, and, reaching back to previous issues, the dismissal of the acting Chief of Security.

To make their point they again marched on the town of Tarkwa, blocked the main road to Abosso and threatened to blow up the court house. The

doctor, the Mine Secretary and the Labour Controller were chased and the first two soundly thrashed. Windows of offices and houses were smashed and the town put under the control of the workers. Eventually police reinforcements arrived and the workers were tear-gassed into submission. Four workers were shot by the police and 47 arrested.

The following day the rioting continued at the shaft top, the bows and arrows of the workers facing the tear-gas and guns of the police. Three more workers were shot and 21 arrested. A few days later, the workers still refusing to work, their foremen – the Shift Bosses and Charge Hands – were sent by the management to persuade them to return to work. They were greeted with a hail of arrows and stones. The police were again hastily summoned and 80 workers arrested. Thus within the space of a week more than 12 senior personnel had been injured by the irate workers, 7 workers had been shot and 148 arrested by the police.

As mentioned before, the organisations which were formed spontaneously by the workers in the period reflected these facts. These were blastmen's associations, shop stewards' associations, machine drivers' groups, underground workers' associations and finally a breakaway Ashanti Goldfields Corporation Employees Association (AGCEU), formed in December 1971 by and for the workers at Obuasi alone, after the Busia government had abolished the TUC in September 1971. Again all the organisational attempts more or less excluded the surface workers, especially clerical workers, who generally treated underground workers with contempt and were regarded by the latter as particularly corrupt and lazy. A timberman said to me one day:

The clerical workers are the cheapest workers. Those who sit in front of tables writing – they are the cheapest workers. I have spent over thirteen years here, but if an elementary school leaver comes to ABA [Amalgamated Banket Areas – the former owners of Tarkwa Goldfields] here, he will get salary past me.

No attempt has ever been made by the workers themselves to change and take over the entire mine workers' union for all the mines. Even when R.A. Yeboah from Ashanti Goldfields became first the leader of that branch union and then head of the GMWU in June 1972 and February 1976 respectively, this was more the doing of the Ashanti Goldfields workers and Yeboah himself, rather than of the mine workers as a whole.

As can be seen, many of the issues raised by the workers (the antagonism between underground and surface workers being the classic example) were not to do with inherent relationships between labour and capital at all. They had rather to do with the carrying over and adoption of the structure of privilege from the colonial period in the mines into Independence.⁶⁵

The point has been made that many of these structural differentials, such as the gap between the working and living conditions of underground workers and senior staff and the rigid division of labour are inherent features of mining everywhere.⁶⁶ This raises vital issues which, however, go beyond the scope of this paper. One point may, provisionally, be made in reply: there are always 'organisational choices' in production and management systems in mining and in other branches of industry, as has been frequently pointed out, by Burawoy amongst others. Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that in classical American industrial sociology precisely the opposite claim has been made for

⁶⁵ For a brief, but very revealing discussion of how early 20th century economic culture took on a craft form in Ghana, complete with Chiefs and councillors, see David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana, The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1965, p.44. Kimble wrote: 'The Gold and Silversmith's Association, for example, was formed in protest against the Gold Mining Protection Ordinance of 1909; two years later it was reported to be a powerful organisation in Accra, ruled by its own Chief and councillors ... There were also other guilds of self-employed workers, including masons, blacksmiths, and coopers; nearly all had elaborate rules concerning apprenticeship, and mutual help at funerals.'

⁶⁶ Professor Francis Wilson has pointed out to me that the standard response to this question by white mining personnel in South Africa is that there is a special need for discipline in underground mining.

underground mining: Gouldner instanced this area of work as one which, by its very nature, defied all the structural rigidities beloved of Taylorites.

'Down here', said the miners, 'we have no rules. We are our own bosses' – this was the attitude which Gouldner reported existed among the American underground workers in the gypsum mine he studied between 1948 and 1951.⁶⁷

Most revealing is that such an attitude was also present in the mining supervisors. A mining foreman was reported as stating the following:

I think they (the miners) should be given the chance to show initiative. Here in the mine we give the man a job to do without being watched ... The men have to do a job themselves. They're not controlled.⁶⁸

On this basis, Gouldner went on to conclude:

Several observable differences between the mine and the surface have been presented: (1) The Miners' resistance to hierarchical administration; (2) the lesser emphasis which they place on delimited spheres of competence; (3) their relative de-emphasis on, and, in fact, positively hostile orientation toward some work rules; (4) the comparatively small degree of 'impersonalization' of super-worker relations in the mine. In short, the authority was greater on the surface than in the mine.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Alvin W. Gouldner, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, The Free Press, New York, 1954, p. 111.

⁶⁸ Gouldner, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, p. 139.

⁶⁹ Gouldner, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, p. 112. The entire structure of Gouldner's analysis is built upon this contrast between rigidity on the surface but fluidity underground: see especially chapters 6, 7 and 8. The approach in colonial mining in Africa has been to attempt to establish an across-the-board rigidity.

Serious problems ensue when mining engineers with a background in African mining systems are transferred elsewhere. This apparently occurred at Tara mine in Ireland in the 1980s as a result of a multinational company with interests in South Africa taking over the Irish mine. Bitter strikes erupted after personnel from South Africa were transferred to Ireland and attempted to establish their systems of work there: 'They would try to do something in their autocratic style and they would be told to go back to South Africa, that he was not dealing with black people ...' (Interview with Training Manager, Tarkwa Goldfields, 31 March 1988). The contrast between Gouldner's experience in American mines and the situation in African mining was first pointed out by Burawoy, *The Colour of Class*, p.54.

Thus it appears that the South Africanised Taylorism which has characterised mining in much of Africa, including Ghana and Zambia, with its system of rigid status hierarchy, detailed supervision and intense job fragmentation, does not at all 'inhere' in mining. The explanation for its occurrence and persistence has to be sought elsewhere in the economic and political culture.

Such issues, needless to say, cannot be adequately discussed here. Whatever the answers to them are, the fact is that in the colonial period, this very visible, gross differential in working and living conditions between management and underground workers was intensified by colonialism, racism and ethnic factors. These were never justified at any time, but in Ghana as elsewhere, after a very superficial 'cleansing', they were taken over and embedded in the culture and social structure of the independent nation by an even more superficial process of 'Africanisation'. This was a process which was implemented strictly from the point of view of the promotion of a bureaucratic elite. It was a notorious reality on the mines that in the periodic upheavals which occurred, most expatriate managers were safe and it was the life of Ghanaian senior personnel which was targeted by the workers.

The structural rigidities and differentials which persisted, were particularly unjustifiable, given the level of efficiency of management and the financial state of the mines and the nation as a whole. It was compounded by another set of 'survivals': the overbearing and generally insulting manner adopted by staff and surface workers who were by and large southerners, to the underground workers, who were in the main northerners; a system of wage and salary differentials which rewarded status more than skill and hard work; and a top-down method of allocation of labour to tasks, promotion and calculation of overtime and bonus payments which was arbitrary and disorganising.

The structure of authority in the mine was extremely authoritarian, the general principle governing operations being that 'the essence of management is control'.⁷⁰ In the allocation of tasks and responsibilities to workgroups, the general colonial principle, that wherever two or three workers were gathered together one was a 'headman', remained the golden rule.

Under colonialism this had its own logic and system of controls – for the colonial rulers and the foreign shareholders of the mines. 'Africanised', such a system was an invitation to arbitrariness, corruption and chaos:

In 'Gold Coast time', we did have permission to attend planning meetings – Miners and Senior Miners. But today's Ghana? – everybody after money and post. So when I myself become the General Manager or the Corporation Manager or any other head of department – I don't mind the workers again.

We are not authorized to attend the planning meetings. Only Shift Bosses are allowed to attend the planning meetings every month. We are supposed to go, because there are certain laws which come and we are supposed to know them. If we don't know them, something very bad will happen. And this time, we are not allowed to go.

And when any new law come, it will come all at once! That you have to do this and that. And we don't know where it comes from ...

Do you think that the management will agree to what we just talk? No! They don't agree! They will not agree.⁷¹

Thus, for example, one of the reasons why so many struggles occurred over bonus and overtime was because of the structure of the compensation package of the workers and the lack of accountability of the Labour Controller's office. To try not to fall even further behind the ever rising cost of living, the workers' basic pay alone was of little help. What they earned in bonus and overtime was not at all an incentive but a desperate means of trying to stay in the inflationary race. The workers did not fail to notice that while some of the

⁷⁰ The motto of the management consultants and production engineers in the 1950s and reiterated at length in the Manual of Standard Practice.

⁷¹ Miner, Tarkwa Goldfields, 24 May 1971.

same pressures applied to management on fixed salaries, they had access to a number of perquisites, such as good housing and utilities basically free.

What was more, these problems linked into the issue of corruption. The Labour Controller's office was a nest of corruption, as far as the workers were concerned. Fraudulent diversion of bonus and overtime payments was a way of life there. It is worth noting that a large part of the growth of corruption was due to the efforts of clerical and supervisory staff on fixed salaries to deal with the problem of inflation.

Petty and everyday corruption, affecting everything and nearly everybody, was deeply resented by the workers and had undermined any attempt at efficiency and responsible behaviour from below:

I am a Miner myself. I will have my boy. In the morning when we go to our working place and I tell the boy to do this and that, the boy will refuse. He will refuse! And then he will insult me!

When I go to report the boy to the Shift Boss, by then the boy is a friend of the Shift. The Shift Boss will not listen to me, he will rather listen to what the boy talk to him. Because the boy is a friend of his. So the whole thing can't work.

When I go again, I will not shout on the boy to do the work again because, yesterday, when I reported him, I was disgraced in front of the Shift Boss or the Senior Miner.

Recently, one of my gang shit at the working place. I reported him to the Shift Boss and the Shift Boss accused *me*, the Miner, of doing it. This was said in front of the boy!

Later, the Shift Boss called me aside to say that he knew I did not do it, but the boy was a friend of his, so ...?

I said: 'Oh! Is it so you say? Good!' And left him.

When I take the complaint to the Shift Boss and the Mine Captain, he doesn't mind you, but he follow the boy.

But that one ... don't write it oh! Ah! Because ... mmmm! It come from girls ... from girls: [in a whisper] the boy find a 'baby' for him.

You, Miner, he doesn't mind you, because you no do nothing for him. And you bring this boy – he always 'help' him – you bring him to say that he doesn't like his work, he do so-and-so. He doesn't mind. He will talk the matter to the Miner, say: 'You, Miner, *you* never do your work.' You see.

So that one dey, make the work must spoil.

I say: 'You, big man. You know that I am leader for the boy, when I bring complaint, you no get any answer or any talking to the boy, you turn to start on me. You think tomorrow I will tell the boy anything again?' I can't say it again.⁷²

At issue here was not just the all pervading phenomenon of corruption and the resentment of it by the workers. What is even more striking is the manner in which all relations on the job became personalised by the economic culture. In such a situation the maintenance of objective norms became well nigh impossible. A worker who only did his job well but did not find ways to 'help' his foreman was regarded as naive. He would not be rewarded with overtime, bonus payments and promotion.

The question is: did the workers resent this system as a whole or only specific cases of the application of it? The quotation above suggests that it was more the latter than the former. The offence there was not necessarily the personalisation per se: it was more the application of it in a manner which undermined the authority of a 'Senior' worker over his 'boy', to the extreme embarrassment of the 'Senior'.

The formal system was the same as in 'Gold Coast time', to all appearances. During that time the same system used to work in the view of the workers. One never had to bribe the Shift Boss for promotion or the Medical Officer to get a sick leave diagnosis or the Welfare Officer to get a compound room, or to contend with problems thrown up by 'Africanisation', as in the Miner's dilemma above.

Then, there was no fight with the Labour Controller over bonus and overtime fraud. Now there might be one, depending on the personalities who occupied those offices. It naturally appeared then that this was the fault of a

⁷² Miner, Tarkwa Goldfields, 24 May 1971.

personality rather than of a structure and the answer was to intimidate, thrash or remove him. Of course, his replacement was not likely to be any different.

The truth is that it was a system problem, but this was not how the workers saw it. The two systems only *appeared* to be the same. In fact the crucial difference was that during the colonial period, rigid control and depersonalisation (at least between Seniors who were European and workers who were African) was maintained by the entire system of colonial domination in the mines and in the wider society. With the dismantling of that system a new approach had not been developed and there was little real accountability in the 'Ghana time' system.

The standard working class 'economistic' issues of wage increases, shorter working hours, improved conditions of work and trade union democracy, which affected the whole work force were, of course, often raised. But the general approach was one of spontaneity and to fight these issues out on a workplace by workplace basis. In other words, it is apparent that the consciousness and sense of unity of the mine workers, even on the same mine or among their fellow mine workers, not to mention with the general working class, was very narrow in this period.

Much of this had to do with the overall level of socio-economic development of the country as a whole. It must not be forgotten that we are discussing a country which, even in 1984, had nearly 70% of its population living in the countryside, with 9% of its labour force in 'manufacturing' and only 0.4% of it in gold mining. Proletarian class consciousness, even in the minimum sense, was not likely to be fostered by conditions such as these.

What is more, about 60% of the underground workers were northerners, overwhelmingly Dagarti. During the colonial period, the north was isolated as a place apart – the Protectorate, the typical colonial labour reserve – from the south, where the 'real' economy was held to be. In addition there had been the

previous centuries of slave trade in which the northerners had been at the mercy of the southern armies or the *kambonse* and thousands had been sold into slavery.⁷³ This tradition is not forgotten in the north, hence the northern name for southerners – *Kambonga* – connoting brutal and treacherous mercenary, and used widely by the underground miners up until the early 1970s when referring to surface workers or supervisory and management personnel.

Since the Second World War the economy in the north, increasingly drawn into the cash economy, has been in serious difficulties. There are few jobs available and life is hard. There is a strong feeling of neglect. These conditions have forced thousands of northerners to migrate to the mines and elsewhere in search of work. Most brought their immediate families to the mines and thus had to contribute both to the household in the mines and to the extended one at home.⁷⁴ Indeed, one study of Obuasi workers indicated that 85% of workers sent money back home to rural kin every month. Among skilled and semi-skilled workers, nearly 40% claimed to be sending about 20% of their monthly wages.⁷⁵

But wages were low and the cost of living in the south very high, and working and living conditions extremely bad and dangerous. What the workers call 'the money palaver' was a very pressing matter indeed. As one worker explained about the economic situation in the north:

Some don't like to get penny; when he get it he can chop it the same day. And some too, he doesn't have any money to buy drink – *pito*. When he is from farm come, just sitting like that to think: Ah! When I come south to get work, I will get money always to chop small-small. I am

⁷³ The *kambonse* were Asante musketeer slave raiders. They were assigned to the Dagomba army for the purpose of raising the tribute of slaves due to Asante after their subordination of Dagomba in the eighteenth century.

⁷⁴ About 70% of the workers at Tarkwa had wives with them in 1971.

⁷⁵ Piet Konings, *Political Potential of Ghanaian Miners*, Table 16, p. 39.

sitting to be poor like that. Oh! I will come south again.

And that make the people go and come. And, sometime, some don't have place to farm. And we don't have any work too for north. I mean, *to work and get pay*. You say [to yourself]: 'When you go home, you no go get money.' You no go go? I say, yes. But you came here to find money, just your going home, you no get money and you go, what do you go to do for home?⁷⁶

The lack of opportunities to earn money in the north was an acutely felt problem for young people. 'At home', another northern worker explained,

I am talking on my own behalf – if in fact I get up and be doing some work, what kind of work? Well, poultry farming is a work at home ... I can be doing that. But how to gather money? It is NC 10 or NC 12 to get such a fine piece of cloth to buy. Because the least little cedis you get, already you have planned what to do with it.⁷⁷

These financial pressures were felt especially acutely where responsibilities to the extended kin grouping were concerned:

When any one come here to work, him helping he 'room' [that is *diudieme* – family]. Yes, he helping the house. When I go and having money at home perhaps I will fix zinc, or to fit to take that money to make farmer or to buy anything – it is for my house. And me and my brothers and my pickins and my mothers – they are all *diudieme* – that's all. Oh! *armine* [mothers' brothers/sisters' sons] too among. Because, if you get something too, you fit give them, you fit give them, because that house is your house again. Some people – many people who are here – he no get no house for him father house. No, he is going to him uncle – like K [a Dagarti Shift Boss whom we were just discussing]. And you get chop, to chop leave him? No, you fit give him.

Today, when I go home, to sleeping, managing myself, to know that I am okay and get something for my pocket, when I go home, I will fit do something, I will resign!

And if I check myself – nothing with me. Either I go home, the same suffer dey ... I am going to suffer again. I can stay here and do the work.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Bossman, Tarkwa Goldfields, 19 May 1971.

⁷⁷ Loco Headman, Tarkwa Goldfields, 22 May 1971.

⁷⁸ Miner, Tarkwa Goldfields, 19 May 1971.

Thus the worker was thrown into a desperate plight by 'the money palaver' both in the north and the south. It was a humiliating situation where elders who were poor 'chop' bride money, some lent it at interest, others evaded funerals and sacred customary responsibilities. Thus the reduction of bonus or overtime payments was immediately and sorely felt. When this occurred because of corruption, or arbitrary behaviour from senior staff who were living privileged lives, it naturally enraged the workers and drove them into a frenzy.

This was especially so because the universal view of underground workers was that, while the work which they are required to do underground was taxing and dangerous, most Shift Bosses were idlers, lolling about doing 'walk-a', giving orders but 'don't sabbe fuck-oh!' while drawing 'big pay':

Senior Miner work – ah! ... that one ... it no be work: just walk-a, walk-a. Or some drive want fall down, they go support it ... to get a level timberman – that one is the Senior Miner's duty: he must stand there and bracket there to support the place ... to know where the loco is coming, it no go hit here and it no go hit there – you must fix it so that the loco can pass.

Apart from that, he comes for stope. He also comes to ask us the amount of holes and check the working place. And you, Miner too, if you short of boy – the Shift Boss – you must tell him. He must be able to find, to go round and check if he see any boy ...

Ah! What can I say? When I say it is no good [that is, the work of the Shift Boss and Senior Miner], they just beat me. Or, I can't get working place to work. They put me out like that. Ha-ha-ha!

So: it is good! Ha-ha! I also like it! It get money!⁷⁹

Contrasts between what the workers claimed to be the incompetence and arrogance of management in 'Ghana time' with the industriousness of colonial supervisors in 'Gold Coast time', fell readily from their lips. In particular they emphasised the absence of fairmindedness when it came to promotion and recognition for hard work:

⁷⁹ Bossman, Tarkwa Goldfields, 24 June 1971.

Formerly, in 'Gold Coast time', the Mine Captain and Shift Boss, when he goes down early in the morning, he will go around all the stopes. Yes! He will go into a stope and see that there is a headman working there with his boys. But he himself will see that there is a boy in the stope who is working harder than the headman.

When you go out, when you close for business and you come to the surface, sometimes he will call you to his office – you may not know what he is going to tell you, but when you go – he will collect your ticket from you and change you to a headman in addition to the old headman who was in the stope. Why? It is due to your hard work ...

But today's Ghana? You can even ... you can even work to death! ... in fact! Under mining, I mean: you can work to death, he wouldn't mind you! ...

He doesn't do it. Why? Because he don't like you. That's how the work is going-on today. Because he doesn't like you.⁸⁰

Of course, the point is not at all whether this was an accurate account of what mining during 'Gold Coast time' was like. In point of fact it was not. The particular worker who made the above statement grew up in the north and was 12 years old at Independence. He thus had no experience of mining in the colonial period and in reality started to work in the mines in 1965, four years after nationalisation. It was all the more remarkable then that there was no appreciable difference between his views on these questions and those of veteran workers. The workers were not particularly preoccupied with historical accuracy: what they were of course trying to pinpoint were the failings of the system *currently*. Contrasts between 'Gold Coast time' and 'Ghana time' were simply ways of emphasising how acutely they felt the economic and social pressures of Independence.

Moreover, unlike the senior staff and the surface workers, only they really faced the dangers of silicosis. And, although major accidents were infrequent, they did occur. And it was not simply these which worried the workers. The really depressing problems were the 'minor' accidents which were routine,

⁸⁰ Trammer, Tarkwa Goldfields, 22 May 1971.

occupational hazards occurring every day and which frequently passed unreported. One simply became inured, at least in appearance. These dangers were year-in, year-out realities for underground workers but far less so for senior staff, including those stationed underground, who were seldom to be found actually in the stopes where the drilling, timbering and blasting took place:

Where I am to stand and hold the drill, there are some small stones there which will go into my eyes, and drops of water too – and that is the most dangerous part.

I was working with a shovel headman in the chute because the chute boy was absent. When we were opening and loading the local trucks, the chute was filled up and we were opening it little-little.

After that, the tally came in a large rush and hit the crossboard in the chute and crushed my fingers. That caused the wound. I couldn't do anything to stop it and I can't say either that someone wounded me. It's just that I was working and I was wounded.⁸¹

Since mining was done 'from level to level', the machine drivers worked in particularly cramped, dangerous and precarious positions especially when inside the stopes:

Some places are there which are high and it is difficult for me to drill the holes. It is higher than my head and I have to point the drill upwards into the face. And it is a force that I must drill a hole there.

And there are some places too, there will be a bar hanging [rock] which may fall down if the machine starts. But I have to stand in this place to drill my holes.

[The wound that you have [a deep gash in his upper arm] how did you get it?]

When I was working in a raise and a stone fell loose from on top and cut my arm. I was drilling above my head and that caused the wound.⁸²

But it was not only the frequency of accidents and the bad conditions of work and the dangers of silicosis which troubled the workers. It was also what

⁸¹ Tania Dagarti, Tarkwa Goldfields, 14 May 1971.

⁸² Dari Dagarti, Tarkwa Goldfields, 12 May 1971.

the mechanical shovel drivers at Marlu mine in 1937 called, 'the hardness of work'. 'We have been working for some time', one Marlu worker said, replying to the Mine Manager and the Acting District Commissioner Cole, 'and we know the hardness of work.'⁸³ The same applied to the workers in the 1970s, at Tarkwa, for example:

If you don't hold the drill steady and it moves from the cut, it may wound you. That is what you will do until all the hole is finished. I will take my spanner and pull the drill out of the hole and then put in another drill. The most important part of my job is to hold the drill steady and tight. If I don't hold it fast and it moves from the wall, it will hurt me.

And when the machine is drilling, it loosens all my bones. And when I come home, I can't sleep.⁸⁴

Although there were many southern workers underground, there were few northerners on the surface, except those on 'L.D.' (light duty, usually at the Staff Club or on the golf course, for workers adjudged insufficiently ill or injured to get sick leave) or those doing domestic work for staff members, or a few in the Mill. There were then none in clerical work in the offices, to my knowledge.

Again, although there were Dagarti Shift Bosses and Mine Captains (some highly respected by the workers), there were no northerners in senior administrative and financial positions in the mine, and only recently (1977) did a northerner come to head the union, in somewhat dubious circumstances.

To this occupational segregation one must add the segregation in the community life of the northerners which existed in towns such as Tarkwa and Prestea. Again some northerners in Tarkwa lived among southerners in some of the mushroom villages. But generally northerners lived apart, in separate communities and in the old mines compounds, where southerners were a

⁸³ GNA CSO 162/34/63A Assistant District Commissioner, Wassaw-Aowin to Provincial Commissioner, 19 October 1937.

⁸⁴ Augustine Dagarti, Tarkwa Goldfields, 6 May 1971.

minority. These communities, complete with *Biepole Na*, *Makazie*, and *Biebile Na* were like little zones of underground mining northern culture, surrounded by Akan, or as the workers would say, Fante or *Kambonga*, culture.

There, *pito* (northern beer) was brewed and *saap* (porridge) cooked along with other staples of the northern and Dagarti diet, and *chira* (ackee) trees planted. Entertainment was by xylophone and dances from the north, and of course Dagarti was the language spoken. Disputes were settled within the community and even when the police were involved, some community effort was usually made on behalf of the worker. Funerals were northern affairs adapted to mines conditions. Marriages were usually within the ethnic group and required visits to the north and payment of bride wealth for them to be established. This did not mean that the workers preserved a 'pure' northern culture in the south. But it did mean that the distance between the living conditions of the northern underground and the southern surface worker, not to mention the southern senior staffer, remained particularly huge.

In my experience, it was this overlap of ethnic-regional cultural divisions with socio-economic divisions – the economic culture of the mine – combined with their awareness of the harsh economic circumstances of the north, that gave the workers' outlook and actions their peculiar quality. If one added to this the arrogant attitudes and insulting behaviour of some southern clerical and senior staff in the mines, as well as the issue of corruption, then it was not difficult to understand the ferocity of the workers' response.

The economic culture was one which stressed authoritarianism, hierarchy, personalism, narrow local specialisations and craft organisation. It upheld sharp status distinctions based on occupation, seniority by age and long service, educational 'status' (in the sense of status of institution attended) and life style. It bred a contempt for manual labour, exaggerated respect for book knowledge and formal academic qualifications and a deep attachment to

routine.

It contained a positive orientation to new technology but in a 'consumerist' sense. There was an avid desire to have 'the latest' (both in consumer and producer goods). But this was not matched by a determination to do the hard work of setting up effective local systems of quality control, maintenance, repair and training which such technology demands and which ultimately leads to it taking root in the local system.

In this culture the dominant figure and the most powerful symbol was the 'Chief': now chief not of a community or region, but of the administrative system of the mine at each point of hierarchy. The use of this term of address by workers and junior staff alike when speaking to or of various members of supervisory or senior staff, especially those with forceful 'chiefly' personalities, was routine on the mine.

It is this whole complex of structures, attitudes and practices, on and off the job, which I characterise as 'colonial'. It is this economic culture which was formative for the workers' consciousness in the post-colonial period.

They vacillate between vigorously opposing specific instances of the application of this culture which are harmful to them and on occasion, contesting the culture as a whole. The dilemma of consciousness for the workers is that they too, at least partially, accepted the personalised norms of the economic culture.

For example, they felt that one of the reasons that they were treated badly was because they were regarded as *Pepe* (the southern ethnic slur for northerner); but they too regarded the southerners as *Kambonga*. They were sick of the big and petty every-day corruption and the sermons for self-sacrifice by sleek bureaucrats but were not beyond being drawn into the practice of corruption themselves. They were under severe economic pressure from relatives north and south and when they rebelled, they had many scores

to settle. They resorted to the methods of the bow and arrow – of the rural society – which they were masters of, and not to the arts of the negotiating table – the favoured terrain of the bureaucrat. Realistically perhaps they did not set too much store by general working class solidarity.

This does not mean that the workers were tribalists. There has never been any significant tendency for them to imagine that the solution to their problems was to have Dagarti clerical workers and senior administrators. On the contrary, a particular hatred was reserved for some of the northerners in senior technical positions, 'who only after post and money'. They would have been proud to have more educated northerners in senior positions in the mines, if these were honest and capable people. They sometimes sought the traditional trade union solutions, wanting in particular to control their own local trade union branches and bargaining process. It was not so much that their approach was 'economistic'. It was rather that the structures which were being opposed had a very specific and entrenched character indeed.

This was one of the reasons why their outrage, instead of propelling them to the left politically, if anything inclined them rightward. Silver has a difficult time explaining, for example, why the 'militantly class conscious' mine workers supported Acheampong in the UNIGOV manoeuvre in 1977.⁸⁵ All other classes seemed to have rejected this government by then. He has to concede that the explanation was simple: a 300% wage increase in 1974 and another 300% in 1977 awarded to the mine workers by the Acheampong government.

But this was no new tendency among the mine workers. As is well known, during the nationalist period they distanced themselves from the 'positive action' strike called by the railway men in 1950. In the fight against the 1958

⁸⁵ Silver, 'Class Struggles', pp. 84-85.

Industrial Relations Act and the 1961 compulsory savings levy, all of which were national issues affecting them more or less directly, they also left it to the railway workers. When Busia introduced the development levy in September 1971 and dissolved the TUC for opposing it, the TUC turned to the mine workers in vain. When it comes to national economic or political issues, the truth is that the record of the mine workers (so far) has not been a heroic one.

The reason for this was that the particularly acute forms of oppression and humiliation which they suffered, had never been seriously addressed by the nationalist movement.

This tendency to a somewhat narrow economic and political outlook was reinforced by their northern background. When they placed their problems in the mines in the broader context of Ghanaian society, it was usually in a manner which, as has been said above, glorified the colonial past. Their analysis tended to be that the root of the problem lay in the inherent character of the southerners who had led the country into Independence. They were aware that this was not a satisfactory analysis, if only because, in their opinion, the north 'also spoil' – becoming increasingly like the south; and because one of their most loved leaders, Yeboah, was a southerner. But they made it all the same.

For all of these reasons then, it is a mistake to interpret the militancy of the mine workers in the 1970s as a case of *proletarian* class consciousness, whether one uses a minimum or a maximum definition of the term. And it is also, perhaps, a mistake to contend, as Silver seemed to do, that the problem derived from the limitations of progressive Ghanaian intellectuals who were said to see the mine workers as 'a rough and uneducated lot, incapable of

understanding the intellectual's theories.⁸⁶

The truth was that the mine workers were very aware of the abuses generated by the ethnic and sectional divisions of the workplace. The issues which they raised, were they to be taken seriously, had profound implications for the character of Ghanaian society. But it is possible that they were less *class* conscious in the *proletarian* sense than other sections of Ghanaian workers who are apparently less militant. This is not just pedantry, nor does it mean that the mine workers were permanently immune to proletarian class consciousness, in either the minimum or the ideological senses. However, the problems of raising this consciousness of the 1970s to a proletarian level (in either senses of the word) in the 1980s and 1990s are formidable ones. This will certainly be more difficult if the peculiarity and limitation of the workers' existing consciousness and the foundations of their grievances are not grasped and acted on.

This is especially so, since what this 'peculiarity' consisted of really had to do with fundamental aspects of the structure of political and economic culture and processes in the colonial and post-colonial period. It was the persistence of pre-colonial and colonial practices and attitudes, adapted to the interests of the contemporary bureaucratic elite, which was the source and the target of the workers' outrage. The struggle against *this* opponent was not inherently a struggle against capitalism at all and indeed a resolution of these issues is likely to lead to a greater flourishing of capitalist relations, including working class consciousness, albeit on a more democratic basis. But it certainly raises radical issues for Ghanaian society.

One may go so far as to say that, without a resolution of these questions (which are social questions though not inherently of a capitalist kind), the

⁸⁶ Silver, 'Class Struggles', p.85.

development of a proletarian class consciousness among mine workers in Ghana is likely to be severely impeded. To contend otherwise may actually be counterproductive to the longer term interests of the workers themselves.

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