

THE 1912 WANKIE MINE STRIKE

by

G. van Onselen

On the 31st December, 1912, approximately 160 of the Wankie coal mine's 1,000 African mine workers came out on strike. The workers put two demands to the management which the latter rejected. The mine manager insisted that the workers be prosecuted for their refusal to work and by the 3rd January, 1913, the workers had been prosecuted and had returned to work. By the 4th January, the Wankie colliery was working 'normally'.

Until recently, the history of African labour in the premier industry of Rhodesia, mining, was comparatively neglected. Since the publication of T. O. Ranger's African Voice, however, a number of studies have been made which offer new insights into black response in the industrial setting of Central Africa. (1) Such studies have contributed to a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of labour mobilization and proletarianization in colonial economies.

The broader based studies of scholars like Ranger and Arrighi have provided descriptive backgrounds and conceptual approaches which are invaluable to the labour historian of Rhodesia. What are also required, however, are studies of a more detailed nature which examine the theoretical basis of African responses within the sociologically specific nexus of the mine compounds. A detailed examination of the strike at the Wankie colliery in 1912 should assist in delineating some of the major determinants of African responses within the parameters of compound sociology and colonial industry.

Opened in 1903 and situated in the isolated north-western area of Rhodesia, Wankie colliery occupied a position of central importance in the colony's economy. The availability of local coal not only ensured considerable savings in foreign exchange but it also facilitated the development of a railway system in an expansive territory. More fundamentally, however, the colliery yielded the fuel-power for the machinery of the major industry of the country - gold mining. The importance of gold and coal were inextricably linked in the economic system of the country: "Coal is as necessary as gold, because the absolute sine qua non of success in the latter industry is low working costs." (2) Inexpensive coal from Wankie and cheap labour were two of the most important factors which ensured the continued profitability of gold mining in Rhodesia.

The necessity of cheap coal for the gold mining industry ensured not only expanding production demands on the colliery but also consistent pressure for reductions in the price of coal. (3) Working within the constraints of these economic realities the management at Wankie, in common with mining concerns throughout Rhodesia, pursued a policy of cheap black labour. This policy aimed at, and in large measure succeeded in, reducing a minimum direct expenditure on African labour in the form of wages and indirect expenditure on a diversity of items such as food, accommodation, hospitalization and compensation for injury.

Procuring labour within the limitations of this policy was difficult, and in the first twenty years of the mine's existence the colliery suffered from periodic "labour shortages". These "labour shortages" must have been compounded partly by the fact that the gold mines to the south of the colliery, in Matabeleland, paid higher wages. (4) This, coupled with a poor health record which, at least in part, stemmed from managerial indifference, did much to secure the mine a "bad name" during its opening years. In 1906, the native commissioner for the Sebungwe district noted of Wankie: "In the words of the Natives themselves the 'Colliery stinks' - Gu ya muka a Malahleni." (5)

This unpopularity, which stemmed from an exploitative labour policy, meant that the colliery could not simply rely on a voluntary labour force which freely sought work at the mine. One of the first colliery managers made this clear to his board of directors: "With regards to our requirements in Native labour, I am afraid that we will never get these fulfilled by voluntary natives, and consequently we must depend upon our agents, either Bureau or private, for our supply." (6) In order to operate with a full complement of cheap labour the Wankie management found it necessary to augment its working force with groups of Africans who, for various reasons, had little or no bargaining power within the economy.

Workers procured from these latter groups were obtained in a variety of ways. In 1903, for example, the management utilized the opportunity afforded by a serious drought to forward grain to an impoverished peasantry in exchange for underground labour. (7) Besides sporadic supplies of labour obtained in this way, the mine made extensive use of African workers supplied by the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau. These workers, significantly called Chibaro (slave or forced labour) by their fellow workers, were drawn from the poorest ranks of the peasantry, signed long-term contracts, and were "drafted" to the most unpopular mines. (8) Besides RNLB workers, who had restricted bargaining powers, the management at different times also found it necessary to turn to the administration for assistance and make use of convict labour - a group with no bargaining power at all. (9)

The majority of the labour force at Wankie was not, however, composed of RNLB workers or convicts. (10) For the bulk of its labour supply the mine relied on its favourable geographical location and the absence of alternative labour markets in the north-west. The fact that there was no other mine within a 200 mile radius ensured that at least some local Tonga and Tonka tribesmen would consider employment at Wankie. (11) Besides these local labourers, the mine was probably utilized to some extent by Africans working their way south to the more lucrative wages of Matabeleland and South Africa. In addition, Wankie, as a large cash employment centre in close proximity to Northern Rhodesia, and in particular Barotseland, must have held certain attractions for workers from those areas with tax and other obligations.

It was largely groups of workers drawn from these areas that had the earliest and most unfortunate experiences of conditions in the Wankie compound. Despite these early experiences Africans were quick to reassess the colliery as a potential place of employment. In its opening year, 1903, the mine acquired a bad reputation, but by the end of the following year Africans were already reassessing it as a potential employment venue. (12) This process of reassessment persisted into the following year and was further facilitated by a drop in the death rate at the mine. By the end of 1905 the Inspector of Mine Compounds for the Wankie district could note that "There is no doubt that the mine has become more popular with native labourers". (13)

From about mid-1905, however, one can detect the presence of two integrally related features which formed part of the recurrent labour crises at the colliery. Firstly, there was the consistent and increasing demand for coal for use in the gold mining industry, which in turn placed great pressure on the African work force to increase production. Production, especially during the early years, did increase rapidly. During 1906, for example, the colliery's coal output doubled. (14) These increases in production were not effected without cost to the black workers, and one sign of the pressure was the large number of assaults which manifested themselves at Wankie whenever an increase in output was expected. (15)

This increased work pressure, when coupled with low expenditure on food, combined to form the second feature of the labour crises at the mine - a high sickness and death rate. (16) Frequently these features would interact and reinforce one another to produce a spiralling effect which would culminate in a labour crisis of some sort. Usually, the precipitating cause of such crises was an outbreak of scurvy.

Given the profitability constraints of the mining industry as a whole in Rhodesia, it will readily be appreciated that scurvy was not restricted to Wankie. Between 1906 and 1908, for example, 4,046 black miners died in Rhodesian compounds from various diseases. Of these deaths, 8.3% in 1906, 12.7% in 1907, and 13.5% in 1908 were attributed to scurvy. (17) Black mineworkers were dying from

"... a disease of the blood, characterised by debility and anaemia, with sponginess and bleeding of the gums, bleeding into muscles, and effusions into joints and serious cavities, and in certain cases by superficial destruction of tissues and the formation of characteristic ulcers, especially on the lower limbs; it is caused by the absence of certain constituents found only in fresh food, and is aggravated and precipitated by unaccustomed muscular demand". (18)

From this description and the figures supplied, it is clear that the syndrome of hard work and inadequate diet was a basic feature of the Rhodesian mining industry. What is interesting and particularly noteworthy of Wankie is the marked way in which this pattern occurred at regular intervals during the first two decades of this century - 1908, 1910, 1912 and 1918. What makes 1912 special is that we can trace the development of this pattern in some detail, place it within the sociological setting of the compound, and link it to an active worker response.

Prior to 1912, outbreaks of scurvy at the colliery did not produce large scale united worker responses. African responses were, on the whole, defensive and based on individual or small group reaction. Thus, when the syndrome manifested itself in a relatively minor form in 1906, African workers simply responded by deserting and making for the northern Rhodesian border. (19) It was perhaps the absence of such large scale worker response which enabled the management to undertake actions which facilitated later outbreaks of scurvy. During 1907, for example, no fresh vegetables at all were issued to black workers at Wankie. This action was presumably due to the cost of fresh vegetables and the remoteness of the mine from fresh produce markets. (20) A further reduction in expenditure on African labour was achieved in 1908 when the colliery, in common with the rest of the mining industry in the country, implemented a general reduction in wages for black workers. (21)

These actions, and especially the reduction in wages, contributed to subsequent outbreaks of scurvy. The reduction of wages would have reduced the mineworkers' ability to purchase "extra" food supplies from the store in the vicinity of the compound. In 1908 matters were complicated by the fact that the rationing system was poorly organized. Anti-scorbutic rations such as meat and vegetables were issued on only one day a week, and this meant, as an official enquiry later revealed, that "... for five days in the week the Natives' sole diet was Mealie Meal". (22) As usual, this dietary deficiency was accompanied by production pressure, and it was reported that many Africans wanted to leave "because the work was too hard". (23)

Under these circumstances the mine rapidly lost its ability to attract local labour and the manager had to "import" labour - 84 "boys" being obtained from Kimberley. With local labour avoiding the colliery to such a marked extent, it was further necessary to make use of labour obtained from the RNLB. These measures partly relieved the pressures in 1908 but, since the underlying profitability constraints remained the same, it was inevitable that the pattern should repeat itself, and it did so in the following year.

By the end of 1909 there had been at least 48 serious cases of scurvy at Wankie and a number of deaths amongst black mineworkers. Again, the workers' response was largely defensive, and this is well illustrated in a letter which four "Nyasas" sent to their headman in the Ncheu district of Nyasaland.

"... we ourselves do not know that we shall arrive there [home] because we are all sick, here is bad disease, perhaps you shall see us but we do not know because many people are dying. We asked the Europeans to send us home and they refused and because the only way is by steamer [railway] we are not able to run away; whenever we try to run away the policemen catch us on the bridges because there is not another way we can go, they tell us to finish our work first, you cannot go before your work is finished, this is the reason we are troubled here." (24)

The desire to desert, its cause and the difficulties imposed by the Zambesi for workers wanting to leave Wankie are only too apparent from this note.

As in 1908, these events at the colliery did not escape the attention of the administration. But, as was frequently the case, administrative action was not only belated but inadequate. Emergency rationing and the order to build a new hospital might relieve immediate pressure on the work force and increase its comfort, but it would not remove the underlying causes of such outbreaks. What was required was an increase in the workers' income, either directly in the form of cash wages or indirectly by a long term improvement in the quality of the diet at the colliery. (25) Basically, many of the black mineworkers at Wankie, in common with black miners throughout Rhodesia, were "living" on sub-subsistence wages.

The tenuous position of black mineworkers flowed as a direct consequence of the profitability constraints of the mining industry and the class position of these workers in a colonial political economy. Perceived as "migrants" - single males who worked for limited periods to supplement rural income - white industrialists did not see these Africans as workers entitled to wages which would support families. The low wages paid in accordance with this perception were further justified by capitalists by pointing to food and accommodation as a major part of real income.

At Wankie, as at other mines in Rhodesia, there was some social reality at the base of this perception. It is certain that there were some single workers who saw their employment period as a temporary sojourn in order to earn necessary cash. It is also beyond doubt that cash wages were a supplement to rural income for many workers and, of course, Africans did receive food and accommodation. But the presence of some of these features in no way justifies the suggestion that it was of equal application to all black workers. To postulate and accept the existence of a homogeneous group of black mineworkers who shared all these features is to accept mining house ideology at face value.

The justification for low wages found in managerial ideology simply did not square with the realities of compound life at Wankie and other Rhodesian mines. In practice, a considerable number of Wankie workers were long-term residents with families, and were permanent inhabitants of married quarters in the compound. For many of these families the possibility of a rural income must have seemed remote. In any case normal seasonal fluctuations were such that few workers could rely on rural income as a "given" year after year. In addition, many mineworkers, married and single, had to make considerable cash outlays on food and accommodation. At Wankie married men, and single workers who were anxious to escape the lack of privacy in the barracks-like central compound, often purchased huts in the compound from departing workers. (26)

More particularly, however, Wankie workers, like workers throughout Rhodesia, were forced to invest a substantial part of their cash income in the purchase of "extra" food supplies. These "extra" items of food, purchased at the mine store, were not, as management termed them, "luxuries", but an essential investment without which workers would not retain their health. (27) But the basic and real need for food also transcended the mere purchase of "extras", and workers spent a substantial part of their free time in scouring the countryside for wild vegetables, fishing and hunting. (28) Especially in regard to the latter activities it is clear that, in a very real and specific sense, Wankie workers were dependent on the capacity of the local environment and seasonal variations for their state of health. The workers' welfare depended as much on weather as it did on wages.

In the years when rainfall was adequate workers would supplement their mine rations in the way indicated, and by so doing would retain their health and productivity. But wages were so low and the quality of food rations so inadequate that even in the best of years only a tenuous balance was maintained. In such "normal" years, however, access to the food resources of the surrounding countryside must have held scurvy outbreaks at bay and blunted potential worker responses. Management, however, could not always rely on the weather, and it was perhaps inevitable that in one year poor diet and production demands would coincide with a drought. In such a year the countryside could not be expected to yield that essential produce which alleviated the plight of the mineworkers.

1912 was such a year. As the annual Report on the Public Health later recorded, "... the evil effects on the mortality rates of a famine year were particularly marked in the case of native mine labourers". (30) Of no mine was this more true and at no mine were the consequences more dramatic than at Wankie.

As from October 1912 food, both in terms of quantity and quality, became a serious problem at the colliery. From the start of that month no fresh vegetables at all were issued to compound inhabitants. With the exception of some onions that were issued during December, this situation persisted until the time of the strike. To all intents and purposes the sole diet of black mineworkers became mealie meal. (31) Under the prevailing famine conditions food became of central importance not only to Wankie workers but also to the peasants in the surrounding countryside. Indeed, so scarce was food that the normal pattern was reversed and instead of food flowing from countryside to compound it frequently happened that miners were forced to take food to adjacent villages. (32) As in 1903, the colliery management utilized the opportunity afforded by the drought to forward grain to the peasants in exchange for labour contracts at the mine. (33)

The food shortage in the compound soon manifested itself in the form of scurvy, and in October 7 cases of the disease were reported. As an increasing number of workers reported ill with the disease, so work pressure intensified on the remaining "healthy" workers. The harder these latter workers worked on the inadequate diet the sooner they too developed scurvy, and by December, the month in which the strike occurred, there were 29 scurvy cases in the compound and 5 deaths from the disease.

The increase in scurvy cases and the number of deaths clearly left its impact on the productivity of the black mineworkers. In October each labourer produced 2.6 tons of coal during the month, by November it had dropped to 2.4, and by December it had been reduced to 2.2. This increase in sickness and the decline in productivity is evidence of the operation of a vicious circle. Inadequate food rations resulted in a growing sickness and death list, the increased sick and death rate placed an added production burden on the remainder of the "healthy" workers, and this added production burden, when coupled with the poor food, produced more scurvy. As this process entrenched itself, so the productivity of the workers declined. The basic dimensions involved are evident in the following table.

WANKIE MINE

<u>Month</u>	<u>Output of coal per worker in tons per month</u>	<u>Scurvy cases per month</u>	<u>Deaths</u>
Oct. 12	2.6	7	1
Nov. 12	2.4	22	3
Dec. 12	2.2	29	5*
Jan. 13	2.3	-	10*

* all attributable to scurvy

While food, health and production demands constitute the major features of the December strike, it would be unprofitable to allow an analysis to rest solely on this mechanistic foundation. Worker responses occur within a sociological nexus, and in order to understand worker demands and behaviour it is necessary to place these features within the setting of the compound.

On the 15th November, the regular compound manager at the colliery, H. P. Marriott, left the mine on extended leave for a period of six months. Marriott had occupied the position for some years, and he was replaced by an acting compound manager, Roy. Roy obviously had little experience in a position which was, in many respects, central to the smooth functioning of the compound. This lack of experience must have been apparent to some of those around Roy. On assuming the job Roy was spoken to by T. R. Jackson, the acting native commissioner at Wankie. Jackson offered his support and pointed out to Roy that "... he and I were in a position to help each other enforce respect for all authority of the white man, whether of Government or employers". (34)

From subsequent events it is also clear that Roy felt that his duty to uphold "the authority of the white man" was central to his role as acting compound manager. Roy's task could not have been easy, for, in addition to having limited experience, he was required to act within a managerial setting where there were marked tensions between various senior colliery officials. In particular, there was considerable hostility between Hewetson, the mine medical officer, and the manager of the colliery, A. R. Thomson. In part, this conflict can be traced to Thomson's belief that "native" malingerers were fooling the doctor, thus extending the sick list and limiting production. (35) Because of his inexperience and the pressures of production Roy could not remain neutral in this conflict. The acting compound manager thus "inherited" some of the conflict that existed between the medical officer and the colliery manager.

In an exposed position as a newcomer and a temporary incumbent of the position of compound manager Roy decided to play it safe and side with Thomson, the most senior official at the colliery. It was T. R. Jackson who noted that "It was in December that the Acting Compound Manager, now replaced, tried to play up to the management, which informed me that there was 'a tremendous amount of malingering going on' and that 'the natives were duping the Doctor right and left'...". (36) Roy thus attempted to resolve his personal predicament by siding with Thomson against Hewetson. In practice, this meant attempting to reduce the sick list to a minimum and by so doing make more black workers available to meet production demands.

Like compound managers throughout Rhodesia, however, Roy had to interact not only with a series of white officials but with a team of specially selected black men who had special responsibility for the control and discipline of black miners - the so-called "compound police". (37) Within the relatively closed community that constituted the compound these black men had considerable power and responsibility. In theory these powers were exercised under the close supervision of the compound manager. Roy, however, faced with a divided white managerial team and consistent pressure, was forced to place even greater trust in his black subordinates.

These compound "police" had a variety of duties which necessitated close and frequent interaction with the black miners. Duties ranged from assisting the compound manager in administering whippings to black miners to supervising and organizing the issuing of rations. The latter practice in particular gave compound "police" considerable scope for abuse, and many managers in Rhodesia were well aware of this. (38) In a situation where part of the rationalization for paying low wages was the distribution of food, the practice of making compound "police" responsible for food issues was akin to making one worker responsible for the payment of an important part of another worker's income. This was true in the best years in Rhodesia, and the practice frequently aroused tensions in mine compounds. (39) In a year of drought, famine and scurvy, the tension inherent in the situation must have sharpened considerably.

From November 1912 onwards, then, there were two sets of forces operating at the colliery, both of which produced tensions and increased pressure on the black mineworkers. Firstly, there were those sets of policies and practices which derived from the profitability constraints of the industry and the role of Wankie as the sole source of coal in Rhodesia. Secondly, there was that particular configuration of social forces which derived from the sociology of the compound and the roles of the individual actors in those circumstances. It is now necessary to turn and examine how these forces interacted to precipitate a strike by part of the black labour force.

Roy, working for and with Thomson, saw his role largely as one of ensuring discipline and supplying labour in the necessary amounts in order to keep up production. The acting compound manager set about achieving this objective in two ways. In the first instance, he undertook at fairly regular intervals a series of brutal assaults on black workers. These assaults were undertaken in order to reduce "loafing". Workers' evidence at the court case which followed the strike throws some light on the activities of Roy and his compound "police". Kalima stated in evidence:

"Arida and I were both whipped by the Compound manager last Friday. He whipped us with a sjambok in the compound office towards sunset. We lay down on our faces held by the wrists by Charlie and by the ankles by Simon - the compound police boy who issues rations. I heard Arida getting whipped first, while I was still locked up in the 'stocks' close by. After that I was whipped across the buttocks. I received fifty-six cuts." (40)

These and other similar assaults Roy undertook to ensure what he considered to be discipline and keep up production. (41)

At the subsequent court case where the workers were put on trial, black mineworkers proved to be remarkably tolerant of Roy's actions and took cognizance of the fact that he was new to the job. (42) What disturbed them more, however, was the fact that these whippings were undertaken in an arbitrary fashion without any systematic enquiry. As some of the workers put it, "The Acting Compound Manager would whip a boy on the word of his native 'police' without making any enquiry of the alleged culprit". (43) In this regard the strikers were of the opinion that the compound "police" had misled Roy as to previous practice in the compound. Whippings had long been part of approved management policy at Wankie, and workers were objecting not to the practice itself but the procedure that was followed. (44)

As far as the strikers were concerned, however, it was Roy's second set of actions that constituted the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back. Roy, acting within his and Thomson's belief that the hospital was a refuge for malingers, decided to make the hospital less attractive for recovering workers. To this end he ordered that all hospitalized workers and out-patients should be placed on a half meat ration. (45) For a work force strained to the limits of its capacity and clamouring for food this must have constituted a highly provocative gesture.

This action in itself was considered insufficient to reduce the "malingering" and the management took further action to deal with what it thought to be the problem. Instructions were issued to the effect that out-patients at the hospital were to undertake "light-duty". There is some doubt as to whom exactly this instruction should be attributed and what exactly the nature of the "light-duty" was. (46) What is known is that the "light-duty" was unpaid and that partly it involved out-patients being set to work next to convicts in the construction of a tennis court. (47) Since Hewetson was also the president of the local lawn tennis club, it is possible that the "light-duty" involved would achieve both his and Roy's objectives for different reasons. In any event, the putting of the sick to unpaid work next to convicts was a singularly unpopular management decision.

The work and rationing system at the hospital was not the only cause for grievance amongst the workers. The cut-back in rations at the hospital that was achieved with managerial sanction was also being achieved in an informal way in the rest of the compound. Here, the role of the compound staff and "police" was crucial. At the time of the strike this staff constituted some 20 workers - 1 clerk, 4 cooks, 7 sweepers and 8 "police boys". The most important of these staff members as far as the strike was concerned were Charlie, the head "police boy", and Simon, the compound "policeman" responsible for rationing. Further, it might be noted that none of these "police boys" were Lozi.

Under the supervision of Charlie and Simon a system of rationing operated which substantially reduced the amount of meat which each worker received. As a concomitant, the amount of food available to the compound staff and their friends increased. The compound "police" simply kept back large portions of the meat ration for their own use. This practice continued for some time after the strike and it was noted by Stokes, the perceptive RNLB inspector who visited the colliery in February 1913. Stokes pointed out that "The issue of foodstuffs is almost entirely left to certain native compound police. These police boys seem somewhat out of the control of the Acting Compound Manager". (48) He further noted that, of the 480 lbs of meat to be issued, the compound staff kept back no less than 96 lbs for their personal use, and he pertinently suggested that "as

there is starvation in the district, meat is naturally a very marketable commodity". (49) Stokes's observations simply confirmed what had been suspected earlier by others. There seems little reason to doubt that these practices extended back to at least the time that Roy took over the management of the compound. (50)

Besides keeping back large quantities of meat for their own benefit, the compound "police" also made little effort to ensure that the remaining meat was fairly distributed amongst the workers. This, too, did not escape the notice of Stokes: "When the food is issued a gong is struck and there is a general scramble, but the weaker boys, and those not having friends with the Police being served last!" (51) For these reasons grievances about rationing were to be found not only amongst those at the hospital but also amongst the rest of the workers in the compound.

It is clear, then, that Roy's actions, the rationing system and the problem of "light-duty" would have made themselves felt through a wide cross-section of the compound. But it also seems clear that this impact was more deeply felt by one group of workers in particular.

To define exactly the composition of the workers who participated in the strike is difficult because of certain overlapping dimensions that are present. The two most prominent of these dimensions are the ethnic and the occupational. There is no doubt that the majority of the strikers were drawn from a single ethnic group - the Lozi. Of those prosecuted for participation in the strike 45% were Lozi, 15% Tonka, and the remainder were drawn from at least six other ethnic groups spread throughout central Africa. (52) With such a large number of the strikers drawn from one group, it was perhaps inevitable that some observers would see the dispute as being tribally based. The magistrate certainly saw it as an important feature, for in his judgement he noted that: "The bulk of the accused form a strong contingent from a tribe living under their own King, whose influence extends to the borders of this District. They must be taught to respect the laws of the land they are living in and that in no circumstances would it be tolerated that they should take the law in their own hands." (53) Roy was also of the opinion that it was largely the "MaRotsi" that were at the base of the trouble.

It is clear that there was an ethnic dimension to the strike and that Lozi workers were particularly prominent in the events at the colliery. But the second dimension, the occupational, seems at least as important as the former. Thomson, called to the compound, at once "... noticed that a number of the more highly paid boys were among the mob". (54) In a later telegram to the Chief Native Commissioner, Thomson again made it clear that he was aware of a dimension other than the ethnic when he pointed out that many of the strikers were underground "boss boys". (55)

In seeking unifying features amongst the strikers, it is probably necessary to consider a third strand besides those of ethnicity and occupation. Although the evidence is scanty, it is probable that the strikers included amongst their number a proportion of peasants who were at work at the colliery in exchange for grain forwarded to them during the drought. (56) While the overall composition of the labour force at the time is not known, this may be a further factor which could account for the predominance of local tribesmen amongst the strikers. Lozi and Tonka workers between them formed 60% of the strikers

prosecuted. This, too, would account for the large numbers of relatively low paid Tonka and Lozi workers involved in the strike - starving peasants would have had little choice in determining their wage rates.

Ethnicity, occupation and indebtedness are thus three of the features which can be isolated when studying the composition of the group of strikers. It seems unnecessary, and, given the cross-cutting nature of some of these features, unwise, to choose any one of these factors as the "cause" of the strike. Individually, each of the features had a unifying potential amongst some of the strikers. Debt might have produced a certain amount of solidarity amongst lower paid Tonka and Lozi workers. A common language would have facilitated the speed and ease of communication amongst the Lozi workers, and perhaps they shared a particular grievance because of the absence of a Lozi compound "policeman". (57) But production pressures would have been particularly felt by underground "boss boys" regardless of ethnic background, although there does seem to be some evidence to suggest that many of these were Lozi.

All of these factors, however, must have come into operation as discontent in the compound mounted in the latter months of 1912. It was in December particularly that the discontent started to manifest itself more openly. It was during this month that the largest number of new scurvy cases appeared in the compound and during the same month that Roy inflicted some of the most severe beatings on the workers. When the management organized an elaborate sports meeting for the black mineworkers on Christmas day, it was noted that "the MaRotsi were conspicuous by their absence from the whole proceedings". (58)

By the 30th December the workers were no longer content to manifest their discontent indirectly, and they requested that Roy arrange for them to have a meeting with Thomson. On the following morning, the 31st December, the Lozi, together with the other workers, assembled in the compound, dressed in their "holiday clothes". This clearly indicated that the workers had discussed the matter during the night and had no intention of working that day until at least such time as they had discussed their grievances with Thomson. (59) Assembled in the compound, they again repeated their request to see Thomson, and Roy responded by demanding that they choose one man to represent them. This request was promptly refused, the workers pointing out that they all wished to speak to the colliery manager. When Roy refused their request and attempted to send them off to work, the miners pointedly refused and remained standing in the compound. At this stage Roy sent for Thomson.

Thomson's arrival did little to reduce tension. On his arrival he immediately noted that "the sick were among the work boys" and his first action was to separate the sick from the healthy. He then ordered the sick "boys" to proceed to the hospital and the healthy to remain behind in the compound. This procedure, and its consequences, was exactly one of the grievances which the workers wished to discuss and, as the hospital party moved off, a shout from the "work boys" caused the sick to attempt to rejoin the healthy group. It was then that Thomson grasped one of the sick "boys" and "flicked him about the face with a stick". (60)

It was these "couple of light taps" (Thomson's words) that settled matters. "A great shout immediately went up from the gang of work boys ..., they threw sticks and hats in the air and jumped about and went out of the inner compound shouting." (61) It was from that moment that the strike really commenced.

Only after these events were the workers given the opportunity to articulate their grievances - with little success. Three days later the colliery manager still had very little insight into the range of motivations for the strike. Requested to give the reasons for the strike, he cabled a reply to the chief native commissioner which reveals his limited insight and understanding: "Natives mainly Barotse underground boss and special boys struck work 31st Dec. grievance being that hospital convalescent patients were put on light duty. Real reason overfed exhuberance." (62)

Thomson's behaviour in the compound left the workers with no avenue for redress within the compound or colliery. With a "quiet and respectful" bearing they made for the offices of the British South Africa Police at Wankie and attempted to spell out their grievances. No sooner had they arrived at the BSAP offices, however, than Thomson arrived. Presumably annoyed at having his authority ignored, Thomson was in an uncompromising mood and insisted that the officer in charge prosecute the workers for insubordination and refusal to work.

The colliery manager then left and the workers at the police station were joined by Roy. The latter again ordered the miners to return to work, and they again ignored the request. The workers then sent two deputations to Roy, each of which made significant requests. The first of these simply requested that the day be declared a holiday and that in exchange for granting this request the miners would return to work on the following day. Given the production demands and work load at Wankie and the state of health of the workers, this demand was understandable, but Roy rejected it out of hand. (63) The second deputation demanded that compound "policemen" Charlie and Simon be discharged in exchange for a return to work. This request, too, was rejected by Roy. (64) This concluded all efforts at "negotiation", and at this point the police took over and charged the workers in accordance with Thomson's demand.

By the 3rd January, 163 workers had appeared in court. Some of the "causes" of the strike at Wankie were only too apparent, but these were not considered mitigating factors by a magistrate who felt that "The Authority of the Management of a large industrial concern must be maintained even in the face of mismanagement". (65) The court was further of the opinion that "there was ample machinery for them to secure the redress of grievances without any such display" and proceeded to find 158 of the workers guilty. Most of the workers were fined the equivalent of one month's wages, and collectively the 158 workers paid a sum of £285.2.6. in fines. (66) By the 4th January Thomson could telegraph to the chief native commissioner that "natives got stiff fine for striking work. They are working today". (67) The strike was over, and as far as the management was concerned the colliery was working "normally".

The strike might have ended but the underlying grievances which had precipitated the troubles at the colliery persisted. January saw double the number of deaths from scurvy as compared with December, and by the end of the month ten workers had died from the disease. In February, at the time of the visit by the RNLB inspector, Stokes, it was noted that the same rationing was still in operation. During the same month the assistant medical director in the colony was still facing a refusal by the management to purchase fresh vegetables for black miners. (68) March saw twenty new cases of scurvy, and it was only towards the end of that month, when the rains fell, that the situation eased. (69) The workers had failed to modify the management's practices through industrial action, and it was left to nature to improve the lot of the Wankie miners.

It is necessary now to set the experiences of the colliery workers in a broader context and to assess the significance of the above events. What does the Wankie strike reveal about black mineworkers in Rhodesia and the functioning of the compound system in a colonial political economy? To what extent were events at the colliery "typical" of the mining industry in Rhodesia?

In at least two important respects the events at Wankie were typical of the mining industry in Rhodesia. Firstly, the events occurred within profitability constraints that were common to the industry as a whole. There had been numerous scurvy outbreaks before this at Wankie, and while the profitability constraints remained similar other outbreaks could be expected to follow. Thus in 1918, for example, the old syndrome of inadequate diet and production pressure again produced a labour crisis. At that time coal production declined so markedly that Chaplin, the administrator, was forced to suggest to the directors of the company that the manager be "relieved from supervision of native labour".(70) Neither was scurvy restricted to Wankie, for as late as 1936 there were still over 600 cases of scurvy reported amongst black mineworkers throughout the country. (71)

Secondly, events at the colliery were typical in the sense that they were derived and precipitated from the operation of forces which existed in large measure in compounds throughout Rhodesia. At Wankie and elsewhere, compound managers frequently resorted to the use of the sjambok to impose discipline, and more often than not they were assisted in this by their compound "police". (72) Likewise, compound "police" were often the source of friction and tension in compounds because of their control of the rationing system. Further, the conflicts between the demands for production and the restriction of expenditure, on the one hand, and the need to safeguard the health of the workers, on the other hand, often gave rise to conflict between mine medical officers and managers. (73) Thus, in terms of both the parameters of the problem and precipitating "causes", events at the colliery were typical. There is no single aspect of the problem at Wankie which was not present in some measure or other in the majority of Rhodesian mine compounds.

The regularity and severity of the labour crises at the colliery, however, suggest that in some respects at least the mine was not typical. The colliery was different in that it had a lower wage structure for its black miners - an aspect which reflected on the fact that the mine was a coal and not a gold mine. Further, as the sole producer of a vital subsidiary industry in the country, the mine was particularly sensitive to production demands. In addition, 1912 was exceptional in that the length and severity of the drought left the workers particularly vulnerable and that difficulties at the mine were compounded by problems of management. But the uniqueness of these aspects should not be allowed to overshadow the fact that most of the features at Wankie were common to the industry, and that qualitatively it was typical of the functioning of the mining industry as a whole.

Typical or not, the colliery strike presents historians with further evidence about the nature and extent of worker consciousness amongst Africans on Rhodesian mines. (74) Although the largest number of participants in the strike were Lozi, workers from at least six other tribes associated themselves with the dispute. Further, the nature of the demands made during the strike (the demand for a rest day and the request for the discharging of the compound "police") is evidence of the ability of social forces derived from the compound setting to transcend the more limited horizons of ethnicity and produce worker co-operation.

Other demands made during the strike, however, reveal the essentially conservative nature of the response by black workers and the extent to which they had been psychologically colonized by settler power in state and industry. Prior to 1912, in other Rhodesian mines, workers had on occasion manifested aggressive responses in the face of industrial exploitation. (75) At Wankie, the workers' behaviour was "quiet and respectful", and Thomson, when asked to describe it, stated that "there was nothing sullen or threatening about it". (76) The workers' demands were essentially conservative. They objected to the manner in which the rations were issued and the fact that Roy beat them on the word of his compound "police". They objected to rationing not the rations, to procedure not punishment. Their demands were directed at the functioning of the system not the questioning of it.

Worker behaviour was so restrained and demands so conservative that the question is raised about the extent to which compounds colonized and moulded the personality of black workers. (77) Compounds certainly constitute an example of a very specific set of institutions which have a particular "encompassing or total character". (78) As such, compounds have a capacity to control and regulate worker behaviour to an extent which is well in excess of the powers of most metropolitan industrialists. In many respects the conservative nature of the response at Wankie was the forerunner of later manifestations of extreme docility in the face of arbitrary violence in the industrial setting. (79) It seems possible that in the majority of cases in Rhodesia, the combination of managerial power in the compounds and state power outside was sufficient to militate against the development of aggressive worker responses.

The latter aspect draws attention to another feature which is typified in the Wankie strike of 1912 - the co-operation between state and industry when confronted with black labour unrest. It will be remembered that the native commissioner (who was also the magistrate at Wankie) told Roy that they had something in common and that they were in a position to "help each other enforce respect for all authority of the white man, whether of Government or employer". The use of state power to break strikes and settle industrial disputes involving black workers was an integral part of the functioning of a colonial political economy. A mere nine years later at Wankie, during another strike, police were used to escort workers back to the pit head. (80) The police also played an important part in breaking the famous Shamva strike of 1927. (81) Collective bargaining in the colonial situation was not a privilege which could be extended to a subjected people who constituted the basis of a system of cheap labour.

But perhaps most clearly of all the 1912 Wankie strike demonstrates the vulnerable class position of black mineworkers in a colonial political economy. Unlike fully proletarianized white workers with families, black workers were paid the wages of "single men", denied direct participation in the political system, and consistently crushed in their attempts at collective bargaining. Part of their income was derived from peasant farming, but so low were their wages in the mining industry and so taxing their work demands that workers had to supplement their diet from the local environment in order to retain their health. In short, their position was remote from that articulated in the managerial rhetoric of the day or the mythology of some contemporary historiography which suggests that

"After the initial period of frontier friction in the nineties, the Chartered Company established a better record in labour and health matters than any British, French or Portuguese Colony in Africa

at the time. Mine work became more popular in Rhodesian villages, and native mine workers generally became better fed than their cousins in the kraals." (82)

Workers at Wankie, like mineworkers throughout Rhodesia, were paying the price for industrialization, and in the light of their and other workers' experiences it seems strange to suggest that "Tribal cohesion, the existence of large land reserves and administrative paternalism, all combined to act as a kind of shock absorber, protecting Africans against the worst effects of incipient industrialisation". (83)

Indirectly, this vulnerable class position and the exposed position of the workers was only too apparent, and acknowledged by some of the mine management at Wankie. Instead of seeing the strike as being derived from the position of black workers in the colonial economy, however, they saw it as being rooted in the vagaries of weather and drew more modest conclusions: "It is perhaps rather too soon yet to gather up the lessons in detail, but one thing is abundantly clear, namely that the seasons vary considerably and that consequently we must be prepared for these bad seasons at any time. In more ways than one we are clearly dependent on the weather, a thing which however cannot be forecast with any degree of certainty." (84)

In terms of the analysis suggested above, however, it seems clear that the Wankie strike of 1912 can be attributed to profitability constraints of the industry, the vulnerable position of the workers in a colonial political economy, the particular constraints operating within the compound setting, and the fact that these features happened to coincide with a year of severe drought in Rhodesia. Drought might have been the catalyst, but it certainly was not the cause of the strike.

-----oOo-----

Notes

- (1) T. O. Ranger, The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia 1898-1930 (London, 1970). See also G. Arrighi, "Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study in the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia", Journal of Development Studies, Vol 6, No 3, 1971, pp. 197-234. For a more detailed case study, see I. Phimister, "The Shamva Mine Strike of 1927", Rhodesian History, Vol 1, No 2 (forthcoming).
- (2) Editorial comment, Bulawayo Chronicle, 8th November 1902.
- (3) See, for example, Rhodesia Chamber of Mines Annual Report 1911, or Southern Rhodesia, Debates in the Legislative Council, Vol 6, No 11, 16th May 1927, col 392-393.
- (4) Public Record Office, London. (PRO) Colonial Office (CO) series 417/387, British South Africa Company (BSA Co) Minutes, 9th December 1903, "Special Report on visit of inspection to Wankie District". Report dated 6/11/03.

- (5) National Archives of Rhodesia, NB 3/1/6, Native Commissioner (NC) Sebungwe to Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), 23/3/06. (All subsequent file numbers other than the CO 417 series refer to material held in the National Archives of Rhodesia.)
- (6) A 1/5/7, J. M. Kearney, General Manager, Wankie Colliery, to A. W. Bird, Secretary, Wankie (Rhodesia) Coal, Railway and Exploration Co Ltd, London, 12/1/06.
- (7) CO 417/386, BSA Co Minutes of 17th and 19th October 1903, Annexure 50.
- (8) See van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness in Black Miners - Southern Rhodesia 1900-1920", Journal of African History, Vol XIV, No 2, 1973, pp. 237-255.
- (9) For the use of convict labour, see, for example, A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers. For a full list of the accused in the same case, see the copy in D 3/37/2.
- (10) The proportion of "voluntary" and "recruited" labour obviously varied with fluctuations in the labour market. In 1918, for example, the proportion of the former to the latter was 60% to 40% - see, A 3/18/30, A. R. Thomson to His Honour the Administrator, 22/4/18.
- (11) See A 1/5/7, J. M. Kearney to A. W. Bird, 12/1/06.
- (12) CO 417/418, Report of CNC, Matabeleland, for the year ended 31st March 1905.
- (13) NB 6/1/19, Report of the Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st March 1905.
- (14) NB 6/1/19, Report of the Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st March 1906.
- (15) For assaults and periodic labour crises at Wankie, see: 1905-06, NB 6/4/20 Review of Inspectors of Native Compounds Reports for December 1905; 1908, see CO 417/628, A. M. Fleming, Medical Director, "Memo to His Honour the Administrator on the Report of the Committee appointed to investigate labour and other recent troubles at the Wankie Colliery", 2/1/19. In most of these cases the assaults were undertaken by white miners and the African "boss boys" who worked below them.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Southern Rhodesia, Report of the Committee appointed to Enquire into the Prevalence and Prevention of Scurvy and Pneumonia amongst Native Labourers, 1910.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) NB 6/1/19, Report of Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st March 1906.
- (20) NB 6/1/21, Report of Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st December 1907.
- (21) NB 6/1/21, Report of the Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st December 1908.
- (22) A 3/18/30, Report on the Conditions applying to Natives at Wankie.
- (23) Ibid.
- (24) A 3/18/30/18, Thomas, Mick, Saulos and Filimon to Father Phiri, 30/11/09.
- (25) For the administrative action taken during 1909, see A 3/18/30, Medical Director to Wankie Colliery Manager, 9/12/09.
- (26) The sale of huts was common practice in many Rhodesian mine compounds. At Wankie, see, for example, D 3/37/3, Case no 227 of 1918, Wankie District Court.

- (27) "It is a striking fact that the habitual labourers and those natives who add to their diet by purchases of foodstuffs from local stores rarely suffer from scurvy, whilst those natives whose pay is reduced by remittances to their homes, or who are of a parsimonious nature, are particularly affected." Report of the Committee appointed to Enquire into the Prevalence and Prevention of Scurvy and Pneumonia amongst Native Labourers, 1910, p. 3.
- (28) Especially popular amongst workers was a variety of wild spinach with considerable anti-scorbutic properties; see NB 6/1/21, Report of the Inspector of Native Compounds, Wankie District, for the year ended 31st December 1908. Fishing during leisure time was a frequent practice at many Rhodesian mines. Often this fishing was done by blasting river pools with dynamite stolen from the mines. For examples at Wankie, see D 3/37/2 Cases No 144, 145 and 146 of 1916 in the District Court. Frequently workers also sold fish to their fellow compound inhabitants - Interview with Alec Chirwa at Triangle, 23/2/73.
- (29) See, for example, A 3/12/27, W. Hewetson, Medical Officer, Wankie, to A. R. Thomson, General Manager, Wankie Colliery, 6/3/13.
- (30) Southern Rhodesia, Report on the Public Health 1912.
- (31) A 3/12/27, Assistant Medical Director to Medical Director, 11/2/13.
- (32) See, for example, A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers, p. 7, evidence of Antonio.
- (33) NB 6/1/12, NC, Wankie, Report for the year ended 1912.
- (34) A 8/3/2, T. R. Jackson to CNC, 8/1/13.
- (35) For the continued hostility between Hewetson and Thomson, see for example A 3/12/27, Compound Inspector's Report, Wankie District, April 1913.
- (36) A 3/12/27, Acting Native Commissioner, Wankie, to CNC, 30/1/13.
- (37) For a more detailed discussion of the background, role and function of the compound "police", see van Onselen, "Collaborators in the Political Economy of Rhodesia", unpublished Oxford University seminar paper.
- (38) See, CO 417/551, Col. Baring to Robert Williams, 6/3/14. See also, A 3/18/30/6, Compound Inspector Hartley to the Medical Inspector, Salisbury, 1/12/12.
- (39) See, for example, S 1175/13, Compound Inspector's Report, February 1929.
- (40) A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers, p. 9.
- (41) Ibid., pp. 7-11.
- (42) Ibid., pp. 12-13.
- (43) Ibid.
- (44) A 1/5/7, J. M. Kearney to A. W. Bird, 12/1/06.
- (45) A 3/12/27, ANC, Wankie, to CNS, 30/1/13.
- (46) The Medical Director implies that this was done without the mine medical officer's knowledge - see, A 3/18/30/7, Med. Director to Asst. Magistrate, Wankie, 15/1/13. N. C. Jackson, however, implies that this was done with Hewetson's knowledge - see A 8/3/2, ANC, Wankie, to CNC, 8/1/13.
- (47) A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers.
- (48) A 3/18/30/7, RNLB Inspector's Report on Visit to Wankie Colliery, February 1913.
- (49) Ibid.
- (50) A 3/12/27, ANC, Wankie, to CNC, 30/1/13.

- (51) RNLB Inspector's Report, op. cit.
- (52) These figures are derived from the copy of Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers in D 3/37/2.
- (53) Ibid.
- (54) Ibid.
- (55) A 3/13/27, Telegram, Thomson to CNC, 3/1/13.
- (56) NB 6/1/12, NC, Wankie, Report for the year ended 31st December 1912.
- (57) See RNLB Inspector's report, op. cit.
- (58) A 8/3/2, ANC, Wankie, to CNC, 8/1/13.
- (59) A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers, pp. 13-14.
- (60) Ibid., p. 2.
- (61) Ibid., p. 4.
- (62) A 3/12/13, Telegram, Thomson to CNC.
- (63) A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers, p. 2.
- (64) Ibid., p. 3.
- (65) Ibid., p. 14.
- (66) D 3/37/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers.
- (67) A 3/12/27, Telegram, Thomson to CNC, 3/1/13.
- (68) A 3/12/27, Asst. Med. Director to Medical Director, 11/2/13.
- (69) A 3/12/27, W. Hewetson to A. R. Thomson, 6/3/13.
- (70) CO 417/613, Telegram, Chaplin to BSA Co Director, 24/8/18.
- (71) Southern Rhodesia, Report on the Public Health 1936, p. 26.
- (72) See, for example, D 3/32/43, Case No 909 of 1930, Rex v. G. M. H. Dinsmore.
- (73) See, for example, A. M. Felming, Medical Director, "Memo to His Honour the Administrator", op. cit.
- (74) See "Worker consciousness", op. cit., pp. 237-238.
- (75) See, for example, the riot at the Ayreshire Mine in 1908, Rhodesia Herald, 14th August 1908.
- (76) A 8/3/2, Rex v. 123 Mine Labourers, p. 5.
- (77) These issues are debated in a different context in A. J. Lane (ed), The Debate over Slavery (London, 1971), pp. 22-42.
- (78) E. Goffman, "The Characteristics of Total Institutions: the Inmate World" in D. R. Cressey (ed), The Prison (New York, 1961), p. 16.
- (79) By the 1930s workers seemed to be thoroughly psychologically colonized. Confronted with arbitrary fining and whipping at the Gaika Mine, workers appear to have been uniformly passive. Questioned as to why they did not protest or take evasive action, worker after worker simply replied that they were in no position to do so "because they were natives". See Rex v. Dinsmore, op. cit.
- (80) A 8/3/9, Compound Inspector's Report, Bulawayo District, September 1921, p.4.
- (81) See, "The Shamva Mine Strike of 1927", op. cit.
- (82) L. H. Gann, A History of Southern Rhodesia (London, 1965), p. 181.
- (83) Ibid., p. 174.
- (84) A 3/12/27, W. Hewetson to A. R. Thomson, 6/3/13.