

‘Wages are but the Expression of Time’: The Foundational Role of Labour Time in Gold Mines: 1886-2006

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The paper alludes to empirical work which traces working time arrangements in South African mining since 1886. It does so by briefly outlining the contours of both working hours (which remain remarkably stable) and the length of the migrant labour contract (which progressively lengthens) until the collapse of the controls of the migrant labour supply system - at which point the labour contract aligns with the annual cycle of industrial working time. The paper suggests labour time has been ignored in scholarly historical analyses; explains why long working hours are required in mining and why the retention of labour in production underground is foundational to and of greater explanatory import in understanding the role of the mining industry than its supply. This view challenges the received wisdom that the exploitation of mine labour is chiefly accounted for in terms of cheap wages for black mineworkers. Labour time is asserted as the missing explanatory concept necessary for understanding the developmental trajectory of mining in South Africa, both historically and in the contemporary period.