

Tswana Mineworkers, Industrial Unrest and 'Worker Consciousness' on the Platinum Mines of Bophuthatswana in the early 1990s

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During 1991 and '92 Impala Platinum's massive mine complex in Bophuthatswana was wracked by successive waves of strike action that were triggered by a dispute over wages. The scale, intensity and longevity of the labour action of the early '90s were unprecedented, and unlike previous industrial action which was quashed by the swift and heavy-handed response of the employer and the Bantustan state, that of the early '90s resulted in an eventual victory for workers and their union, NUM. A noteworthy feature of the latter period of unrest was its insurrectionary nature and the way in which workers directly confronted the regime of 'President' Lucas Mangope. The paper seeks to explain the unrest of the 1990s and the way in which it evolved.

The backdrop of a changing homeland political economy and rising popular animosity towards the Mangope regime are elaborated on, whilst major restructuring within the mining industry and migrant labour system that had been taking place since the 1970s, as well as the peculiarities of large-scale platinum mining within the Bophuthatswana context, are also examined. At the core of the study, however, is the issue of 'worker consciousness' and, crucially, the continued impact of 'the rural' on this. Though the Tswana speaking workers at Impala were by and large much more proletarianised, and by implication much more assertive in the workplace than migrants of earlier generations, they nonetheless continued to be strongly influenced by identities, networks, collective memories, and discourses of resistance that were all rooted in rural forms of organisation and common rural experience (a 'rural consciousness'). In the case of the unrest at Impala in the 1990s, these rural factors heavily influenced and indeed aided the strike.

South Africa's particular path of capitalist development meant that both industrial and pre-industrial forms of organisation coexisted among workers who oscillated between town and countryside. But what is highlighted by the case of Impala is that the influence of rurally-rooted pre-industrial forms of association, identity and consciousness remained remarkably resilient despite the ever increasing tendency towards the proletarianisation of the migrant workforce that occurred over time, especially from the 1970s. That 'the rural' had such a crucial bearing on the strikes at Impala as late as the 1990s, suggests that a broad focus of what constitutes 'worker consciousness' is needed in analysing migrant labour in that era – one that takes into account influences outside the workplace, is especially aware of the persisting influence of rural worldviews, and is based on a holistic perspective of the workers' social existence.