

‘A New Broom Sweeps Zambia’: Implications for the Informal Copper Business

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The diminished sphere of formal employment on the Zambian Copperbelt since the mid 1990's has pushed more of the regions residents into informal economic activity. One of these areas is in the informal copper business. On the periphery of formal mining in Zambia, it is not uncommon to find women and children working at mining dump sites, spaces that in the Zambian imaginary are occupied by young male copper thieves, popularly known as Jerabo's (jail boys). Work at these sites falls outside the regulatory boundaries of legality, and workers at these places are called illegal miners, but workers have crafted an alternative moral economy to justify what they do. They ask, if the market for copper is open, why is it not open to them. These claims occur in context where the livelihoods of mining communities have diminished as the re-privatised mines shifted their focus from the welfare orientation of the former state owned mines, the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines to one of mining as the core business. They also happened at time of rising copper prices that after decades of decline have raised the expectations of mining communities. It is within this situation that the opposition political party the Patriotic Front gained popular support from Copperbelt and the country's other residents to eventually unseat in September 2011 the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD). The MMD had initiated privatization as a shift towards neo-liberal economic policies from 1991 when they won a landslide victory against the nationalist post independence party the United Independence Party (UNIP) led by Kenneth Kaunda who had run a socialist orientated 'benevolent' dictatorship. The PF in their manifesto promised more money in people's pockets. They also promised to stamp out corruption. In the leadership of the PF, Michael Sata, people saw a strong disciplinarian who would bring an end to lawlessness. The brief suspension in October 2011 of metal export permits by the PF government indicates an attempt to regulate and bring transparency to the copper business. What does this mean for the informal copper business, a sector that has come to play an important role in the livelihoods of Copperbelt residents? What may be the implications and expectations for communities that have long associated strong leadership with a patriarchal approach to welfare?

This paper responds to these questions as a post-script to my chapter "Contesting illegality: Women in the informal copper business" (2010) In: A. Fraser and M. Larmer, eds. *Zambia, mining and neoliberalism: boom and bust on the globalized Copperbelt*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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