



# From Compounded to Fragmented Labour: Mineworkers and the Demise of Compounds in South Africa

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**Abstract:** At the core of colonial and apartheid social engineering was a spatial strategy based on institutions and infrastructure linking together rural homesteads and villages, and mining centers and towns. In the case of the mining industry, single-sex compounds were set up as the foundation of the infrastructure of control over black labor. In this paper we examine how various forms of control operated. We locate our contribution within the labor geography literature. We argue that it was not only state institutions and major corporations that shaped landscapes of control. In this regard we highlight the centrality of workers' agency, specifically the way in which the National Union of Mineworkers captured the compounds and subverted the logic of employer control. However, the union's successes as well as the advent of democracy have resulted in profound changes, thus presenting the union with new challenges.

**Keywords:** control, labor geography, mine compounds, South Africa, worker's agency

## Labor Geography, Control and Agency

During the heyday of the South African gold mining industry, a Chamber of Mines booklet boasted about one of the roles and successes of this body as follows: "One of the Chamber's early achievements was the establishment of a system of attracting Bantu (African) laborers in the joint interest of the mining companies. . ." It added, in rather Orwellian fashion, that it had also ensured "cooperation with the companies in evolving a uniformly high standard of treatment of all Bantu workers. . ." (Chamber of Mines nd:7). But as we know, the industry's migrant labor system—including its recruitment arms, TEBA ("The Employment Bureau of Africa") and WNLA ("Witwatersrand Native Labor Association"), as well as the notorious mine compounds—were key parts of the landscape of labor control that had devastating

consequences for the social fabric of the black mineworkers and their communities. At the heart of the migrant labor system was a spatial strategy that had to ensure a regular supply of cheap black labor to the industry.

The migrant labor system was a cornerstone of the landscape of colonial and apartheid South and southern Africa. This involved African men being forced to leave their families in rural parts of the sub-continent and travel to mining centers where they were housed in single-sex compounds<sup>1</sup> while they worked on the mines. Their movements to and from the mines were tightly controlled by the pass system. As such, apartheid was probably one of the most extreme examples of spatial engineering in human history. This spatial strategy hinged on the creation of a spectrum of institutions and infrastructure linking together two nodes, rural homesteads and villages, at the one end, and mining centers and towns, at the other. Control was exercised at both ends, but also resisted at both ends.

The first node, various “labor sending areas”, was controlled through what Mamdani (1996) terms indirect rule in the form of traditional leadership structures overseen by the various incarnations of the Department of Native Administration. These leaders, and governments in the case of other African countries, were paid commissions and a part of the wages of mine migrants. Because labor sending areas were so diverse and spread out throughout southern Africa—from the Eastern Cape in South Africa, through to Lesotho, Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania—regimes of control varied and were shaped by local and national politics (see eg Beinart 1979; Wilson 1972:4). The second node was the institution of the mining compound at the mines themselves. Control in the compounds linked back to various rural villages with forms of indirect rule often transplanted into the infrastructure of control so central to these places. The logic of control in mining compounds was reinforced by urban segregation in places where mines were located (Moodie with Ndatshe and Sibuyi 1988:232; Moodie with Ndatshe 1992). While considerable attention has been paid to these two nodes, the articulation between them and the mutually reinforcing forms of control have been neglected.<sup>2</sup> Mining compounds would not have been possible without rural homesteads and villages as counterpoints, as well as the local urban and peri-urban geography of colonial and apartheid South Africa.

But, as we know, it is not only state institutions and major corporations that shape landscapes of control. As Herod (2001:257) argues, “space can be used by both capital and labor—and by different segments within these two categories—to further political and economic agendas”. Structuralist approaches to the geography of labor (as opposed to labor geography) fail to see workers as “active geographical agents” (256), he argues. In order to see workers and their organizations as active

geographical agents, there is a need “to understand how various groups of workers went about constructing spatial fixes in pursuit of their varied political and economic objectives” (Herod 2001:xiii; see also Castree 2007; Harvey 2006; Herod 1997; Herod and Wright 2002).

Nevertheless, as Castree (2007:858) points out, while a focus on worker agency defines labor geography, the notion is “both under-theorized and under-specified in most labor geographers’ analyses of it”. It has “become a catch all for *any* instance in which some group of workers undertake *any* sort of action on behalf of themselves or others”. He argues:

What is missing is a discriminating grasp of worker agency that both informs and arises from a variety of empirical studies. Given that there is a limit on how much research can be practically done, it is important that the choice of studies is well justified so that alone and together they can push our understanding of agency forward to the maximum extent . . . The current inability to satisfy this need has political as well as analytical consequences, since a failure to distinguish kinds of agency and their enabling/disabling conditions leads to an inability among analysts to say much sensible about worker strategy, normatively speaking. For all the talk by leading labor geographers that worker visions and actions are necessarily geographical, their failure to be systematic about forms of agency and how geography permits or proscribes them must be counted as a strategic weakness (Castree 2007:858).

Castree further critiques labor geography for its failure to engage in a systematic way with labor migration, the role of the state, the non-work aspects of working people’s lives, and workers’ moral geographies. In addition, he argues, there is a lack of theoretical coherence, as well as a failure to engage the policy realm of research seriously (Castree 2007:858–860). This criticism resonates with some of the critiques of labor studies more broadly and an awareness of the need to move beyond the workplace and ground analyses of worker agency in households and local (and, indeed, national and transnational) communities (Burawoy 2008, 2009; Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008: 5–21).

In this paper we examine the way in which the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) captured the compound system in South Africa and subverted the logic of the employers by using these places of residence and labor control as sites of mobilization. The NUM is the largest affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and one of the most powerful unions in the country. It is a spectacular illustration of how workers’ collective agency shapes and re-shapes landscapes. Compounds were more than a convenient housing solution to the mining industry as the institution served as a mechanism

of control. Nevertheless, from the early 1980s onwards, the NUM was able to capture this space and turn the logic of control on its head, a strategy that explains the union's success in organizing the industry. Where manufacturing unions had to organize on a small scale—factory-by-factory—the NUM used the economies of scale of mines to their advantage and was able to grow worker organization at a rapid pace.<sup>3</sup> Once the NUM captured the compounds, workers as a collective were able to shape in a more fundamental way the labor geography of the mining industry.

The NUM's campaigns against migrant labor and the compound system paid off, and with the advent of democracy mineworkers increasingly tend to live in spaces outside these compounds. Ironically, this change in the landscape of mining is now presenting the NUM with a challenge. The union has to adapt to the new spatial order to which workers themselves contributed. This challenges the union's notions of what constitutes a branch, how union meetings are called, and how union democracy is structured. As the spatial order is reconfigured, old divisions of ethnicity and nationality come back to haunt the NUM, as well as newer fissures around gender (see also Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008). We see our own contribution to debates on the nature of workers' agency as fourfold.

First, we foreground migrant labor in an attempt to expand the geographic reach of our argument beyond the workplace as such. There is a rich body of scholarship on the mining labor process, migrant labor, and the nature of compounds in southern and South Africa (eg Beinart 1979; Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman 1991; Gordon 1978; Moodie with Ndatshe 1994; Murray 1981; Van Onselen 1976; see also Allen 1992, 2003a and 2003b). Particularly useful for our purposes in writing this paper was a special edition of *Labor, Capital and Society* [25(1)], which reported on a research project on the changing nature of mine migrancy and accommodation patterns (guest edited by Crush, James and Jeeves 1992). Several of the trends we discuss in this paper appear in this literature in a piecemeal fashion, given that the changes were still tentative. We see our contribution as building on this scholarship, but we also take it forward to consider more recent changes, such as the shift from gold to platinum, and the consolidation of post-apartheid social and geographical configurations.

At the risk of unfair generalization, it could also be argued that the agency of mineworkers as individuals and as a collective has been underplayed in most of this literature. Shifts in migration are often portrayed solely as the outcome of broad structural changes involving the state and capital. The fact that our research focus was the NUM gave us unprecedented access to the world of mineworkers, and the interplay between worker struggles and corporate and state policy. However, we are aware of the fact that in attempting to point to agency as a counter to

the cynical determinism of structuralist analyses there is a real danger of falling prey to naïve voluntarism.

Second, by historicizing our discussion, we consider the role of the state in shaping worker agency, in this case the colonial and apartheid states, as well as the post-apartheid state. This enables us to describe more accurately the ebbs and flows of control and resistance and to point to the contradictions that emerge from such resistance. We hope that this counter-balances voluntarist tendencies in our analysis. We identify and discuss three historical periods, namely the colonial and apartheid moment (up to 1982), the moment of resistance (1982–1987), and the moment of liberation (1987 to the present). We use 1982 as a turning point, because it is the year when the NUM is formed. This is also the time when what is called “flexible migration” shifts to “inflexible migration”, implying more permanence and stability of migrant worker contracts. The phase of contraction in gold mining also starts in this period (Crush 1992a; Jeeves and Crush 1992). The year 1987 is another turning point because of the historic strike that took place in this year and the NUM’s “mineworkers take control” campaign launched in that year. Even though the union was defeated in the strike and faced a clampdown from the apartheid state it survived and grew even stronger (see Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008). Also, realizing that the NUM had successfully captured the compounds, and responding to a wave of violence in 1986, the mining firms formally abandoned their preference for compound accommodation (Hunter 1992; James 1992; Laburn-Peart 1992).

Third, we relate agency directly to control, which we disaggregate analytically in order to relate the micro-politics of control (the body, compounds) to macro-politics (the apartheid and post-apartheid political landscapes). During each of the three periods we have identified, we focus on four forms of control, namely spatial control, reproductive control, associational control and political control. By *spatial control* we mean regulating and restricting the actual movements of individuals or groups of individuals. In this case, this refers to the movement of people between the two nodes we referred to, as well as their movements in and around compounds. By *reproductive control* we mean interventions into people’s actual reproductive functions (including sexual intercourse), their intake of food and beverages, issues such as personal hygiene, and even how they spend their leisure time. By *associational control* we mean the regulation and restriction of voluntary interaction among workers, including forms of worker self-organization such as union activities, sport, religion and leisure. By *political control* we mean the policing functions that constitute what Burawoy (1985) calls the company-state, specifically when company officials incorporate elements of force and coercion into their activities.

These various forms of control add up to a *normative-corporal order* based on various sanctions, which shift over time. It is normative because it contains an element of ideological legitimization, and corporal because regimes of control essentially add up to the regulation of actual bodies.

Finally, our focus on compounds and residential spaces enables us to understand worker agency as rooted in notions of dignity, and not merely their exploitation at the point of production, which allows us to explore how moral geographies operate and shift over time. Conventional studies of labor, collective action and mobilization prioritize economic exploitation as a trigger for worker agency. The classical analysis of the southern African migrant labor system by Wolpe (1972) emphasizes the exploitative nature of the system. This formulation inspired much of the neo-Marxist analyses of the South African labor regime from the 1970s onwards. In response to this structuralist school, a number of social historians, inspired by E P Thompson, focused on worker agency (eg Moodie with Ndatshe 1994; Van Onselen 1976). Moodie's analysis of the limits to racial despotism set by local moral economies is a case in point. He argues that there were "imithetho", or informal laws set by workers to limit racial abuse. They often acted collectively when these "laws" were transgressed by white workers and managers. This perspective adds notions of justice and integrity to the structural analysis of the neo-Marxists.

The notion of a normative-corporal order—one that is grounded in a geographic reading of attempts at labor control—highlights the importance of recognizing dignity as an additional ingredient to understanding workers' agency, particularly in a context where class intersects with race and gender in such a profound way (see Castree 2007:857, 859–860). We call it the *normative-corporal order* to emphasize the importance of control over the body—how it is used in regimes of accumulation, and how its movement is circumscribed, and how it is reproduced and represented. As Harvey points out, "[c]lass, racial, gender, and all manner of other distinctions are marked upon the human body by virtue of the different socio-ecological processes that do their work upon that body" (Harvey 2000:99).

An explicit focus on the human body—and issues such as the spaces and scales of reproduction and consumption—brings into sharper focus notions of dignity that are missing from accounts of resistance that draw only on exploitation and injustice. This approach allows us to re-conceptualize capitalist control in production as well as worker resistance and agency. The labor historian E P Thompson (1963) has shown how workers mobilize notions of dignity in order to assert their agency. This is also the case in the context of the South African mining industry, where it was common to call grown men "boys", who in turn had to call their white supervisors "baas".<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, the current president of the NUM, Senzeni Zokwana, recently linked the compound

system to indignity: “Dehumanizing living conditions are one of the issues that have stripped the dignity of mineworkers, the core producers of our mineral wealth that anchors our economy.”<sup>5</sup>

Hodson (2001) attempted to develop a theory of dignity in the workplace. He identified four sources of the denial of dignity: mismanagement and abuse, overwork, constraints to worker autonomy, and contradictions of employee involvement in decisions. All these were clearly present in the mining industry. Hodson argues that these essentially managerial transgressions can be countered by worker resistance to attacks, organizational citizenship, independent meaning systems, and group relations (Hodson 2001:17). Hodson’s sources of indignity are clearly appropriate here. However, his narrow focus on the workplace leaves the landscapes of control and resistance so salient in the case of the South African mining industry unexamined (see Castree et al 2004; Herod 2001).

We primarily draw on the existing literature on South and southern African mine migrancy for our discussion of the first two historical moments. Our analysis of the current phase—that of liberation—is based on a survey of 724 members of the NUM (out of an actual membership of 259,807 at the time), supplemented by 44 focus group interviews, 15 interviews with regional and national office bearers and officials, as well as visits to compounds during which we were able to observe changes and conduct unstructured interviews and informal conversations. The survey was conducted in 2005 at the union’s request and investigated the state of union organization (Bezuidenhout et al 2005). We conducted a similar survey in 1998 (Bezuidenhout et al 1998). We agreed with the union upfront that we could use our findings for academic purposes, and our research strategy was designed with this in mind. During visits to mines for purposes of the research we were struck by the relative decline of the compound as a central site for union organizing. We developed this as one of the central themes of our report to the union and for further research.

The survey was conducted in six of the union’s 11 regions, namely, the Free State, Natal, North East, Klerksdorp, Rustenburg and the Western Cape. While our sample did not cover the whole union, the regions surveyed represented the sectoral spread of the union’s membership. The Free State and Klerksdorp are two typical gold mining regions, and some of the union’s oldest and strongest branches are located here. In the past, Natal represented coal mining, but since the closure of many of these mines organizing in the region has shifted to the construction sector. The Western Cape is also dominated by construction, but has a number of diamond mines. Rustenburg and North West represent the recent boom in platinum mining and the union’s less established branches are located here. In order to explore in a more focused way the decline of compounds, we undertook follow-up research visits to

six such compounds, former white working class quarters, a managerial estate, and a range of working class suburbs and townships, informal settlements, rural villages, and gated communities for the rich, primarily in Carletonville and Rustenburg in 2008.

### **The Colonial and Apartheid Moment (up to 1982)**

The migrant labor system in the South African mining industry originated as a solution to the housing and control of black workers following the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1867 and gold in Johannesburg in 1886 (Turrell 1984). Spatial control was embedded in the way in which workers were recruited into the industry. The period up to the late 1970s was characterized by constant labor shortages, partly due to the low wages offered by the industry, and the fact that in many cases rural communities were relatively self-sufficient through subsistence agriculture. Colonial land policies were introduced to disrupt rural economies and to incorporate rural areas into vital spatial nodes for the creation of a labor market for the industry. Due to waves of resistance to this incorporation, agricultural seasonality and livestock diseases, areas of labor supply constantly shifted throughout the southern African region, stretching from the Eastern Cape, Lesotho, and Mozambique, to as far north as Malawi and Tanzania (Beinart 1979; Harris 1959; Wilson 1972:4). The local TEBA (or WNLA) office was a nerve centre for recruitment, regulation and enforcement. The road and rail infrastructure supported the movements of mineworkers, equipment and produce and a WNLA fleet of airplanes was used to transport workers from Malawi (Pirie 1993). In the majority of cases, workers did not have a free choice as to their destinations or mode of transport, nor did they have an unfettered choice where they worked. To resign from a contract was a criminal offence (Massey 1983:445). Back home, TEBA offices facilitated investigations into workers who broke their contracts.

Taking on a contract meant being sucked into a pipeline to the other node of spatial control, a highly regimented residential space called a compound. Compounds were highly regimented spaces, located close to mine shafts in order for thousands of workers to be mobilized for work at short notice. Whilst management attempted to discourage visits by workers to local townships, they could not legally forbid them (Moodie with Ndatshe and Sibuyi 1988; Moodie with Ndatshe 1994). However, African mineworkers were prohibited from entering spaces defined as “white” under colonial and apartheid laws, including major commercial centers in mining towns, because such regimes of control in compounds were reinforced by colonial and apartheid geographies of local control.

Compounds were created as male-only spaces and thus allowed for invasive reproductive control, including regulating the conditions under which husbands and wives were allowed to interact. Men were removed



from their households for extended periods and visits by their spouses to the compounds were also controlled (see eg Moodie with Ndatshé 1994; Wilson 1972). The bulk of the burden of social reproduction, however, was carried by rural areas, where families remained in the reserves and neighboring countries. Here, they had to eke out a living based on remittances and subsistence agriculture. The flow of cash from the mines was also taken advantage of by local white traders, who were protected from competition by a monopolized system of licensing. This spatial control through the compound system was further bolstered by these traders through their role as granters of credit to families, postal agents, and recruiters of labor (Southall 1982:147–148).

Mining companies also controlled the intake of food, ran beer halls at the compounds, and provided the infrastructure for mine stores. Food was often of a very low quality and led to protests. The fact that the movements of mineworkers were restricted meant that mining companies had a captive market and were thus able to control consumption. Concessioned mine stores, known as *kwamashonisa*, basically ran a monopoly of foodstuffs and consumer goods such as clothes, radios and bicycles. Beer halls were controlled directly by mining companies and were located in compounds, which increased managerial control over the leisure activities of mineworkers (Moodie with Ndatshé 1994:ch 5; see also Van Onselen 2001 [1982]).

Associational control was based on the broader racial order that structured South African society. Attempts by black workers to form unions in the mining industry were violently crushed by companies and the state, and the crushing of the African Mineworkers Union (AMU) after a strike in 1946 provides a good illustration of this use of repressive methods (see Allen 1992:397–427). In addition to measures preventing workers from organizing, the industry actively encouraged association on the basis of “ethnicity” through the allocation of jobs and rooms in the compounds. Mines also promoted other forms of association considered non-subversive by the authorities such as sports, religious and self-help societies (Badenhorst and Mather 1997).

Political control included the notorious mine police, essentially a private police force that maintained “order” on the mines. In its rudimentary form this force involved black mine policemen (called “police boys” in earlier times) armed with batons and knobkerries, who enforced basic regulations prohibiting drunkenness, disorderly conduct and failure to obey instructions (Moodie with Ndatshé 1994:49). In its advanced form the force had uniforms, firearms and military vehicles. The mine police was backed up by the South African Police Force, who often crushed worker protests violently (Breckenridge 1998a; 1998b). In compounds themselves, a strict hierarchy of control was maintained. This involved white superintendents, presiding over an ethnicity-based structure involving “traditional leaders”, or *izinduna*,

as well as *izibonda*, who were in charge of policing issues such as noise levels, cleanliness and personal hygiene in dormitories. A further important instrument of control was public address systems, which could be used to make announcements and communicate orders (Moodie with Ndatshe 1994:49).

The normative-corporal order under apartheid constituted an attack on the dignity of workers and their households, intervening in the most private spheres of human existence, from cooking food to making love. Workers responded to this individually and collectively. A range of strategies involved attempts to evade the system or aspects thereof, and this includes the refusal by many prospective and former employees to take contracts in the first place. Some attempted to bypass recruitment agencies while others deserted from their contracts (even though, until 1974, this was illegal). It is exactly this instability in the mining labor market that motivated the industry to institute harsh penalties for mineworkers who broke their contracts (Beinart 1979; Massey 1983). There were also rare cases where mineworkers were able to evade controls and moved to townships where they started relationships with local women (Moodie with Ndatshe and Sibuyi 1988:232; 1992).

Several coping strategies, often at the expense of other mineworkers, can be identified. Because of the gendered nature of compound life, sexual activities and a pseudo-household division of labor found other outlets, particularly through the phenomenon of “mine wives” where younger men performed sexual and household services for older men in return for money and other favors (Moodie with Ndatshe and Sibuyi 1988; Moodie with Ndatshe 1994: ch 4). Mineworkers also formed collectives along the lines of ethnicity in order to compete for resources. This was reinforced by hostel organization and labor market allocation along ethnicity. So-called “faction fights” erupted as a result of this and became a feature of compound life during this period (Breckenridge 1990; 1998a; 1998b; Elder 2003). African mineworkers were also able to put certain limits to arbitrary racial abuse and insults from white miners, supervisors and managers, who drew on colonial ideologies of white supremacy and the militaristic mining culture. Harsh sanctions, including physical assault or imprisonment, were applied to those who dared to resist the order. In response, African miners asserted their manhood (*ubudoda*), which drew on their patriarchal status in rural society. In some instances, individual African mineworkers responded by violently attacking white miners who were perceived to have “crossed the line”, or *imithetho* (laws, rules, or habitual ways of behavior) (Moodie with Ndatshe 1994:22, 84). Hence, this period was characterized by contending racialized masculinities.

During this period we also see the emergence of collective forms of organization. Forms of organization encouraged by managements to pre-empt worker militancy not only divided workers, but inadvertently

created collective bonds among them. Initially sport and religious organizations provided for spaces where workers could cope as individuals, but as consciousness evolved over time, these became the bedrock of collective organization when the indignity of having to cope led to action (Cohen 1980; Gordon 1978; Van Onselen 1976). Often such resistance led to full-scale strikes or protests, which were crushed by the industry and the state, such as the mineworkers strike in 1946. Importantly, even though emerging forms of collective organization were an advance on individualized resistance, workers' protest actions were mostly informal, individualized, spontaneous, sporadic, and localized to compounds and mining communities. This is true even of the 1946 strike. Only in 1982 were African mineworkers able to form a national labor union, the NUM, which was able to capture the national scale. This enabled them to challenge and alter the landscape of apartheid in a significant way. We now turn to an examination of this moment of resistance.

### **Moment of Collective Resistance (1982–1987)**

The main contours of apartheid spatial control remained intact during the resistance period. The access of visitors to mining hostels was still tightly controlled. However, this did not mean that these boundaries were impenetrable. NUM organizers told us of how they were able to get hold of identification wrist tags and were able to hide *Umkhonto weSizwe*<sup>6</sup> cadres in some of the compounds. But there were signs that some mining houses in the industry were starting to rethink the virtues of the migrant labor system. In 1977 the Riekert Commission was appointed to consider urban unrest and new policies on urbanization, particularly the creation of a stable urban working class. A sense of urban crisis led to major corporations forming the Urban Foundation, with Anglo-American taking a lead. To be sure, waves of violence, or “faction fights”, on the mines from 1974 to 1976 led to the exploration of alternatives to the compound system. The mining industry recognized that squalor in the compounds led to the violence (McNamara 1988; Steinberg and Seidman 1995:25).

At this time, there was increased international attention to corporate interests under the apartheid regime. Calls for sanctions led to the Sullivan Codes which required US multinationals to introduce non-discriminatory personnel practices, including the granting of trade union rights. Even though US multinationals were not directly involved in the mining industry, these initiatives, along with reforms to labor law, contributed to changes in the industrial relations climate. The gold price also peaked in the early 1980s, which gave the industry some room to maneuver, including the introduction to reforms to the compound system. A number of other factors related to the emergence of “inflexible

migrancy” opened up space for the union to make inroads. Changes to the labor process, including the use of smaller work teams, coupled with a more steady supply of labor to the industry contributed to the need for a more stable workforce (Crush 1989).

This in turn created the need for formalized industrial relations, which was exploited by the NUM. The union grew in strength throughout the 1980s, a development attributable in part to the union’s capturing of the mining compounds. This started out in Anglo-American compounds, where the company withdrew some of its more despotic practices in order for the union to emerge. In the context of the pressures identified above, increased worker militancy, and reforms by the state, Anglo-American executives saw the need for worker interests to be represented in a more systematic way. Also, already from the 1970s new compounds were constructed along less militaristic plans, and there was a move to house the higher echelons of black mineworkers in stable township homes, such as those at Wedela Township in Carletonville (Laburn-Peart 1992:106; Crush 1992c:394).

Nevertheless, while the local geography of apartheid remained intact, management reforms that relaxed some of the more crude forms of control, coupled with the emergence of the minibus taxi industry as an alternative to trains and company buses started to unravel the spatial order at its seams. This meant that mineworkers had more flexibility in traveling between urban and rural nodes, as well as around mining communities themselves and to the urban townships. Mineworkers were no longer housed in enclosed spaces and were exposed to repertoires of resistance in factories and townships. Significantly, from its inception the NUM was part of national labor federations, first the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), and then as a founding member of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008:266–269). During this time the pass system also became unworkable, and “influx control” gave way to attempts, known as “industrial decentralization” policies, to locate new industry in rural areas (Hart 2002). Obviously, this attempt at a spatial fix to rising urban wages and assertiveness could not be applied to mines.

In this period reproductive control was still shaped by the migrant labor system, but more interaction between mineworkers and township dwellers led to increased contact between mineworkers and sex workers. The practice of taking on male “mine wives” receded, and some mineworkers struck up relationships with women in urban areas. Union campaigns started to pay off and the quality of food improved while increased worker influence on how compounds were run also helped depoliticize the canteens. Since workers were increasingly able to travel to town, mine stores began to disappear, and informal trading mushroomed outside compounds. The NUM appropriated leisure

activities which had previously been sponsored and dominated by management (Crush 1992c; Crush and James 1991).

Associational control remained race based, but ethnicity was actively incorporated by the NUM. From the 1980s onwards, the NUM has played an active role in defusing “faction fights”. Our interviewees told us how the union initially discouraged the cultural activities associated with “faction fights”, such as tribal dances, but later actively incorporated these into union sponsored cultural events and mass meetings. The union also captured sport stadiums as a space for rallies and meetings. Since these stadiums were technically on private mine land, the police found it increasingly hard to prevent and control such gatherings of workers. Leisure activities designed to discourage workers from joining unions were captured by the NUM, and these activities now tended to reinforce union organization (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008).

In terms of political control, the role of the mine police shifted from micro labor control to a macro securocratic function. Increasingly mining companies were drawn into the state’s attempts to crush the liberation movements. Mine security (as opposed to mine police), who in the past had focused mainly on curbing gold theft, were drawn into crowd control and coordinated more closely with state security functionaries.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the NUM succeeded in subverting the hostel hierarchy. The power of the *izinduna* was broken and taken over by elected committees. The union also took control of the dreaded public address systems and used them to call its own meetings and to communicate with workers. The NUM was increasingly confident and assertive, contested everything, and put an alternative political infrastructure in place (South African Labor Bulletin 1989).

The normative-corporal order during the resistance phase changes as workers increasingly succeeded in asserting their dignity at a micro level. The NUM constructed resistance based on African masculinity, something that set some limits to the use of arbitrary sanctions by mining companies. Where in the past worker agency and resistance to arbitrary racial assaults had been based on an informal moral economy (Moodie with Ndatshe 1994), the introduction of the union formalized this. Disciplinary procedures were put in place and the union was able to end the dreaded contract system.

In summary, disruptions caused by violence and “faction fights”, combined with international pressure, caused progressive mining houses to open up the compounds for union organization. The NUM took the gap and captured the compounds. These instruments of control were now in the union’s hands, and the NUM itself became a gate-keeper. It was also able to use spatial control to put pressure on non-members to join, and to control strikes (Crush and James 1991:306). The union’s membership expanded phenomenally, thus enabling it to jump to the national scale.

It played a key role in the formation of COSATU, which meant that the organized workers at the heart of the South African economy were now posing a challenge to the apartheid state as well. Mineworkers did not only respond to their exploitation at the point of production, but also to the indignity of living in a racially despotic state. Through the union, worker resistance became formal, collective, goal-directed, sustained, and moved beyond individual mines and compounds. The state and the industry clamped down, but it was too late. The union proved to be resilient and its survival after a major assault by employers following the strike of 1987 is a good illustration.

### **Liberation (1987–present): “Mineworkers Take Control”**

The NUM’s use of compounds as an instrument of worker discipline during strikes, particularly in 1987, led to mining companies exploring alternatives to the compound system. As Crush and James have argued, mine managements:

quite openly [speak] of the broader political agenda which underlies the need to “depopulate” the hostels and provide owner occupied housing for married workers. In negotiations with the state, Anglo American argued that hostels were becoming unmanageable, that they were exploited by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) to “foment unrest” and that a policy of home ownership would have the greatest impact on “worker and social stability” (Crush and James 1991:306).

Indeed, the NUM was getting more and more assertive, as illustrated by the “mineworkers take control” slogan at their 1987 congress. Control now did not only imply the space of the compound, but also production, health and safety, and the liberation from apartheid of the country as a whole. The NUM itself saw itself as being part of the vanguard of the liberation movement. The forces of this liberation movement were emboldened by the unbanning of the African National Congress in 1990, and the transfer of power following the elections in 1994.

Cyril Ramaphosa, the NUM’s general secretary was elected as the ANC’s secretary general in 1991, and after 1994 hundreds of NUM shaft stewards and other union activists were elected to political positions at various tiers of government. Within individual mines, many black workers moved up the occupational ladder and began to occupy key positions. The moment of liberation had arrived! What were the implications of liberation for union organization and worker agency?

Speaking of compounds more generally, many of these vacant buildings have been put to new use. In Germiston, near Johannesburg, a former compound has been converted by a private sector developer into middle-income and low cost housing, called Shaft Citi. A compound

near to Soweto has been converted into a conference facility known as Shaft 17 Conference Centre. In Ermelo in Mpumalanga province a disused coal mine compound has been converted into a further education and training college. In Cape Town, the Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU) bought and turned a municipal compound into their head office, known as the Vuyisile Mini Centre.

Nevertheless, with specific reference to the mining industry the migrant labor and the compound system have by no means come to an end. However, increasingly workers have a choice of where to settle in and around mining communities. Thus, key elements of the spatial control of the past have broken down, but some elements are being reconstituted. At the compounds we visited for our research there are now diverse logics of access. In some cases, information technology is used to computerize access control (Crush 1992b). At a compound in Carletonville (now called a "residence"), we were able to walk in and out without being accosted by a security official. The fact that one of us stood out in terms of skin color meant that we were noticed, but after enquiries we were not prevented from entering. At the Number 1 Contractors Hostel in Rustenburg things were different, as access is still tightly controlled and we had to rely on the negotiation skills of a union official from the regional office to get inside. In this compound, contract workers are housed.

Roughly a third of workers in platinum mining are employed through labor contractors. Where the majority of mineworkers now have indefinite contracts of employment, the old insecurity of contract is reintroduced for this segment of the mining labor market. The mining industry has traditionally drawn on subcontractors to perform certain key functions, such as shaft sinking, wire meshing and certain aspects of underground construction. During the 1990s, further functions, such as cleaning and security, were outsourced to external providers. Since the mid-1990s, however, a major trend—especially in platinum mining—has been to subcontract core mining work to outside contractors. These workers often work alongside workers who are employed directly by mines on a permanent basis. Contract workers typically receive lower wages, often work in dangerous parts of mines, have much less job security, and tend not to be members of unions, since they are often dismissed when they join up (see Bezuidenhout 2008; Bezuidenhout and Kenny 1999; Crush et al 2001).

Access control has a further interesting dynamic. Since workers now run and control compounds, they tend to see these as spaces that are safe from crime, with the union acting as a gatekeeper. Compound dwellers are also now visitors to communities, and increasingly members of communities around mines. They can choose from a range of transport options for traveling to and from mines to home villages, as well as local travel, including buses, minibus taxis, and trains. The proximity

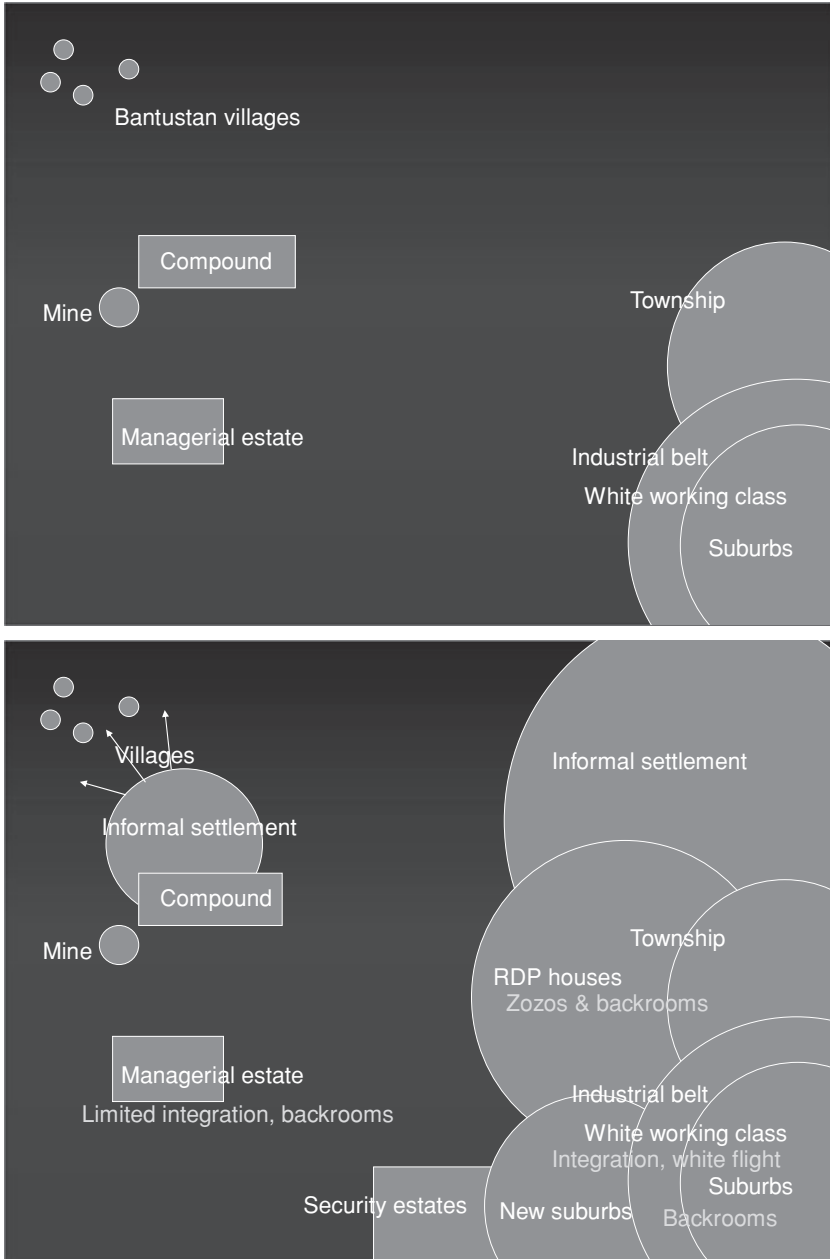
of informal settlements to mines means that many can walk to and from work. Many workers also have their own cars now, with a seeming propensity to acquire “bakkies” (pickup trucks) which are ideal for transporting goods and passengers to and from villages.

The local geography has been transformed in profound ways. In Figure 1 we provide a representation of local geography of mining communities before and during apartheid and after apartheid.

Legislation such as the Group Areas Act, coupled with “influx control”, led to a regimented approach to urban zoning under apartheid. This geography is rapidly changing. Apart from the compounds of old, townships, and limited married quarters, workers now live in various configurations of compounds at various stages of conversion, RDP houses<sup>8</sup>, their own houses in new suburbs, township houses, informal settlements, villages near mines, flats rented from companies, backrooms in old white suburbs, houses or backrooms in old white working class suburbs, and backrooms in managerial estates.

Where the nature of spatial control was based on the logic of incarceration and the compound, the fact that the NUM turned this logic on its head meant that management soon realized that the policy of divide and rule had to be changed to one where the segmentation of workers operated in different ways. Within the compounds themselves, rather than drawing on notions of ethnicity, seniority (in terms of occupational hierarchy, contract and age) became the fulcrum of this strategy, and residential patterns followed suit. The higher occupational echelons of the mining workforce moved into family housing—often in new suburban developments—whereas those at the bottom of the chain (contractors) still remain locked into the logic of compounds and migrant labor. It has become commonplace for mines to offer their employees “living-out allowances”, which enables many of them to subsidize their accommodation. Many NUM shaft stewards choose to move out of compounds into new suburbs because being elected to the position boosts their salaries significantly (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007:250–252). But not all mineworkers are as fortunate. We came across several mineworkers who use their living-out allowances to set up houses of corrugated iron in informal settlements around mines instead of living in compounds. Rather than spending the whole allowance on accommodation at their places of work, they cut their costs to the bone so as to save up money to return to their rural homesteads. Within compounds themselves, there is differentiation based on age, with older workers (often employed directly and indefinitely) living in single rooms or flats where two workers share a bedroom, and younger ones (often contract workers) in dormitories. During our field trips we encountered several kinds of conversions of compounds. Some are converted into small flats, where four mineworkers share two bedrooms, a living space, a bathroom and a kitchen. Then there are those where each worker has





**Figure 1:** Local geography under apartheid and after apartheid

his own room but bathrooms and toilets are shared. Another model involves the conversions of large rooms into smaller dormitories where about four to six workers sleep and share common spaces such as a shower, toilet and a kitchenette. Sections of some compounds have been

converted to accommodate women miners, who are joining the industry in increasing numbers (Benya 2009). Conversions mean that workers have more privacy than in the old days when up to 20 men used to share a dormitory with bunk beds. But, despite the longstanding demand of the union for the conversion of compounds into family units, many mineworkers still prefer not to bring their families to the mines.

The company-state is making way for the market as the key mechanism of control. The logic of coercion is fading, and the logic of choice intersects with class and citizenship status. This shift is embedded in a local geography, where workers can map their mobility on the landscape. Indeed, space can be used to compound, but also to fragment. Whereas in the colonial and apartheid period spatial control took the form of containing people within designated spaces, from the liberation period onwards, spatial control takes the form of differentiation and segmentation, driven by the market.

The unraveling of the apartheid spatial order also means that approaches to reproductive control have changed. Citizenship status has become a major fault line, with foreign migrants subjected to being separated from their families. Nevertheless, the number of South African migrants remains high. There is a disjuncture between the NUM's call for the termination of the migrant labor system and the interests of many of their members, who would rather build their homesteads in rural areas, which they see as safer and an appropriate place for a dignified old age. This is continuity with the migrant labor system of the past. But there are also reconstituted families living in the various residential configurations discussed above.

Sex work is still a major feature in and around mining communities. Indeed, given the HIV/Aids pandemic in southern Africa, itself a result of the migrant labor system (Iliffe 2006:41–45; Jochelson, Leger and Mothibeli 1991), choice leads to risk, and mines and mine compounds are filled with bill boards and posters advertising the dangers of promiscuity and unprotected sex. In particular, mineworkers told us that sex workers operated from informal settlements near compounds.

The food and alcohol trade is now thoroughly privatized, with the language of BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and SMMEs (Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises) used to praise the virtues of this approach. Compounds are now hubs of economic activity, ranging from various kiosks, dry cleaning services, driving schools, banks, cigarette vendors to transport and travel companies. In addition, kitchens, security, gardening and canteens are all outsourced to external suppliers, with BEE companies (including those of the NUM's former general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa) taking their fair share.

The nature of associational control has also been transformed. Mineworkers can now choose which union to join, with some of NUM's former members who join the ranks of supervision and management now

becoming members of the United Associations of South Africa (UASA), a union that mainly organized white mine officials in the past. There is also a trend towards the privatization of representation, with legal insurance companies such as *Scorpions* and *LegalWise* who have offices in and around compounds. In some cases, union officials and office bearers act as agents of these companies. Mineworkers gave different reasons for joining these insurance companies. Some felt that the NUM was losing its power and needed a backup. Others saw a division of labor between NUM and legal insurance companies, where the NUM takes care of workplace disputes, and legal insurance companies taking care of instances such as furniture shops who want to repossess goods bought on credit. Our surveys also showed that many workers belong to religious organizations, and sport continues to play an important role in associational life. Workers can also now choose from a variety of sports clubs, which management seems to have handed over to the state (Mudau 2006).

Political control in the liberation period has shifted significantly. The functions of the mine security are now outsourced to private security agencies. There are rules and procedures that govern their behavior, and some demilitarization has taken place. Women often work as security guards, frequently at the gates of compounds. With regard to compound governance structure, there is “dual power”, with worker-based structures on the one hand and company structures on the other. The managing and maintenance of compounds are often outsourced to BEE companies. Because there are fewer workers in compounds, the PA system has become less central. Workers can no longer just be called to attend meetings. Where meetings were held after hours or on weekends in the past, union meetings increasingly take place directly after shifts when mineworkers return to the surface. This makes it possible for those who do not live in compounds to attend. This also illustrates how the union is experimenting with new ways of recreating the “captive audiences” that it had in the compounds in the past. The state no longer underwrites the despotic labor practices of mining companies. The post-apartheid labor dispensation has codified labor rights, including union access to workplaces to organize workers. New mining health and safety legislation has also been put in place. The state has nationalized mineral rights, and now uses the granting of mining licenses to extract concessions from mining companies, such as a commitment to achieve certain targets, most importantly black share ownership, to increase the number of black and female managers, to increase the number of women underground miners, and to reduce the proportion of the workforce that lives in compounds.

The normative-corporal order after liberation implies that dignity has been asserted at the macro level. Today mineworkers even run the ANC. At the time of writing, Kgalema Motlanthe, a former NUM education

officer and general secretary, was the ANC's vice president and South Africa's state president, and Gwede Mantashe, a former shaft steward, organizer and general secretary of the union, was the ANC's secretary general. In addition to this, many current and former NUM members are members of parliament, provincial legislatures, and local government councils. Of course, the same cannot be said of foreign workers, with new cleavages emerging between South African and foreign workers. In addition, new forms of indignity emerge at the micro level, as the shift from the state to the market through contracting introduces new forms of insecurity. Also, the establishment of a non-racial masculine solidarity means that women now bear the brunt of indignity. The NUM still provides its members with considerable protection from the arbitrary exercise of coercion, thereby restoring their dignity that was stripped by apartheid. There have been numerous legislative improvements, but the benefits do not reach all mineworkers. Contracting reintroduces the whip of the market, and new forms of exclusion emerge.

The introduction of choice for black mineworkers has its own contradictions. Where labor was compounded in the past, and used this to organize solidarity, the fragmentation of labor in the liberation phase leads to new cleavages, which undermine old solidarities; men vs women, permanent vs contract, South Africans vs foreigners, and this overlaps with ethnicity, and finally, compound dwellers vs those who reside outside the compounds. In short, the demise of the logic of compounding results in a logic of fragmentation. This clearly presents the NUM with a challenge. Our survey of members found that mineworkers who live in compounds are more likely to attend mass meetings than those who live in other forms of accommodation (Bezuidenhout et al 2005). The implications are clear. New residential patterns are leading to a decline in union participation.

Whereas there is a substantial fragmentation of residential patterns, the migrant labor system seems to be resilient. The resulting cleavages among workers are a threat to solidarity and existing ways of organizing. This does not mean that compounds have become redundant. It is ironic that contract workers were organized at their compound, which implies that changes in the industry and patterns of accommodation are highly uneven. Clearly, for the NUM there is a need to rethink the organizing model based only on full-time employed workers, who live in compounds only. New forms of solidarity will have to be forged that involve families, communities and local government. The stakes for individuals to lose their jobs are much higher when entire families are settled near a mine.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of the configuration of space depend on a dynamic interaction between attempts at labor control and resistance from

workers. In each of the moments we discuss, we see different permutations of space, depending on regimes of control that capital puts in place and the resulting resistance. Attempts at control by management are driven by the search for profitability, as well as state policy that seeks to maintain social order, usually as defined by dominant interests in society. Changing regimes of accumulation clearly impact on how labor is incorporated, allocated, controlled and reproduced (see Castree et al 2004; Peck 1996). The introduction of the compound system, as well as its modifications at different times, was no doubt shaped by imperatives of capital accumulation. Nevertheless, the major shifts in spatial control resulted from worker agency. In labor process terms worker resistance is a response to exploitation, leading to struggles around the wage–effort bargain. These struggles are also explained as opposition to injustice, especially when framed as struggles against race and gender oppression (Harvey 2000). Approaches that emphasize exploitation and justice run the risk of failing to recognize the importance of struggles around dignity, and the fact that this is often a powerful impetus for collective action. Our research on servicing in the NUM showed that mineworkers were equally members of the union because it “fights racism” and that it has a good track record in negotiating better wages (Bezuidenhout et al 1998; 2005).

During colonialism and apartheid, the mining industry did not just exploit African workers in an economic sense, or commit an injustice against them as a collective, it also attacked the dignity of mineworkers and their families, at the micro, as well as the macro level. At the heart of this was a denial of choice including in such areas as the most intimate aspects of human existence. Associated with the attack on dignity was the denial of an assertion of identity and the use of sanctions to regulate the behavior of mineworkers. As workers resisted these attacks on their dignity, the crudeness of the indignities, the denial of the assertion of identity and the use of sanctions shifted for the better. A narrow focus on exploitation and collective injustice that excludes the body and interventions in the intimate realm of human existence will fail to appreciate this.

The hegemony of the market in new forms of control in the liberation phase is not merely a cynical shift to a new regime of exploitation. The fact that workers are able to assert their dignity, that they often can make choices in areas where they were previously denied this, is a momentous advance. Highlighting the importance of choice and individual freedom does not necessarily imply a celebration of the market, as the new contours of class clearly illustrate (for a summary see Table 1).

What does this case tell us about worker agency? At a very basic level, we can say that worker agency can be informal or formal, individual or collective, spontaneous or goal directed, sporadic or sustained, and it can operate on different scales. It can unite and compound, and yet it can

**Table 1:** Shifts in the normative-corporal order and resulting forms of worker agency

	<b>Colonialism and apartheid</b>	<b>Resistance</b>	<b>Liberation</b>
<b>Dignity</b>	Loss of dignity of workers and families at micro and macro levels	Dignity asserted at micro level	Dignity at macro level, new indignities at micro
<b>Identity</b>	Contending racialized masculinities	Collective African masculinity asserted	Non-racial masculine solidarity, women bear the brunt
<b>Sanctions</b>	Physical assault Imprisonment Insecurity of contract	Assaults limited Disciplinary procedures Permanence of contract	NUM still provides protection Legislative improvements Contracting and whip of the market
<b>Agency</b>	Informal, individualized, spontaneous, sporadic, localized, eg individual retreat, "faction fights", sporadic strikes and protest action	Formal, collective, goal directed, sustained, national, eg formation of the NUM, strikes, political alliances	Formal, collective, directed, sustained, national, but solidarity begins to fracture along new forms of exclusion

also fracture and fragment. In addition to this, our focus on migrant labor and the compound system enabled us to go beyond a narrow focus on the workplace. By historicizing our discussion, we were able to examine the nature, as well as the ebbs and flows, of strategies of control and resistance. The role of the state is central to this. We showed how various forms of control relate to space, reproduction, associational life, as well as politics. Through the notion of a normative-corporal order our focus on the body as a micro-space of contestation enabled us to link this most intimate realm of human existence to the national order of apartheid. We did this by linking the normative-corporal order, and the resulting forms of worker agency, to notions of dignity, and not merely exploitation and injustice.

Control in the South African mining industry was, and still is, a profoundly geographic affair. The production of space involved the entire southern African sub-continent and involved nodes in "labor sending areas" as well as places where mines are located. The refusal of prospective and former workers to take contracts at the wages levels the industry was willing to pay, a form of agency, contributed to the prison-like form control took once the services of workers were procured. The indignity and squalor produced by the compounds, as well as the divide and rule strategies of mining companies, led to violence and so-called

“faction fights”. This was a key reason for mining companies opening up compounds to union organization. Again, informal and localized worker agency necessitated a structural response from mining companies, and indeed the state. This illustrates that forms of resistance, however undeveloped, spontaneous, or seemingly irrational, have the potential to disrupt logics of control. The opening up of the compounds, even though reluctantly, led to a surge of formal union-based mobilization. Instruments of control were turned into instruments of collective worker resistance and discipline. Mining companies attempted to abandon the compound system and the state clamped down with force, but the fact that NUM had jumped scale to the national level and linked up with the broader workers and liberation movements forced the state to capitulate. This was one of the key reasons for the collapse of apartheid, a spectacular example of worker agency in solidarity with other forms of collective organization. But this victory also produced its own contradictions. The fragmentation of the spatial order of apartheid and the introduction of choice leads to new forms of exclusion and the erosion of solidarities of old. Forms of agency that are effective in an historical moment may recede, even erode, on a changed landscape—even if it is one that worker agency helped to bring about. This is the paradox of worker agency under capitalism.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We refer here to mining compounds, not the municipal compounds or hostels run by the state. These are discussed at length by, among others, Sitas (1983), Ramphele (1993) and Xeketwane (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Here we would like to acknowledge some notable exception to this neglect, such as Harold Wolpe’s seminal paper that explored the articulation of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production (Wolpe 1972). However, even Wolpe failed to theorize the use of space for purposes of labor control.

<sup>3</sup> Mine compounds for black workers are usually large residential establishments housing anything between 500 and 5000 per shaft. From a union mobilizing point of view, this provides an additional advantage over and above the widely acknowledged benefits of large concentration of workers under one roof in a workplace and labor process setting.

<sup>4</sup> “Baas” means “boss”, but implies an important element of white supremacy—a more accurate translation might be “master”, rather than “boss”. According to the Chamber of Mines’ English-Afrikaans-Fanakalo dictionary, “baas” is translated as “bas” in Fanakalo. The Fanakalo “bas boy” is translated to “baasjong” or “voorjong” in Afrikaans. The Afrikaans translation for “supervisor” would be “voorman”—which is already a gendered translation. But Africans are not considered to be “men” here—the word “jong” is used instead, which literally means “young”. This is similar to the colonial use of “boy” in English. In the same dictionary, the different versions for what later became a “machine operator” are “machine boy” (English), “boorjong” (Afrikaans) and “mtshin boy” (Fanakalo). The translation for “miner” (in English “ganger” is presented as a synonym) is simply “bas”. A “fitter” (“passer” in Afrikaans), is translated as “bas ka lo fitas”, a “shaft timberman” is a “bas ka lo tshaf”. Here we can see how certain jobs implied a certain racial category. A “miner” can only be a “baas”. In fact, the two concepts were synonymous. See Chamber of Mines of South Africa (1969).

<sup>5</sup> Opening address of the NUM President, Senzeni Zokwana, to the NUM Central Committee, Birchwood Hotel, Boksburg, 23 May 2007, [www.num.org.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=358&Itemid=79](http://www.num.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=358&Itemid=79) (accessed 20 June 2008).

<sup>6</sup> “Spear of the nation”—the armed wing of the African National Congress.

<sup>7</sup> Towards the dying days of apartheid, the regime of PW Botha set up a shadow bureaucracy that coordinated various state departments through the Joint Security Management System (JSMS). This included the identification and assassination of key anti-apartheid activists, often including prominent labor activists.

<sup>8</sup> RDP is an abbreviation for Reconstruction and Development Program, the policy blueprint adopted by the ANC when it came to power in 1994. The program prioritized the meeting of basic needs of the country’s population and housing is one of these basic needs. In pursuit of this objective, the ANC government has embarked on an ambitious program of providing modest housing to those who cannot afford to build or purchase their own. These uniform housing structures, known as RDP houses, are modeled on the slightly bigger “matchbox” township houses built by various apartheid governments and are to be seen in virtually every town and city in the country.

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