8 The dog that didn't bark

The Mufulira strike and white mineworkers at Zambian independence

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Introduction

This chapter is, in some ways, a history of why something did not happen, explained through the history of something which did. This is a way of approaching a historical problem inspired by one of the most memorable scenes in Arthur Conan Doyle's series of short stories about the detective Sherlock Holmes, which occurs in 'The Adventure of Silver Blaze'. The scene features the ever-observant Holmes, who is investigating the disappearance of the prize-winning race-horse Silver Blaze, patiently explaining to a Scotland Yard detective, Inspector Gregory, the significance of a dog not barking:

INSPECTOR GREGORY: Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?

SHERLOCK HOLMES: To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.

GREGORY: The dog did nothing in the night-time.

HOLMES: That was the curious incident.¹

Holmes inferred that the absence of an expected reaction was significant, in this case the dog's failure to raise the alarm.² The aim of this chapter is to make inferences from the absence of an anticipated reaction, that is, the failure of whites on the Zambian Copperbelt to seriously and actively resist decolonisation. What does this tell us about white society on the Copperbelt? In many ways, the Copperbelt contained all the ingredients for a bloody, protracted struggle against decolonisation: an armed, racist white minority in a highly privileged social and economic position who, in the early 1960s, suddenly found themselves neighbours to newly independent African nations and close witnesses to chaotic decolonisation in Congo. Yet no such struggle occurred. Unlike what transpired in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the end of white minority rule in Zambia was relatively peaceful. Despite some bluff and bluster, when it came down to it, whites on the Copperbelt grumbled, but ultimately, and rapidly, surrendered political power and accepted life under an African nationalist government.

Control over the Copperbelt was central to white political control over the region. In the early 1960s, colonial Zambia (or Northern Rhodesia, as it was then called) was part of the Central African Federation, linking the colony with Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (Malawi) to entrench white and British control over the region. The British Government had established this Federation in 1953 as a counterpoise to South African influence in the region, and to appease white settler politicians who sought greater autonomy from London.³ For settler politicians, the Federation was a way of becoming an independent white Dominion within the Commonwealth, granting them the same status as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, a status which the British Government had vaguely promised in the late 1950s.⁴ The Copperbelt was integral to this plan as the economic powerhouse of the Federation and tax revenues from the copper mines effectively bankrolled the project.⁵ Absent this, the Federation would scarcely have been economically viable. There was no other industry of comparable size or importance or, crucially, which employed so many white workers in such a concentrated manner. The mines supported the only substantial white population in the Federation outside Southern Rhodesia's urban centres: some 33,510 people lived in the Copperbelt towns in 1961, almost half of the resident white population in Northern Rhodesia.⁶ Preserving white minority rule was near-impossible unless the Copperbelt's white population lent their active support.⁷

Exploring why they did not tells us something important about the operation and salience of race in different contexts, and about the roots of racial identity. For the first point, it draws our attention to the set of circumstances which make a race a more salient identity upon which people draw, building on Ann Stoler's insight that seeing racism as "built into" the colonial encounter 'accords poorly with the fact that the *quality* and *intensity* of racism vary enormously in different colonial contexts and at different historical moments in any particular colonial encounter'.⁸ For the second point, it raises the question of what did being white on the Copperbelt mean? How and where was racial identity generated?

It is often assumed that there was no substantive difference between how race operated on the Copperbelt and how it did elsewhere in Southern Africa, and in the wider literature the Copperbelt's white mineworkers have been viewed as simply emulating the organisation and attitudes of white mineworkers in South Africa, who were amongst the staunchest supporters of apartheid.⁹ A major contemporary study of white mineworkers by a team of industrial psychologists concluded that 'the transplantation to the Copperbelt of the essentially conservative and self-centred White attitude pattern prevalent elsewhere in Southern Africa, was historically inevitable'.¹⁰ It has been regarded as axiomatic that whites across Southern Africa not only actively supported white minority rule and the colonial racial order, but were prepared to offer determined violent resistance to African nationalist movements. 'South African and Rhodesian whites refused to forego their privileged lifestyles' and, following Portugal's lead, 'stood firm against racial equality and majority rule', argued Filipe Ribeiro de

Meneses and Robert McNamara.¹¹ Similarly, Matthew Hughes has argued that the British Government's changing colonial policy in the late 1950s, 'encouraged the whites in the Federation to make common cause with fellow white settler communities in Angola and Mozambique, South Africa, and Katanga, in the hope that, by standing together', they could resist African demands for political reforms and external pressure from newly independent African states.¹²

Many contemporary observers expected such resistance. Plans by the British Government to invade the Federation to suppress anticipated unrest by white settlers worried civil servants that British troops would refuse to fight 'the European mineworkers on the Copperbelt'.¹³ Statements of intent about resisting decolonisation are not hard to find. In September 1960, for instance, prominent settler politician Rex L'Ange, who had previously worked as an official on the mines, declared to a public meeting in the mining township of Nkana:

Here, on the Copperbelt, we are right in the front line of racial conflict. . . . I think we should make it very clear that we look upon this part of the world as our home and birthright, which we have no intention of relinquishing.¹⁴

Intuitively, then, it might be expected that the longest strike in the history of the Copperbelt mines, initiated in February 1963 by white mineworkers on Mufulira Mine, to be closely connected with decolonisation, an attempt to prevent or wreck a smooth transition to independence under an African nationalist government. Yet this was not the case. The dispute was, in fact, triggered by a demand from the mine management that a group of white workers complete a new form providing information on the work they had undertaken during their shift. That this seemingly trivial issue provoked a major dispute is indicative of the consciousness and priorities of the white workforce, and of the kind of racial identity which developed amongst this workforce.

White workers on the Copperbelt certainly were racist and regarded Africans as more or less permanent subordinates in all areas of life. Racist attitudes appear to have been no less common than elsewhere in the region, indeed the converse would have been odd as large numbers of white mineworkers had spent substantial portions of their working lives in South Africa or Southern Rhodesia. Race operated differently on the Copperbelt, however. Whiteness was not about attachment to geography or to the state. White workers' access to jobs, high wages, housing, health care, education and leisure came via the workplace, not from the state. Maintaining their privileged lifestyle depended less on the maintenance of the colonial political order and more on their capacity to extract high wages and generous fringe benefits from the mining companies through collective action and not, unlike elsewhere in Southern Africa, through legislation.

White employees on the mines thought of themselves as workers, with interests distinct and opposed to their white managers. They perceived that threats to their privileges emanated primarily from white managers, rather than African

workers, and directed their actions accordingly. These privileges, however, included control over African labour and restricting skilled jobs to people of European descent. Whiteness was therefore a core component of their identity. The aim of this chapter is not – in the manner of the alchemist – an attempt to separate out workers' justifiable class-based demands made on their autocratic bosses from illegitimate racist demands. Instead, it argues that these demands were intertwined and were not regarded as separate by those making them at the time, and that this constitutes a form of "white labourism" that did not rest on explicit pronouncements of racial identity.¹⁵ The men who initiated and led the dispute at Mufulira did so as conscious members of a racially bound class. It is to this dispute, to the actual struggles occurring in white society during decolonisation in Zambia, to which this chapter now turns.

Labour and industrial strife at Mufulira mine

Production at Mufulira Mine had begun in 1933 and, thirty years later, it had become the world's largest underground copper mine. The Rhodesian Selection Trust, a company domiciled in the Federation but owned by the New York-based American Metal Company, operated the mine and in the early 1960s employed almost 10,000 people there, around 1,500 whites and 8,000 Africans.¹⁶ The mine had expanded considerably during the 1950s as the post-war economic boom and strategic stockpiling of copper by the United States boosted copper prices. A refinery was constructed at the mine in 1952 and a massive expansion of the underground workings, the Mufulira West Extension, began in 1956. Around half of the £14 million cost of the extension was funded by long-term debt, and the remainder by retained profits.¹⁷ However, copper prices and profits fell sharply while this expansion was underway and had not recovered by the time the Mufulira West Extension opened in 1962. Controlling costs therefore became crucial.

Production costs had increased steadily during the 1950s at all Copperbelt mines and the single largest component of this increase was wages. The total wage bill for African workers increased from £2.11 million in 1950 to £9.32 million in 1960, while total wages for white mineworkers soared from £4.75 million to £16.12 million over the same period.¹⁸ There were, of course, substantially more African mineworkers than white mineworkers, but white mineworkers were paid vastly higher wages, higher both than African wages on the Copperbelt and higher than wages paid to white mineworkers elsewhere in the region.¹⁹ These higher wages were a particular problem for production costs as the Copperbelt's white workforce was also comparatively larger than white mining workforces elsewhere in the region. In 1963, the 7,776 white employees on the Copperbelt mines constituted 17 per cent of the total workforce, whereas the 2,550 whites on Southern Rhodesian mines represented only 6.2 per cent of the total workforce and the 47,352 whites on the Rand and Orange Free State gold mines formed 11 per cent of the total workforce.²⁰ Better paid and proportionately more numerous than their counterparts elsewhere in the

region, the Copperbelt's white mineworkers were in a position of remarkable privilege but, as will be seen, many also felt the position to be a precarious one.

Labour on all the Copperbelt mines was organised by a rigid racial hierarchy, one that in form was very much like the organisation of work on mines in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa and South West Africa. In these territories though, the industrial colour bar that restricted all jobs perceived as skilled and many semi-skilled jobs to white workers was enforced by legislation. In Northern Rhodesia, the colour bar had no basis in law but was enforced on the mines by agreements made between the mining companies and the two white trade unions: the Northern Rhodesia Mine Workers' Union (NRMWU) and the Mine Officials and Salaried Staff Association (MOSSA). This meant that all work regarded as unskilled was performed by African workers, who undertook most of the manual work underground and in the surface plants: drilling ore in the stopes, removing blasted ore, clearing waste rock, loading skips, etc. Some African workers performed semi-skilled jobs such as driving underground locomotives and operating overhead cranes, while a smaller number held higher-status jobs that involved less manual labour including clerks and "boss boys", who supervised African labour underground. All African mineworkers were supervised by a white mineworker, and the former could not be above the latter in the hierarchy of the mine, regardless of the job they performed.

There was also a clear hierarchy within the white workforce, which was divided into a daily-paid section and a monthly-staff section. Administrative and clerical workers, engineers and other professionals, and supervisors of white labour such as shift bosses, mine captains, and foremen were all graded as staff. The small number of white women who worked on the mines as clerks or nurses in the mine hospitals were also in staff positions. Most staff were members of MOSSA. Daily-paid mineworkers were all men and were all union members, as the NRMWU had run a closed shop on the mines since 1942. Their numbers included artisans such as boilermakers, electricians and fitters, and semi-skilled workers such as operators, and they performed almost all skilled work on the mines: blasting ore, repairing machinery, operating pumps, and driving the winding engines that hauled men and ore up the shafts. Most also had responsibility for directly supervising a "gang" of African workers.

This was, in theory, what daily-paid mineworkers were doing at work. In practice, supervising workers dispersed throughout a vast network of underground tunnels and shafts presents a unique challenge and white mineworkers, backed up by a union that bristled against "interference" from management, had a substantial degree of autonomy underground. From the late 1950s, the mining companies sought closer knowledge of and control over what their expensive white workforce was actually doing at work, as a part of controlling costs. At Mufulira, the mine management began implementing scientific management techniques then prevalent in British industry. Two study teams were deployed to examine jobs performed by white workers looking at 'process planning, work simplification, works organisation, layout planning, transport, materials handling, administrations and clerical procedures', insofar as they

affect the way a job was done. These techniques were an attempt to improve productivity and manage costs by linking pay to performance.²¹ In contrast, the NRMWU had always insisted on standardised basic rates of pay for the same jobs across all mines. With some friction, new bonus schemes were steadily expanded across Mufulira's white workforce until late 1962, when timbermen were incorporated into the scheme.

Timbermen were daily-paid underground workers responsible for constructing and maintaining underground structures of timber and concrete. Most of the manual work was done by groups of between two and six African workers who, in the derogatory language of the time, were employed as "timberboys" and the timberman's role largely consisted of using specialised tools and supervising this group. For this, timbermen were paid 80/3 £/s/d per eight-hour shift, plus a two-shilling bonus if they were required to use a cutting torch, and an annual copper bonus, housing allowance, free electricity and water, subsidised health care and leisure facilities.²² All other white employees of the mines received the same, or even better, benefits.

High wages and the provision of a 'miniature Welfare State conceived on lines which made the similar arrangements in the United Kingdom seem parsimonious' by the mining companies enabled white mineworkers to comfortably support families.²³ Contrary to the conventional image of mining towns as a largely male environment, which was certainly true on the Copperbelt in the 1930s, by the 1960s there was no pronounced gender imbalance amongst the white population. Most white mineworkers were married and had children, and could be confident that education, health care, welfare and leisure would be provided for their families by the mining companies, provided they kept their jobs on the mine and that these jobs continued to provide such benefits.

Timbermen, like other daily-paid mineworkers, were not actually paid each day and the term refers to the fact that they were employed on a daily basis. They could be fired or resign with 24 hours' notice, which entailed not only losing their job but also the extensive fringe benefits. Refusing to follow the instructions of mine managers was a good way to get fired on the spot, unless groups of white workers stuck together. This is what happened when, on 31 December 1962, Mufulira's mine superintendent informed all timbermen that they would now be required to complete a new form providing details on all tasks undertaken during their shift, how long they had taken to do the task, and what materials had been used in order to receive their bonus. This was a time and motion study which would then be linked to a new categorisation system where all daily-paid workers underground would be rated by officials every six months and ranked as above merit, average merit or below merit. Further bonuses and promotions would be based on merit rating.²⁴ Timbermen collectively refused point blank to participate in this.

This was unsurprising. Precarious employment encouraged collective action – while one timberman could be fired easily, sacking all of them would disrupt the operations of the mine – but, beyond this, industrial relations at Mufulira, like all the Copperbelt mines, were poor. It had not even been a year

since the last strike by white mineworkers had shut down the mine.²⁵ While the dispute with white timbermen was developing, mine management had to contend with a strike by some 800 African miners at Mufulira West in protest over the attitude of a white shift boss and a series of wildcat strikes by African smelter workers, in defiance of their union leadership. This is not to say the leadership of the African Mineworkers' Union (AMU) were moderates. On the eve of the shutdown at Mufulira, the AMU declared an unrelated dispute with all mines to try and impose a closed shop on the mining industry.²⁶

Most disputes by white mineworkers were generated by contestations over authority and skill with mine management; that is the self-belief of many white mineworkers that they were skilled workers who possessed the necessary skills to do the job with minimal intervention from managers. Carter Goodrich's classic study of conflict in British industry following the First World War, *The Frontier of Control*, is instructive here.²⁷ Goodrich used the idea of the frontier to understand the struggle between unrestrained management prerogative and increasingly assertive trade unions on the shop floor. "Control" was understood implicitly – the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, when asked by a mine-owner what they meant by control, replied 'we mean just what you mean when you say we must not have control' – and similarly on the Copperbelt "control" was not clearly defined but involved control over the production process, that is, for white mineworkers, control over time, tools, and African labour. Autonomy, for white mineworkers, was closely entwined with their freedom to control and instruct the African workers they supervised as they saw fit. In the hierarchy of the mine, greater autonomy for some meant increased control and surveillance for others.

The end of empire in Northern Rhodesia

It is difficult to exaggerate the speed of political developments in Northern Rhodesia during the early 1960s. In 1959, very few people, including African nationalists, white settler politicians or the British Government, could plausibly have expected that Northern Rhodesia would become the independent nation of Zambia within five years, headed by a man, Kenneth Kaunda, then in prison, and governed by a party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP), then illegal. Yet by early 1963, the writing was on the wall for colonial rule. African nationalist movements in all three constituent territories of the Central African Federation had resolutely opposed its formation and consistently agitated against it during the 1950s, with little success until the end of the decade. By 1963, however, both Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland had been granted a substantial degree of internal self-government – Southern Rhodesia had been granted self-government in 1923 – and African nationalist parties had taken power in territorial elections. The British Government's announcement in March 1963 that governments in individual territories could secede from the Federation therefore sounded the death knell for the Federation, if the decision was not reversed or obstructed.

Unsuccessful efforts by the United Federal Party (UFP) – the white settler party which governed the Federation – to prevent the disintegration of the Federation had focused on the October 1962 territorial elections in Northern Rhodesia. The Malawi Congress Party had already won a convincing victory in the August 1961 territorial elections in Nyasaland and were pressing to secede from Federation, but the territory's miniscule white population and comparative lack of resources meant the UFP were resigned to losing the territory and focus shifted to retaining control of Northern Rhodesia. In any case, for whites, the real impetus behind Federation had been the possibility of amalgamating Northern and Southern Rhodesia. White control over Southern Rhodesia seemed secure; the African nationalist movement there had not yet recovered from the Federation-wide suppression of nationalist parties in February 1959.²⁸ In Northern Rhodesia, complex franchise arrangements held out the slim possibility that the UFP could secure victory, despite the fact that African voters had been included on the electoral roll in substantial numbers for the first time. This was not entirely a forlorn hope. Franchise arrangements did deny UNIP, which won the popular vote by a large margin, an outright majority of seats, but UNIP confounded the UFP's plans by forming an uneasy coalition with a smaller nationalist party, the African National Congress (ANC), and ousted the UFP from power.

Any possibility that white settlers would retain political power relied on the UFP securing the support of nearly all white voters in the territory and attracting a sliver of African votes, the latter thought possible as white politicians were convinced that genuine enthusiasm for Federation by Africans was suppressed by nationalist parties. The UFP therefore ran a campaign aimed at stiffening the resolve of white voters to resist African nationalism through a lurid portrayal of what life would be like for whites under a UNIP government. UFP leaflets distributed on the Copperbelt warned that, after years of prosperity, 'a savage fist is pounding at the door, and the question is whether the benefits we now have, and those yet to come, should be exchanged for the petrol bomb!' and claimed that UNIP supported a mass uprising like Mau Mau, which would see whites murdered in their beds.²⁹

Interestingly, white mineworkers and the NRMWU had little discernible involvement in the 1962 territorial election, a noteworthy contrast to their South African counterparts who were a key constituency for those rejecting any reforms to apartheid. The UFP's candidates included eight politicians, six businessmen, five farmers, five mine executives or senior officials, two lawyers, a doctor and a teacher, but no mineworkers though the party's candidate in Roan Antelope, Hendrik Liebenberg, had been an NRMWU branch official at Roan Antelope Mine some years earlier. At Mufulira, the UFP candidate, Pieter Wulff, a South African who was chief underground surveyor on the mine, was opposed by Alec Stevens, a carpenter on the same mine who had been NRMWU president in the early 1950s. Stevens, though, fared poorly and secured less than 7 per cent of the vote.

The UFP's campaign was, in one sense, successful. Dire warnings about African nationalism resonated with white voters and across Northern Rhodesia

almost all whites voted for the UFP. The enfranchisement of some African voters makes it difficult to calculate the precise proportion of white voters who endorsed the UFP, but it appears that around 90 per cent of white voters in the territory did so on a turnout that exceeded 90 per cent.³⁰ These figures, however, disguise the fact that many whites did not vote at all. Many were ineligible to vote as they had not been in the country long enough to fulfil the residency requirements or had not registered to vote. A total of 14,163 (overwhelmingly white) voters on the Copperbelt cast their votes, but the Copperbelt towns collectively had a white population of around 34,000 in 1961. Although a sizable proportion of this population would have been children, substantial numbers clearly did not vote.

A regional comparison is instructive here. One obvious contrast is the failure of white politicians in Northern Rhodesia to prevent the inclusion of steadily larger numbers of Africans on the electoral roll. It is striking that the efforts of the UFP, and whites in the colony more generally, to hold onto political power were so lacklustre. In the early 1960s in South Africa, the National Party was tightening its grip on power and ruthlessly suppressed domestic opposition. Its policy of apartheid was a popular one with the white electorate, coloured voters having been successfully removed from the electoral roll in 1956, and its vote had risen considerably since the 1948 elections in which the party first took power. Similarly, in Southern Rhodesia white voters swung behind the far-Right Rhodesian Front in the 1962 general election, setting the territory's trajectory towards the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965. Divergence between Northern and Southern Rhodesia predated the elections in 1962. The Rhodesian Front's predecessor, the Dominion Party, actually won the highest number of votes in Southern Rhodesia's 1958 General Election, though the complex electoral arrangements handed the UFP a majority of seats.³¹ In contrast, the Dominion Party fared poorly in Northern Rhodesia.

A more proximate and spectacular example of how to prevent decolonisation, or at least attempt to, was provided to whites on the Copperbelt by events in 1960 immediately across the border in Katanga. At Belgian Congo's hastily arranged independence, Katangese politicians hostile to the distant, would-be national government conspired with white settlers and elements in the Belgian Government to form their own, separate state. Using the excuse of an army mutiny that occurred immediately after independence, the province seceded from Congo in July 1960.³² Several thousand whites fled Katanga after the army mutiny, streaming across the border into Northern Rhodesia and then into Southern Rhodesia. It might be expected that witnessing the sudden arrival of large numbers of whites fleeing a newly independent African state would have hardened attitudes on the Copperbelt. Roy Welensky, prime minister of the Federation, certainly thought so, identifying 'the evacuation of the Belgian refugees from Katanga' as the 'major cause' pushing white voters in Southern Rhodesia towards the Rhodesian Front.³³ Yet if anything, the fate of Katanga seems to have discouraged attempts to resist decolonisation across the border.

Separatist Katanga was bolstered by clandestine military support from white minority regimes to the south, including a steady flow of white mercenaries, and it took three years of fighting with forces from the new national Congolese Government and the United Nations to crush the break-away state. The Federal Government identified the Katangese cause as vital to its own survival, and its involvement in Katanga has been seen as a precursor to the white Rhodesian resistance to black majority rule that continued until 1980.³⁴ Elements in the South African Government thought the same. As H.K.T. Taswell, the South African high commissioner to the Federation, explained to his superiors in Pretoria, 'the Federal Government takes the view that Tshombe is fighting their battle for them'. Taswell himself was convinced of this view and urged South African military support for Katanga, because 'if Tshombe fails, the drive to the south will be on. The Rhodesias, already in a shaky position, may collapse and we will be the main target'.³⁵ However, as United Nations forces closed in on the Katangese capital Elizabethville in January 1963, a few miles across the border the whites at Mufulira Mine had very different ideas about what their interests were, and how best to protect them.

Shutdown at Mufulira

Outright rejection of management initiatives, with no negotiation or suggestion of compromise, had been a regular feature of industrial relations on the Copperbelt mines for the previous 25 years. This history of white industrial unrest makes the timbermen's decision and subsequent strike unsurprising, but what is surprising is that many participants in the Mufulira strike would not have been around to experience this history. Figures for 1963 are unavailable, but in both December 1961 and in December 1964, 46 per cent of the white workforce had been on the mines for less than three years.³⁶ The average length of white employment was only 5.6 years in 1964.³⁷ Frequent disputes meant that newcomers were quickly socialised into confrontational industrial relations, but another factor is also significant: the international experience of this workforce. Almost none of the white workforce were from Northern Rhodesia. They had arrived on the Copperbelt with experience of life and work at mining and industrial centres in Britain, South Africa, and elsewhere around the world. This explains the knowledge of, and hostility to, scientific management techniques, even though these were new on the Copperbelt. Explaining why timbermen had refused to complete any forms, NRMWU President Emrys Williams – a winding engine driver originally from South Wales – explained that the men 'were concerned they were effectively conducting a Time and Motion Study on themselves'.³⁸ There was close knowledge of events and trends in industry elsewhere.

It was this knowledge that prompted the timbermen's action. During the final week in January 1963, timbermen refused to go underground or, if they did, refused to complete the bonus form at the end of their shift. Mine management immediately moved to discipline them, and on 4 February notice was

given individually to timbermen that there was no work available for them until they obeyed instructions. Effectively, they were laid off without pay. In response, artisans across the mine refused to complete their bonus forms and on 9 February took wildcat strike action. An artisan's delegation to the mine manager, Noel Kenny from Southern Rhodesia, explained that they were not unhappy with their own bonus scheme but were supporting the timbermen.³⁹

White managers, too, maintained a tough, intransigent stance and refused to broker any compromise. In meetings with the union, Kenny vowed 'he would shut down the mine immediately, lay off the workers and run the mine on a care and maintenance basis for an indefinite period' rather than accede to their demands.⁴⁰ Once the strike was underway, Mufulira's Canadian mine superintendent Al O'Connell explained it 'was correct and quite reasonable' to close the mine. 'Management', he insisted, 'must be allowed to manage', and this meant white employees doing as they were instructed.⁴¹ Kenny was furious at his authority being flouted by artisans and timbermen. On 8 February, he made an unannounced visit to the change house at Prain Shaft and offered one of the new bonus vouchers to Schoeman, a shop steward who had just returned from holiday. Schoeman reached for the form but Kenny snatched it back, telling him 'it's just as well you were prepared to take that voucher from me, otherwise your feet wouldn't have touched the floor you would have been fired so quickly'.⁴²

This, unsurprisingly, resulted in a hardening of attitudes and preparation for a strike began. As usual, legal niceties were ignored, and no secret ballot of union members was taken, as required by law; a law which had been passed in 1958 following wildcat strikes by white mineworkers. Throughout the dispute, decisions were put to a vote by a show of hands at mass meetings. Even the initial decision not to sign the bonus forms was taken on a show of hands. Shop stewards preferred conducting business in the open in this manner, as they knew they could usually rely on the macho culture of the mines and the tough, masculine self-image of their members. As one man who worked underground at Mufulira in the early 1960s later claimed, 'the men who mined were as hard as the rock they fought underground'.⁴³ Maintaining this self-image meant not backing down to white bosses or shying away from industrial disputes. Consequently, with sections of the white workforce either on strike or ignoring instructions from mine officials, the management shut the mine on 22 February.⁴⁴ All 800 daily-paid mineworkers were immediately laid off without pay, and the African workforce was steadily reduced as available work diminished.

The fact that the mine had to be closed is worth exploring. Contemporary observers were convinced that white mineworkers did little, if any, actual work. Once underground, it was thought, they wiled away the hours and earned fantastic wages by the sweat of the brow of the African workers they supervised, who did the real work. Andrew Sardanis, who operated a transport business in Nchanga in the 1950s, expressed the common cynic's view that, as African "boss boys" supervised African workers, young white miners 'had very little to

do except snooze, eat their sandwiches and listen to music on their radios'.⁴⁵ Cyril Dunn, foreign correspondent for the *Observer*, explained that while 'miners in other parts of the world do a great deal of hard manual work', on the Copperbelt even the 'humblest white worker . . . is a supervisor of blacks, who do all the shovelling'.⁴⁶ In his 1963 book on the Central African Federation, the *Guardian* journalist Patrick Keatley offers a snapshot of a typical white mineworker, 'Jacobus van der Merwe': 'Let us say that Jacobus is not, unhappily, one of Mother Nature's most gifted creatures, and that because of his limited intelligence . . . he has been assigned the simplest sort of job and has never been promoted'. Keatley contrasts "Jacobus" with an imagined African miner, "Moses Chona", 'sweating it out with a drill in humid, choking conditions underground', for substantially less pay.⁴⁷

The forced shutdown of the mines whenever white mineworkers went on strike suggests that they did fulfil an important role in production, as well as in the supervisory hierarchy. The mines could not function without them and white mineworkers had, for over two decades, used this to their full advantage.⁴⁸ This, however, was changing, as the dispute at Mufulira would reveal. Changes in the organisation of work during the 1950s had steadily reduced the proportion of daily-paid mineworkers, even as the overall size of the white workforce had grown. Increasing numbers of whites were employed as officials.

There were still enough daily-paid workers at Mufulira to cause serious problems though. A Board of Enquiry was hastily arranged by the colonial administration to resolve the dispute. This Board, headed by Sir Charles Hartwell, formerly chief secretary to Uganda's colonial government, was mystified about the dispute. White workers who appeared before the Board expressed a deep-seated conviction that the mine management would use any information supplied in the forms against them.⁴⁹ Another objection was made to the Board as well: filling in forms was not their job. NRMWU representatives explained that a mining official could note down the time it took to complete a job, but timbermen could not, as 'a daily-paid Timberman is not in the same category'.⁵⁰ It emerged that a version of these forms had previously been filled by shift bosses, an arrangement which timbermen and other white workers were happy with. This points to their self-identification as workers and an understanding that workers were white men who performed manual tasks. Timbermen, as one explained to the Board, would only do the job they were employed to do and 'they were not employed as clerks'.⁵¹

These arguments made little impression on the Board, who recommended an immediate return to work.⁵² In turn, this made little impression on the strikers, who voted at a mass meeting to reject the report entirely. The Board had no way to enforce their recommendation as, while not exactly maintaining a *laissez-faire* attitude, the colonial administration and Federal Government had comparatively little involvement in industrial relations on the Copperbelt. African trade unions, for instance, were not illegal, and the kind of industry-wide machinery for conciliation and collective bargaining brought in by the Industrial Conciliation Acts in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia was never

established in Northern Rhodesia. Consequently, trade unions were not incorporated into the state, as white trade unions elsewhere in the region had been. White mineworkers' leaders carefully guarded their autonomy and successfully opposed any attempt to implement a version of the Industrial Conciliation Act in Northern Rhodesia.

The strike was largely a trial of strength between the NRMWU and Mufulira Mine. Despite the seemingly low stakes, disputes between the mining companies and their white workforce were often discussed in existential terms. 'Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind', NRMWU branch chairman Mieczysław "Frank" Rzechorzek, informed his members, 'the Company would like nothing better than to see this Union wiped out. This is a naked, calculated move to further this end'.⁵³ Rzechorzek was a firebrand. A 38-year-old miner, Rzechorzek had been born in Poland but left at the outbreak of the Second World War and made his way to Britain, via Algiers, where he joined the RAF as a pilot while still a teenager. He left Britain for the Copperbelt after being demobilised and arrived at Mufulira in mid-1953.⁵⁴ By the time of the Mufulira dispute, he had spent ten years working underground and had been involved in innumerable disputes, including two Copperbelt-wide strikes.

Rzechorzek and other union officials were not ignorant of the greatly altered political context in the early 1960s. From early on, they had sought to reach out to the African Mineworkers' Union (AMU) as an acknowledgement that the dispute impacted a much larger number of African mineworkers. While white timbermen thought of themselves primarily as manual workers, much of the manual work was performed by African workers, who were directly supervised by white workers and whose bonuses were calculated using the same form under dispute. Information provided by white timbermen determined a component of African workers' wages. At the outset of the dispute, union officials had been at pains to emphasise that they 'wanted to remove any impression of their provoking conflict with the Africans'.⁵⁵ The union branch also attempted to use the connection between white and African timber workers to their advantage by declaring 'we have a common cause with the African employee in this matter' and attempting to enlist the support of the AMU at a joint meeting.⁵⁶ AMU officials were non-committal, presumably because the interests and perspectives of their members had not been taken into consideration when white timbermen refused to fill in a form, resulting in hundreds of African workers being laid off.⁵⁷

White-owned businesses on the Copperbelt were more responsive to appeals for support. As a Methodist minister in nearby Chingola described it, the Copperbelt towns were 'abjectly dependent upon the copper companies to which they owe their existence'.⁵⁸ Fifty-five per cent of all white employees in Mufulira worked on the mine and many of those who did not work on the mines were dependent on the incomes of those who did.⁵⁹ From mid-March, the union sent appeals for assistance to around 300 businesses and responses came back with offers of free meals, free petrol, specially reduced prices and extended credit for laid-off white mineworkers. With the mine closed, however, other

economic activity in the town slowly came to a halt. By the end of March, dozens of local businesses – including general stores, garages, car dealers, furnishers, beauty parlours, jewellers, cycle shops, cafes and the Mufulira Chamber of Commerce – had contacted the Ministry of Labour to urge intervention to end the dispute as business was at a standstill.⁶⁰

The weeks-long stalemate gradually turned against white mineworkers. Their power relied on the capacity to inflict a heavy financial penalty on the mine-owners by disrupting production. When mine managers were prepared to wait out the dispute, there was little they could do. The union leadership could not make good on their threat to expand the strike by pulling workers at other mines out on strike, as they had done in previous disputes. Other threats were equally empty. Emrys Williams declared that he was prepared to go to London to give the British Trade Union Congress a first-hand account of how the company had locked out their members and have Copperbelt copper declared “black”, so British dockers would not unload it.⁶¹ Nothing came of this. Amongst the white workforce, belief that they could win against an intransigent management was diminishing. On 11 April, the Mufulira branch voted 232–136 against returning to work.⁶² The mine management, clearly sensing a wavering of resolve, decided to reopen the mine, and approached daily-paid workers individually asking them to return to work.

Rzechorzek singled out anyone who returned as ‘deliberately injuring himself, his community and his Union’.⁶³ This did not prevent a trickle of his members returning to work. The first went back on 11 April and two weeks later 53 were at work.⁶⁴ NRMWU members began picketing the shafts and workshops and some were spotted taking down the numbers of cars so that those who were working could be identified. Mine management claimed that people returning to work had received threats that their cars and property would be damaged.⁶⁵ Indeed, seven daily-paid men wrote to the minister of Labour, Reuben Kamanga, claiming that intimidation had kept them away from work and requesting emergency legislation to make the closed shop illegal; appealing to an African politician for the state to take action against fellow white workers.⁶⁶ Wavering resolve was evident in other ways. Many white mineworkers simply resigned from the mine and left. By late April, one colonial official estimated that around 156 daily-paid mineworkers had resigned from the mine since the beginning of the dispute, and most had left the Copperbelt.⁶⁷ One timberman, for instance, hopped on a cargo ship to New Zealand. ‘We have decided to give New Zealand a year’s trial’, his wife explained, and if they didn’t like it then they would move to South Africa.⁶⁸

The decision to reopen the mine was a turning point. There were 650 white staff at Mufulira by 1963, almost as many as the 800 daily-paid workers, and the staff returned to work when the mine reopened. Copper production was restarted, though at a lower level. The position for white mineworkers was becoming unsustainable. Many freely admitted that they were only on the Copperbelt to make money, and by 1 May they had been out of work for over 12 weeks.⁶⁹ Moreover, by this time, it was obvious that there would be no

solidarity strikes at other mines. The NRMWU Mufulira branch capitulated on 1 May and timbermen agreed to complete the required forms, in exchange for a slightly higher bonus.⁷⁰ This was a serious defeat in two ways: the NRMWU were forced to concede the principle and had incurred a crippling financial cost. The dispute cost the union almost £60,000, mostly strike pay, and strikers collectively lost around £250,000 in wages.⁷¹

Although defeated, most union members didn't seem to think there was anything fundamentally wrong with the approach they had taken. A month after the end of the strike Rzechorzek was returned unopposed as chairman for a third term at the annual branch elections.⁷² Moreover, there were further wildcat strikes by white mineworkers across the Copperbelt in November 1963, including at Mufulira, where there was a walkout after a white miner was disciplined for allegedly contravening blasting regulations. This was the seventh wildcat strike by white mineworkers on the Copperbelt mines that month, and again no ballot was taken. Mine management strongly suspected that the reasons for the strike had been "trumped up" because there had already been a strike at every other mine and so 'Mufulira were the "odd men out" on the Copperbelt' if they did not organise one.⁷³ Mufulira's NRMWU branch had a militant, combative reputation to maintain.

The AMU's patience with white industrial unrest had finally worn through. While at best noncommittal during the Mufulira's timbermen's dispute, the union denounced the wildcat strikes during November. Matthew Mwenda-pole, an AMU official, accused white strikers of attempting to blackmail the new government, and pointed to the dual nature of their demands. White mineworkers were seeking guarantees from the mining companies 'in respect of pensions and savings, but also in respect to other preferential and discriminatory practices to which they have been accustomed for a long time'.⁷⁴ Although striking white workers 'denied categorically' that their aim was blackmailing the government – it was the companies they sought guarantees from – Mwenda-pole was entirely correct in identifying the intertwined nature of their demands.⁷⁵ Protecting their financial rewards from their employers was, for white mineworkers, not separate from preserving racist working practices. They were a privileged, racially delineated class and wanted to keep things that way.

Conclusion

The Copperbelt of the early 1960s occupied an intriguing chronological and geographical position. Quite suddenly, and unexpectedly, its white inhabitants found themselves on the northern edge of white-ruled Southern Africa, with the British Empire unravelling around them. It might reasonably be expected that these racist mineworkers would have fought tooth and nail against an African nationalist movement about to upend white minority rule and take power. They did not and, reflecting on the vignette that opened this chapter, the existence of an absence can be significant. That white workers on the Copperbelt did not actively resist decolonisation tells us something about how they

saw themselves and how they saw their place in the world. It does not suggest that these whites were a quiescent population, generally happy with their lot. There were serious industrial upheavals on the copper mines prior to Zambian independence.

White mineworkers constituted a transient population tied to an extractive industry and had no real abiding interest in Northern Rhodesia, the territory they happened to be in. This was important. Consequently, the fortunes of these white workers were much less tied to the state and to the land than elsewhere in the region. Whites on the Copperbelt were prepared to go no further than marking "UFP" on a ballot paper to defend white minority rule, and many could not even be bothered to take this step. Yet at the same time, white mineworkers were willing to initiate a lengthy struggle over the seemingly inconsequential issue of who should complete a bonus form. The apparent triviality of this issue, especially in contrast with the magnitude of the political events occurring at this time, should not detract from the seriousness with which participants at the time regarded this struggle, both white mineworkers and Mufulira Mine's management. These were the kinds of issues that white mineworkers on the Copperbelt were prepared to fight over.

This lengthy and bitter dispute locates the origin of the privileged position of these workers as the workplace. It was here that their considerable privileges were obtained and defended. The organisation of the labour process on the mines made white workers a racialised labour aristocracy. This position was based both on the skilled work and supervisory functions they performed on the mines and on their collective willingness to engage in bruising encounters with their employers. Demands by white mineworkers for better pay and conditions were *de facto* racialised because of their position in the mines, even when they did not make explicit racial appeals and even consciously sought to enlist the support of African mineworkers. Resistance to encroachments from management was an important part of this dispute and, in this sense, it had much in common with disputes in British industry over the application of scientific management techniques. Yet part of the autonomy that they sought to retain was control over the African mineworkers, who almost all white daily-paid mineworkers supervised, and maintenance of the racial hierarchy on the mines.

Despite this, timbermen and other white mineworkers had a strong self-image that they were working-class because they were male manual workers, something that was resistant to the fact that the African workers they supervised performed most of this manual work. The bonuses that white timbermen received were based, in part, on the work performed by African workers they regarded as their subordinates. Generally, white mineworkers had little interest in the Africans they worked alongside, who, of course, experienced much harsher and more arbitrary treatment from mine managers. The opponents were the mining companies and their local managers whose actions threatened their position as a racialised labour aristocracy whose work was crucial to the operation of the mines.

Notes

- 1 Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 347.
- 2 In the story, Holmes infers from the lack of barking that the race-horse was taken by someone whom was familiar to the stable dog.
- 3 Murphy, 'Government by Blackmail', 54.
- 4 Cohen, *Failed Experiment*, 5; Kalinga, 'Independence Negotiations', 238.
- 5 Hazlewood, 'Economics of Federation', 211–212.
- 6 Kay, *Social Geography of Zambia*, 35.
- 7 Secret – and somewhat hare-brained – schemes by the Federal Government to declare independence relied on the mobilisation of all virtually all white adult males into the police and army, see Welensky Papers, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford [hereafter WP], 234/8, Top Secret (for Prime Minister and Minister of Defence only), 31 January 1961.
- 8 Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories', 137. Emphasis in the original.
- 9 Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa*, 130; Butler, *Copper Empire*, 57.
- 10 Holleman and Biesheuvel, *Attitudes of White Mining Employees. Part I*, vi.
- 11 Meneses and McNamara, *The White Redoubt*, xxiii.
- 12 Hughes, 'Fighting for White Rule', 596.
- 13 Murphy, 'An Intricate and Distasteful Subject', 752.
- 14 WP 635/11, Speech given by Rex L'Ange to UFP meeting in Nkana, 23 September 1960.
- 15 The concept was first outlined by Jonathan Hyslop in Hyslop, 'The Imperial Working Class'. He subsequently modified the concept, noting that its initial formulation was 'overly stark': Hyslop, 'Reply to Kenefick', 64.
- 16 Government of Zambia, *Final Report of the September 1961 Census of Non-Africans and Employees* (Lusaka: Government Printer, 1965), 25.
- 17 Cunningham, *Copper Industry in Zambia*, 106.
- 18 Phimister, 'Workers in Wonderland?' 198, 212.
- 19 For a comparison between the wages of white mineworkers on the Copperbelt and their counterparts in South Africa see Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines archive, Ndola [hereafter ZCCM] 17.4.4C, The European Wage Structure on the Copperbelt, 26 February 1958.
- 20 Northern Rhodesia Chamber of Mines, *Mining Industry Year Book 1964* (Kitwe: Chamber of Mines, 1965), 31; Chamber of Mines of Rhodesia, *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report for the Year 1964* (Salisbury: Chamber of Mines, 1965), 36; Chamber of Mines of South Africa, *Eight-First Annual Report 1970* (Johannesburg: Chamber of Mines, 1971), 72.
- 21 National Archives of Zambia, Lusaka [hereafter NAZ] MLSS1/25/3, Improvement of Efficiency, Mufulira Copper Mines, 2 November 1959.
- 22 International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam [hereafter IISH], MIF Box 360, Agreement between the NRMWU and Mufulira Copper Mines Ltd, 24 August 1962.
- 23 Dunn, *Central African Witness*, 137.
- 24 NAZ, MLSS1/25/3, Promotional Policy, Mining Department Mufulira Copper Mines, 21 January 1963. This memo was confidential but was leaked to NRMWU members in February.
- 25 The National Archives, London, CO 1015/2197, Telegram from Acting Governor to Colonial Secretary, 8 February 1962.
- 26 NAZ, MLSS1/25/3, Report on a Labour Dispute, Department of Labour, 14 January 1963, 12 February 1963 and 21 February 1963.
- 27 Goodrich, *Frontier of Control*.
- 28 Groves, 'Transnational Networks and Regional Solidarity', 167–169.
- 29 Mulford, *Northern Rhodesia General Election*, 32.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 31 Fraenkel, 'Electoral Engineering in Southern Rhodesia', 1173, 1178.
- 32 Larmer and Kennes, 'Rethinking the Katangese Secession', 748–752.

- 33 'Situation in Rhodesia', *The Times*, 28 January 1965. I am grateful to Sibanengi Ncube for directing my attention to this quotation.
- 34 Hughes, 'Fighting for White Rule', 615.
- 35 Scarnecchia, 'The Congo Crisis', 68–69.
- 36 Figures calculated from Northern Rhodesia Chamber of Mines, *Mining Industry Year Book 1961* (Kitwe: Chamber of Mines, 1962), 31; Copper Industry Service Bureau, *Copperbelt of Zambia Mining Industry Year Book 1964*, (Kitwe: Copper Industry Service Bureau), 51. These figures slightly overstate the number of newly arrived white mine-workers as mineworkers who moved to a mine operated by a different company were counted as new employees in terms of length of service. There were, however, only two mining companies in Northern Rhodesia.
- 37 Northern Rhodesia Chamber of Mines, *Mining Industry Year Book 1964*, 51.
- 38 NAZ, MLSS1/25/3, Notes on Board of Enquiry into dispute at Mufulira Copper Mine, 25 February 1963.
- 39 Ibid., Summary: Main points of disagreement.
- 40 Ibid., Record of meetings between Mufulira Copper Mines Limited and the NRMWU, 14, 16 and 18 February 1963. Care and maintenance means a mine is closed but maintenance work continues so that production could be restarted in future.
- 41 Ibid., Notes on Board of Enquiry into dispute at Mufulira Copper Mine, 26 February 1963.
- 42 Ibid., Record note, 6 May 1963.
- 43 In this, he was referring exclusively to white miners. Smith, *Mad Dog Killer*, 18.
- 44 NAZ, MLSS1/25/3, Record from J.G. Doubleday, 22 February 1963.
- 45 Sardanis, *Another Side of the Coin*, 25.
- 46 Dunn, *Central African Witness*, 137.
- 47 Quoted in Phimister, 'Workers in Wonderland', 191.
- 48 This can be usefully contrasted with the wildcat strikes by white miners in South Africa in 1979 when their union 'tried to demonstrate that the white miner was irreplaceable' but the mines remained open and production continued. Visser, 'Miners' Strike of 1979', 203–204.
- 49 NAZ, MLS1/25/3, Report of Board of Inquiry into the cause of the trade dispute between certain section of European employees and Mufulira Copper Mines Limited over bonus system of payment, 4 March 1963.
- 50 Ibid., Notes on Board of Enquiry into dispute at Mufulira Copper Mine, 25 February 1963.
- 51 Ibid., Notes on Board of Enquiry into dispute at Mufulira Copper Mine, 26 February 1963.
- 52 Ibid., Report of Board of Inquiry into the cause of the trade dispute between certain section of European employees and Mufulira Copper Mines Limited over bonus system of payment, 4 March 1963.
- 53 Ibid., Mufulira branch newsletter, 11 April 1963.
- 54 'Mufulira Roundabout', *Mufulira Magazine*, September 1953.
- 55 NAZ, MLS1/25/3, Notes on a meeting held at the Ministry of Labour and Mines, 8 February 1963.
- 56 Ibid., Notice to all Timbermen, NRMWU Mufulira branch, 2 February 1963.
- 57 Ibid., Record note, 6 May 1963.
- 58 Morris, *The Hour After Midnight*, 10.
- 59 Government of Zambia, *September 1961 Census*, 22.
- 60 NAZ, MLS1/25/3, Letter from J.G. Doubleday to Manager, Naik & Sons, Mufulira, 30 March 1963.
- 61 ZCCM, 10.5.8D, Telex from Mining Employers' Committee to Anmercusa and Roselite, Salisbury, 4 April 1963.
- 62 NAZ, MLS1/25/3, Record from J.G. Doubleday, 11 April 1963. There were a large number of abstentions.
- 63 Ibid., Mufulira branch newsletter, 11 April 1963.
- 64 Ibid., Record from E.W. Dunlop, 11 April and 24 April 1963.

- 65 Ibid., Record note, 6 May 1963.
- 66 Ibid., Message to Minister of Labour and Mines from Seven Reasonable Minded Union Members, 16 April 1963.
- 67 Ibid., Record from E.W. Dunlop, 27 April 1963.
- 68 'Teacher Emigrating to New Zealand', *Mufulira Mirror*, 24 May 1963.
- 69 43% of 468 white employees surveyed in 1958 stated that their reasons for coming to the Copperbelt were purely financial. Holleman and Biesheuvel, *Attitudes of White Mining Employees. Part II*, ii.
- 70 NAZ, MLS1/25/3, Record from E.W. Dunlop, 1 May 1963.
- 71 IISH, MIF, Box 319, Report on the NRMWU's Dispute at Mufulira Copper Mine, 15 May 1963.
- 72 'Local Union Elections', *Mufulira Mirror*, 7 June 1963.
- 73 ZCCM, 10.5.8D, Telegram from Chamber of Mines to Roselite and Anmercosa, Lusaka, 29 November 1963.
- 74 'Rockbreakers Strike at Mufulira', *Northern News*, 29 November 1963.
- 75 'Miners Hit Back at African Union's "Blackmail" Claim'.