Divergence and Convergence on the Copperbelt: White Mineworkers in Comparative Perspective, 1911–1963

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Introduction

The first rumours of impending unrest in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) reached the Kasumbalesa border post between Northern Rhodesia and newly independent Congo on 7 July 1960 – though the first carloads of whites did not begin arriving until two days later. Rapidly, the numbers trying to cross the border became overwhelming and immigration officials abandoned formalities and opened the barriers. Over a four-day period approximately 7,500 whites from Katanga passed through Kasumbalesa into the safety of the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, still firmly under colonial rule. Kasumbalesa border crossing now marked the northern edge of the bloc of white-ruled states in Southern Africa.

The Force Publique – Congo’s military – had mutinied, first in Léopoldville (Kinshasa) on 5 July, and then across the country. Troops in Elisabethville mutinied on 9 July, prompting the exodus of some 13,000 whites across various parts of the border into Northern Rhodesia. Rumours abounded that dozens of whites had been massacred in Elisabethville and immigration officers reported that ‘fear and despair’ predominated among the whites passing through Kasumbalesa; by the third day, these included Belgian policemen, military officers and all sections of white society in Katanga.

1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented to conferences at the Nordic Africa Institute in December 2016 and the University of Lubumbashi in July 2019. I am very grateful to Iva Pea and to Lazlo Passemiers for their generosity in sharing archival documents with me.
Many of the refugees were heavily armed and five troop carriers were filled with the firearms and ammunition taken from them at the border. They recognised in the refugees from Katanga a people like themselves, both in great need, and — in their eyes — deserving of assistance and kindness that they would never have offered to Africans.

This incident is a powerful example of white solidarity, in which whites offered help and assistance to those seemingly displaced by the collapse of colonial rule. Yet this incident also shows how far the historical experiences of white communities on the Copperbelt had diverged, and why it is pertinent to talk of two communities with different though at times entangled histories. These have seldom attracted the attention of scholars, aside from some discussion of the ostentatious social life enjoyed by whites, which is however not the focus of this chapter. References to whites are scattered across works that deal primarily with other subjects — though both Charles Perrings and John Higginson pay attention to the actions of white miners, and their consequences — and there is relatively little on the topic aside from my earlier work, which focuses almost entirely on Zambia, and Benjamin Rubbers' study of whites in contemporary Katanga.

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3 The Copperbelt Opened its Doors', Horizon, August 1960.
This chapter traces broad similarities and contrasts in the migration of whites to the Copperbelt, their relationships with the state and mining companies, and the organisations and movements they established. The Copperbelt can usefully be considered as one continuous region, as other chapters in this volume argue, but examining the history of whites shows us how the border dividing the region was one which came to structure the experiences of whites who came to live there. Focusing on white mineworkers, with occasional references to other sections of the white population, I argue that despite initial similarities, the histories of white communities on different sides of the border diverged considerably, and this divergence was influenced by colonial and corporate policies as well as the actions of white mineworkers themselves. Determined and persistent action by the colonial state and Union Minière du Haut-Katanga severed earlier links between whites in Katanga and white societies to the south.

The category of 'white' is not a stable one. The people who left Katanga in 1960, described as 'white' or 'European' refugees in contemporary sources, included people who were listed by British colonial officers on arrival as Egyptians, Indians, Lebanese and Turks. At its broadest, the term could include virtually anyone on the Copperbelt who was not a black African. In other instances, a much narrower definition was deployed as some European nationals found their status as 'white' to be tenuous and people who regarded themselves as 'white' could be removed as undesirable troublemakers. 'White' status was no guarantee of permanency on the Copperbelt.

Mining, the Colonial State and White Migration

The presence of what was, relative to other parts of colonial Africa, a substantial white population was directly related to the development of industrial mining in the early twentieth century. Prior to this, there was only a handful of whites in the region and, without copper, it would likely have stayed that way. Few substantial white urban settlements were formed in either the Belgian Congo or Northern Rhodesia. In a taxonomy of white settlement in Africa, the Central African Copperbelt had a more substantial and enduring white presence then the flurry of white itinerants who descended on gold rushes in Tanganyika or the Gold Coast, but was on a smaller scale than the permanent urban white population implanted on South Africa's Witwatersrand by the gold industry.

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The threadbare administration on either side of the border did little to encourage white settlement and more commonly sought to discourage it. Indeed, across the colonial period, the colonial authorities had an ambivalent attitude towards white settlement as something that both demonstrated the apparent transformation of 'backward' regions by European enterprise and represented a potentially destabilising force to colonial rule. Authorities and large employers therefore carefully surveilled and policed the white population and usually dealt with perceived recalcitrants by physically removing them.

The first whites who came to live on the Copperbelt were missionaries from the Plymouth Brethren – a conservative British Protestant sect – who arrived in the late 1880s, although their presence in Bunkeya had little impact. Colonial occupation initially changed little and between 1892 and 1900 there were never more than six Belgians in the whole of Katanga. Similarly, in 1910 there were only 64 whites in Ndola District in Northern Rhodesia, almost all of them men, and this figure had only increased to 50 white men and 25 women by 1921. Most were traders, hunters or prospectors, who drifted across the region in search of fortune.

Belgium pursued an elitist vision of colonisation that discouraged mass emigration. The colony's white population – especially non-Belgian whites – was therefore monitored, and potential new arrivals closely scrutinised. The British South Africa Company (BSAC), the first rulers, or, more accurately, proprietors, of Northern Rhodesia had a more practical than ideological orientation, but the effect was the same. The Company saw the territory as a labour reserve for industries in the south and sought to deter white settlement as it would interfere with that goal. In 1909, one BSAC board member declared 'the policy of the Board' to be that 'the resident white population' should not increase 'beyond just what will supply the wants of the mining population', i.e. the whites operating small-scale mining and prospecting operations dotted across the territory.

12 Peter Siim, 'Commercial Concessions and Politics during the Colonial Period: The Role of the British South Africa Company in Northern Rhodesia 1890–1964', *African
White settlement schemes of the kind implemented in the early 1920s in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia or, later, in Angola and Mozambique were not emulated in the Belgian Congo or Northern Rhodesia, aside from a brief, and very expensive, attempt to settle poorer Belgian farmers in Katanga by the Ministry of Colonies. Early accounts were optimistic – one 1912 article claimed ‘colonists were prospering’ in Katanga with many families settled on small plots of land – and the Ministry of Colonies even published a guide for emigrant farmers, but the scheme soon collapsed due to the vast costs and the disinclination of would-be farmers to remain on the land. Between 1910 and 1920, 755 Belgian agricultural settlers were sent to Katanga with assistance from the Ministry of Colonies, but in 1920 there were only 129 still living in Katanga, and only 32 of these continued to farm.

There was to be little place for white farmers on the Copperbelt and, in fact, relatively little land was alienated across the whole of the Belgian Congo or Northern Rhodesia. Only 3.29% of the total area of Katanga was alienated for whites by the end of the colonial period. The future of the region, and of its white presence, was instead bound up with mining. The white population of Ndola District had risen to a few hundred in the mid-1920s, and then jumped to 6,873 by 1931 following the onset of industrial mining. Katanga had experienced a similar leap in its white population when the railway arrived, connecting Elisabethville to areas of white settlement further south. As in Northern Rhodesia, there was a small, predominately male, influx, and Elisabethville’s white population reached over 1,000 by the end of 1911.

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14 La Revue Congolaise, 14 July 1912, p. 206.
19 Fetter, Creation of Elisabethville, p. 33.
Colonial borders at this time were relatively porous. Whites could cross easily and transport connections to the south meant that Elisabethville's white population had a strongly Anglophone element. The city had an English Club and the first newspapers, *Etoile du Congo* and *Journal du Katanga*, both established in 1911, published articles in English and French. Katanga's new white population was the latest extension of a white population expanding and moving across Southern Africa. It even included a handful of Afrikaners who had come from Southern Angola, making Elisabethville the northern-most extremity of the Treks.

Most new arrivals did not hang around for long. This was a transient population, and many of the whites in Elisabethville in 1912 had left the following year. 'No-one could be called a permanent resident' of Elisabethville in the mid-1910s, concluded Bruce Fetter. High death rates caused by disease drove most whites away, and 43 whites died in Elisabethville during 1911. The same subsequently occurred in Northern Rhodesia, where malaria, dysentery and typhoid caused a mortality crisis at the new mines, and encouraged the swift departure of many whites. Stories of deadly conditions spread across the region and railway staff in Cape Town reportedly delighted in telling those heading to the Copperbelt that it was a waste of money buying a return ticket, as they would never make it back alive.

**Labour Migration and Industrial Unrest**

The changes wrought by large-scale mining represented a serious challenge to vision of the colonial authorities in both the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia. Despite the turnover in population, the expansion of

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22 Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, p. 94.
23 Fetter, *Creation of Elisabethville*, p. 53.
24 Ibid., p. 32.
mining operations in Katanga in the 1910s and 1920s, and then in Northern Rhodesia from the mid-1920s, drew in more and more white mineworkers, and other white migrants followed in their wake. The mechanisation of mining operations required skilled workers and connected the Copperbelt to the world of white labour, a transnational network of white workers extending across Southern Africa and beyond. White workers brought with them not only particular industrial skills, but also the knowledge and traditions of the international labour movement. These ideas helped spark waves of industrial unrest from the late 1910s, and again the 1940s, and helped persuade Union Minière to decisively alter its labour policies. White industrial unrest across the Copperbelt is thus comparable, but was mostly not concurrent, for reasons that will be explored below.

Union Minière’s operations were mechanised in response to persistent shortages of African labour, and Rhodesian Anglo American (RAA) and the Rhodesian Selection Trust mechanised their mines from the outset for the same reason. Accordingly, Union Minière’s workforce swelled from 175 whites and 3,868 Africans in 1914 to 2,261 whites and 20,915 Africans in 1929. By 1930, the company could boast that ‘operations were mechanised to the greatest extent, so as to reduce the workforce to a minimum.’ In Northern Rhodesia, both companies collectively employed some 2,221 white workers in 1931, alongside 13,948 African workers. White labour was recruited from mining and industrial centres elsewhere in the world. In 1929, RAA forecast that the problem of attracting ‘trained white labour will no doubt solve itself... Men will come from South Africa, from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the Continent of Europe.’ Union Minière had followed the same policy and in 1920 43% of their white workforce was from Belgium, 23% from Britain, 16% from South Africa, 5% from the United States and 13% from elsewhere.

These whites disrupted the smooth running of colonial rule, both as individuals and collectively. Union Minière advertised to potential recruits that ‘a sober and dutiful worker is able to save’ at least 1,000 francs each

28 Perring, Black Mineworkers in Central Africa, p. 252.
29 Rhodesian Anglo American, Mining Developments in Northern Rhodesia (Johannesburg: Radford Cadlington Ltd, 1929), p. 63.
30 Perring, Black Mineworkers in Central Africa, p. 51.
month, but not all were sober.\textsuperscript{31} In Katanga, ‘White industrial workers’, according to John Higginson, ‘frequently amused themselves with alcohol and firearms’, and regularly appeared before the courts on charges relating to this.\textsuperscript{32} The same was true in Northern Rhodesia, and visitors frequently commented on the vast quantities of alcohol consumed by white mine-workers. One senior colonial official in Northern Rhodesia referred to the Copperbelt’s white population as ‘a sort of human Whipsnade containing some fine specimens of rogues’, Whipsnade being what was then Britain’s largest zoo.\textsuperscript{33}

Collective action by white mine-workers, however, presented the greatest threat. At the outbreak of the First World War, many Belgian nationals left Union Minière to join the armed forces and their proportion among the white workforce fell sharply from 53\% in August 1914 to 22.5\% in June 1917.\textsuperscript{34} The gap was filled by new white recruits from Southern Africa and, to a lesser extent, the United States. This brought the new mines and railways of Katanga into closer connection with a white labour movement whose politics were a volatile mixture of industrial militancy, political radicalism and segregationist ideas. White male workers with a transnational work experience, one that closely informed their demands, were at the centre of unrest on both sides of the border.

One key figure in the unrest in Katanga was E. J. Brown, who came from the Rand to work for Union Minière. Brown had arrived on the Rand from Australia and was one of the leaders of the 1913 South African white mineworkers’ strike, which culminated in a general strike and unrest that left twenty people dead. When further strikes in 1914 were suppressed by the imposition of martial law, Brown came to work for Union Minière, and tried to organise the white workforce. For this, he was swiftly sacked and deported to South Africa in 1920. He last appears in the historical record in a letter from the Communist Party of South Africa to Comintern providing a list of their leading militants.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, \textit{Le Katanga}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{32} Higginson, A Working Class, pp. 67–8.
Brown's experience in the more radical end of the labour movement was mirrored by the men who established the whites-only Northern Rhodesia Mine Workers' Union (NRMWU) in 1936. These included Tommy Graves, a veteran of the 'labor wars' in the American copper industry who had been deported from the United States, and Jim Purvis, who had been jailed in Australia after a strike and had worked in Britain and South Africa. In the 1940s, as will be discussed below, two white mineworkers were deported from Northern Rhodesia for instigating strikes: Frank Maybank, who had worked as a miner in New Zealand and Australia and had spent time in the Soviet Union, and Chris Meyer, a South African mineworker who had been a prominent member of the white miners' union on the Rand.36

Katanga was hit by the wave of industrial unrest that engulfed Southern Africa in the period after the First World War, but the specific trigger for action was the devaluation of the Congolese Franc in 1919, which cut the value of salaries for white workers in sterling terms. White mineworkers took wildcat strike action in response in May 1919, and some militants tried to blow up the offices of the Attorney General.37 This was followed by a strike of white railway and government workers and the formation of a new trade union in May 1920, L'Union Générale des Ouvriers du Congo. This was a whites-only union, just as were the trade unions formed on the mines in Northern Rhodesia. The following month, this new union demanded a salary increase compensating for the devaluation of the franc – as they saw themselves as workers in an international labour market – and a bar on African workers performing jobs done by whites.38

Gains won by white workers on Rhodesia Railways after a major strike in 1920, whose effect would soon have been felt in Katanga, triggered further action by white workers in Katanga, who embarked on a five-week strike in September. This dispute was also marked by militancy and violence, with white strikers trying to halt railway traffic by dynamiting a bridge at Sakania, derailing an approaching freight train. White workers won a pay increase but not their wider demands, and Union Minière and the colonial authorities cracked down decisively on the union in the aftermath.39

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leaders were sacked and then expelled from the colony.

Although Belgian workers had participated in the strikes, both Union Minière and the colonial administration were convinced that the strikes had been instigated by British and South African white workers to undermine Belgian rule.\footnote{Fahian, Language and Colonial Power, pp. 105–6.} This reflected persistent Belgian fears that Britain would attempt to bring Katanga into the orbit of its colonies in Southern Africa and annex the territory.\footnote{Vanheemsche, Belgium and the Congo, p. 118.} There is no evidence of British, or South African, strategic intrigue behind these strikes, but this provided a convenient excuse for Union Minière to change its labour policy, so that the structure of the mining workforce in Katanga was noticeably different than the one in Northern Rhodesia by the 1930s.

Union Minière made a determined effort to sever links with the transnational world of white labour, and redirected recruitment efforts towards Belgium, specifically the Hainaut region (where coal mining was prominent), and the proportion of white employees hired in Europe rose from 37% in 1919 to 89% by 1929.\footnote{Perriings, Black Mineworkers in Central Africa, p. 251.} These white workers were recruited on fixed-term contracts and repatriated to Belgium on completion, and could thus be controlled more closely. White militants had been removed from the workforce by the mid-1920s and the white mineworkers’ union crushed. It took twenty years and the circumstances of another world war for trade unionism to revive on the Katanga mines.

Changes in the Racial Division of Labour

The brief recession in the global copper industry in the early 1920s soon gave way to a boom period. Copper production in Katanga rose sharply – from 18,962 tonnes in 1920 to 138,949 in 1930 – while over the border prospecting efforts discovered vast copper ore bodies, triggering a rush to bring new mines into production.\footnote{Simon Katzenellenbogen, ‘The Miner’s Frontier, Transport and General Economic Development’ in Peter Duignan and L. H. Gans (eds), Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960, vol. 4, The Economics of Colonialism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 360–426, p. 377.} Soon, there were more white mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia than in Katanga, and many of these had previously worked for Union Minière. More and more whites flocked to the region, and one American mining engineer confidently forecast in 1931 that
‘this region will... support and require a half a million whites in the very near future’. Yet as this prediction was being made, developments on the Copperbelt would reveal how tenuous white settlement was, as the Great Depression struck and Union Minière implemented its new labour policy.

Modest white urban centres developed in this period. Elisabethville's white population rose from 1,476 in 1920 to 4,168 in 1930, while Kitwe became the largest town in Northern Rhodesia, with a white population of 1,762 in 1931. Racial segregation was inscribed on the landscape of these new urban spaces through physical separation. European and African areas of Elisabethville were purposively constructed with a 170-metre wide strip - later widened to 500m - between them. New mining towns in Northern Rhodesia used the mine itself to segregate the African and white workforces, with townships for each built on opposite sides of the mine. Virtually all the inhabitants of Northern Rhodesia's new mining towns worked for the mines, but the same was not true in Katanga. In the early 1920s, white Union Minière employees in the mining camps were given the option of moving into the main towns, and almost all of them did. In Northern Rhodesia, the mining companies housed almost their entire white workforces throughout this period.

Insofar as spatial segregation in new urban areas reflected divisions within the white population, in Northern Rhodesia it was an occupational division separating mining and non-mining populations. Katanga's white population, however, had a broader occupational profile and was more cosmopolitan. Elisabethville was not 'just another Belgian colonial city', and had substantial Italian, Greek and Portuguese communities, the latter bolstered by the Benguela Railway that linked the city to Angola from 1929. The

44 Ronald Prain Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming (hereafter RP), Box 1, File 2, Letter from Fred Scalfs Jr to Vivian Smith, London, 24 February 1931.
45 Rubbers, Faire fortune en Afrique, p. 35. ‘Report of the Director of Census...1931’, p. 46.
48 Johan Lague, ‘From “Patrimoine partagé” to “whose heritage”? Critical Reflections on Colonial Built Heritage in the City of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the
respective status of these groups was reflected in their physical location; Italian, Greek and Portuguese traders—termed ‘gens de couleur’ in colonial legislation and often referred to as ‘second class whites’—primarily catered for African customers and were pushed to the edge of the European city in the buffer zone between the European and African areas. Katanga also had a sizeable Jewish community which supported an array of communal institutions, ‘including a Jewish scout troop, youth movement, women’s group, and a range of Zionist organisations’. 

Katanga’s white population still included some 2,500 white mineworkers in 1930, and more were sought:

In the category of specialist workers, the company is looking among others for mechanics, fitters, turners, machine operators, boilermakers, electricians, power shovel operators, overhead crane drivers, locomotive drivers, power station operators, miners and woodworkers, masons, concrete workers, etc.

Such people would soon no longer be required. The sharp fall in copper prices in the Great Depression almost throttled the new copper industry in Central Africa. Most mines in Northern Rhodesia shut down and across the Copperbelt the white population fell precipitously. In Katanga, almost 2,000 white mineworkers were sent back to Europe, and others followed in their wake. Elisabethville’s white population plummeted to 548 in 1932 and in Jadotville (Likasi) more than half the houses were unoccupied. Similarly, the white workforce on Northern Rhodesia’s mines fell from

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3,456 in January 1931 to a low of 995 in October 1932.\textsuperscript{54} Unemployed and impoverished whites posed a severe threat to colonial rule, and across the Copperbelt the respective colony authorities deported thousands of whites to prevent the emergence of a class of ‘poor whites’—a category much feared elsewhere in the sub-continent for the threat it posed to racial hierarchies.\textsuperscript{55} In total, the authorities in the Belgian Congo used an \textit{arrêté d'expulsion} to deport whites from the colony at least 1,450 times, ostensibly because the individual in question was bankrupt.\textsuperscript{56}

Northern Rhodesia’s Governor James Maxwell gravely warned in 1930 that the ‘growing population’ of ‘poor whites’ was ‘the greatest danger to the existence of white civilisation in tropical Africa’.\textsuperscript{57} His counterpart in the Belgian Congo, Pierre Ryckmans, justified the exclusion of some whites from the colony in the mid-1930s in the same way, stating that ‘the “poor whites” are pariahs condemned to ‘the destiny of the natives’.\textsuperscript{58} In 1929, entry requirements for whites had been tightened for this reason, and potential white immigrants had to deposit a substantial sum of money to guarantee they would not become a burden on the public purse.\textsuperscript{59}

The copper industry gradually revived through the 1930s but when it did the composition of the workforce was altered, especially in Katanga. White industrial unrest in 1919–20 and the costs of continually recruiting African labour prompted serious changes to labour policy by \textit{Union Minière}. Having curtailed the prospect of resistance from white workers, the company now embarked on a policy of training African workers to replace them.\textsuperscript{60}

Between 1933 and 1935, \textit{Union Minière’s} workforce doubled in size and output increased by almost a third, but total labour costs remained static, as


\textsuperscript{59} In 1957, the sum was 50,000 Belgian Francs. Rubbers, \textit{Faire fortune en Afrique}, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{60} Perrings, \textit{Black Mineworkers in Central Africa}, pp. 54–61.
the replacement of white workers with Africans allowed the company to effectively implement a huge wage reduction for certain jobs.\textsuperscript{61}

Rhodesian Anglo American and Rhodesian Selection Trust tried to follow the same policies, though with greater hesitation. Underground mining was more complex than open-pit mining, the demand for skilled labour was consequently greater and white mineworkers had a stronger position. Both companies were well aware of \textit{Union Minière}’s labour policy and company representatives told the British Government in 1938 that they intended to follow the same policy, but ‘we have been very careful not to go too fast’, lest they provoke resistance.\textsuperscript{62} White workers in Katanga offered no resistance to these policies, and did not engage in any collective organising, as those recruited in these years ‘were paralyzed with fear of losing their jobs and of being repatriated’.\textsuperscript{63} African workers in Northern Rhodesia did progressively undertake more skilled work, and the composition of the workforce did change, but there were far more whites at work on the mines of Northern Rhodesia: 2,609 in 1939 compared with 870 in Katanga.\textsuperscript{64}

While Anglo American and Rhodesian Selection Trust saw \textit{Union Minière} as a model to emulate, for their white workforces Katanga was a possible future to be feared and avoided. The cross-border proximity of two different racialised labour structures made it a constant reference point. Harold Hochshild, chair of the American Metal Company, the parent company of Rhodesian Selection Trust, visited the Copperbelt in 1949 and was very impressed with \textit{Union Minière}’s operations, where ‘in their mines and plants one rarely sees a white man unless one searches for him’. He regarded the extension of this system to Northern Rhodesia as ‘inevitable’.\textsuperscript{65} Senior figures at Anglo American reached the same conclusion, and one posed the question: ‘Is it possible to have different lines of development in adjacent territories without creating some degree of unrest as progress is made towards different ends?’\textsuperscript{66}


\textsuperscript{62} Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines archives (hereafter ZCCM-IH), 18.4.3E, Meeting at the Dominion Office, 14 April 1938.

\textsuperscript{63} Jewieswiczki, ‘Great Depression’, p. 167.


\textsuperscript{65} R.P, Box 1, Unnumbered File, ‘Visit to the Rhodesias’, 22 October 1949.

It is important to note that all three mining companies were careful to maintain a racial division of labour, and that Union Minière did not abolish the racial division of labour. Instead, the colour bar was moved up the occupational hierarchy of the mines. Although Africans performed skilled work in Katangese mines, factories and railways, the lines of authority were clear: no African held a position of power over any white. In 1959, almost 40 years after Union Minière’s training and stabilisation labour policy was introduced, there were no African engineers, and only eighteen Africans were employed in contremaître (foreman) positions otherwise occupied by whites. African workers could not be trusted in positions of authority, as one Union Minière director explained: ‘the indigenous worker… has one failing which distinguishes him clearly from the European worker… his will-power is always unreliable and he remains a creature of impulse.’ A clear racial division of labour therefore had to be maintained. During the Second World War, for instance, Union Minière tried to overcome white labour shortages by recruiting in Mauritius, until it became obvious that many of the men recruited from there were mixed-race. Recruitment efforts were swiftly redirected to the more distant, though racially more secure, Portugal.

Connections and Attempted Convergence in the Second World War

Circumstances brought about by the Second World War forged closer connections across the Copperbelt and allowed white mineworkers to attempt a convergence across the border. For a brief period, many white mineworkers imagined that their struggles were linked, and Katanga was re-integrated into the world of white labour. White mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia saw what had happened in Katanga as a future to be avoided, while their counterparts in Katanga viewed what was happening on the mines in Northern Rhodesia as something to be emulated. Many among the white workforce saw the war as an opportunity to permanently improve their position, and their demands were shaped by what was happening in other mining and industrial regions.

67 Bräusch, Belgian Administration, p. 32.
The Second World War temporarily severed the Belgian Congo’s connection with the metropole following the occupation of Belgium by Nazi Germany in May 1940. The British Government was already purchasing all copper produced in Northern Rhodesia and now extended this scheme to cover the Katanga mines, and the Congolese Franc was pegged to the Pound Sterling in June 1941. Across the Copperbelt, white mineworkers were now producing copper for the same ends and their wages were directly comparable. Wartime need for copper also placed these whites in a strong negotiating position.

White mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia were the first to strike. Wildcat strikes in March 1940 quickly secured an array of concessions, including wage increases, followed by a closed shop for their union and a colour bar in 1941, safeguarding them from the fate that had befallen their counterparts in Katanga. Soon after, whites struck on Katanga’s mines in October 1941, initially over the employment of an Italian national at the UMHK plant in Jadotville, but the strike soon spread to other UMHK operations and demands broadened to cover pension rights and wage increases. Immediately after this strike, a whites-only trade union was formed clandestinely with the assistance of NRMWU militants: the Association des Agents de l’Union Minière et Filiales (AGUFFI), which soon had 850 members.

This was a boom period for white trade unionism. The closed shop gave NRMWU an unprecedented degree of control over the mines, and white mineworkers in Katanga forced Union Minière to engage in collective bargaining. In April 1942, the colonial authorities in the Belgian Congo were forced to grant legal recognition to white trade unions, followed in June 1944 by a decree guaranteeing freedom of association for whites. Dozens of white trade unions were formed, including four others in Elisabethville, and together they established a colony-wide white labour body at a congress held in Elisabethville: the Confédération générale des syndicats du Congo belge (CGS). White labour organisations soon established links with their counterparts elsewhere in the region. In 1943, white trade unionists from the across the Copperbelt attended the Southern Africa

70 Ryckbost, *Premières Associations*, p. 18.
Labour Congress in Johannesburg, a gathering of representatives of the white labour movement that established a short-lived organisation to coordinate a region-wide movement.76

In the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia, the mining companies acted in concert with the state to crack down on white industrial unrest. The problem, the British Consul in Elisabethville observed, was that ‘the distance is so small’ between the mines ‘and the frontier so difficult to control’, so preventing liaison between their respective white workforces seemed impossible.77 In June 1942, another wildcat strike by white miners in Jadotville resulted in the arrest and prosecution of two AGUFI leaders, Joseph Heynen and Jean Dutron, for voicing defeatist sentiments; the two men were removed to Ruanda-Urundi. The authorities suppressed further wildcat strikes in August and September, and ‘a virtual state of siege was declared in Jadotville’, according to the British Consul. Telephone services were suspended, a curfew imposed, road and rail traffic curtailed and troops patrolled the streets.78

Katanga’s white mineworkers had sent urgent requests for help to their counterparts across the border, and the NRMWU leadership, having met secretly with AGUFI representatives inside Katanga in early August, now attempted to launch sympathy strikes in Northern Rhodesia to demand the return of Heynen and Dutron to Katanga. Northern Rhodesia’s colonial administration panicked. The Governor pleaded with the British Government to send troops after the NRMWU General Secretary Frank Maybank tried to organise a sympathy strike and warned the Governor that white mineworkers were armed. As in Katanga, troops were rapidly deployed from East Africa, and two of the union’s leaders, Maybank and Chris Meyer, were arrested and deported.79 The prospect of united strike action by whites across the Copperbelt was firmly extinguished.

There were, however, limits to the power of the colonial state, both practical and ideological. Embarrassingly, Heynen and Dutron escaped twice from Ruanda-Urundi and made their way back to Katanga. On the second occasion, in September 1944, they arrived during a CGS conference, where

77 The National Archives UK (hereafter TNA), CO 795/123/7, Letter from T. R. Shaw to F. M. Shepherd, 5 September 1942.
78 TNA, CO 795/123/7, Letter from T. R. Shaw to F. M. Shepherd, 28 September 1942.
they were elected to that body's leadership. In Northern Rhodesia, wildcat strikes by whites continued to disrupt production during 1944, and the colonial state was unable to prevent the return of Maybank to the Copperbelt in 1945.

The response by the colonial states to strikes by white mineworkers was very different to the response to strikes by African mineworkers: there were some forms of repression that the state would not enact against whites. White strikers could have their movements restricted and be subject to sudden arrest and deportation. African strikers could be massacred, as happened at Nkana in April 1940, and at Panda and Lubumbashi in December 1941. It was inconceivable that African troops, who made up the large bulk of colonial armed forces, could be used against whites. In Katanga, the Corps des Volontaires Européens had been formed in 1920 to deal with unrest by whites because, as the Colonial Minister explained, 'the use of black troops is not desirable for the repression of European riots'. In Northern Rhodesia, the colonial authorities relied on guarantees of troops from Britain to deal with white unrest.

On both sides of the border, white mineworkers stood aloof during strikes by African mineworkers. Still, white mineworkers were often blamed by their employers and the colonial state for instigating or inspiring strikes by African workers. It is true that strikes by African mineworkers directly followed strikes by white mineworkers in 1940 in Northern Rhodesia and 1941 in Katanga, but there is no evidence that white trade unions encouraged this, even if some individual white mineworkers were sympathetic. In any case, open expressions of sympathy for African workers tended to attract swift censure and action from the state.

Attempts by white mineworkers to bring the two workforces together failed, and their histories diverged. By 1949, CGS had split and then disintegrated, while AGUFI lapsed into inactivity, but NRWMU went from strength to strength. Further strikes in 1946 preserved Northern Rhodesia's industrial colour bar and secured a copper bonus that would be the source of immense affluence in the post-war period. White mineworkers

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80 TNA, CO 795/128/5, Note on M. Heynen and M. Dutron.
83 One white trade unionist, George Lievens, who contradicted the official account of the African strike at Lubumbashi, was imprisoned and then deported: Higginson, A Working Class, pp. 193–4.
84 Bud, 'Belgian Africa at War', p. 46.
in Katanga failed both to improve their position in wartime or to change Union Minière’s labour policy. Their numbers increased only marginally, from 923 in 1940 to 1,075 in late 1944.85

The Boom Years

Many similarities existed between the white communities on the Copperbelt in the post-Second World War period, but there were few direct connections. Both became substantially larger as the mining industry expanded and the white population across most of Southern Africa rose markedly. By 1960, there were around 35,000 whites on Northern Rhodesia’s Copperbelt and almost 32,000 white residents in Katanga.86 More white women arrived and the gender imbalance in the white population, marked in the early mining camps, disappeared. Recruitment material for the mining companies began to emphasise education facilities for children and the ease of life for housewives, as mining work continued to be restricted to men.

These white communities also became wealthier, benefiting handsomely from the post-war boom that saw copper production in Northern Rhodesia rise from 192,000 tons in 1947 to 559,000 tons by 1960.87 Increases in Union Minière’s operations were more modest, though production still doubled from 151,000 tons in 1947 to 301,000 tons in 1960.88 Expanding production and further mechanisation meant that additional white skilled workers and mining professionals were needed. The number of white mineworkers employed by Union Minière increased by 48% between 1942 and 1958, while the number of African mineworkers decreased by 50% as production required less labour.89 In Northern Rhodesia, where a colour bar remained, white employment on the copper mines more than doubled in the same period, and reached a peak of almost 8,000 in 1962.90

The composition and structure of the white mining workforce was quite different on different sides of the border, however, and this had consequences

88 Katzenellenbogen, ‘Miner’s Frontier’, p. 337.
90 Berger, Labour, Race, and Colonial Rule, p. 239.
for life on the mines for whites. In 1942, NRMWU had justified intervention in disputes in Katanga by claiming that, with the British Government purchasing all copper produced in the region, soon ‘someone would want to know why our wages were much higher for the same work’.\(^9\) Whites on both sides of the border were not doing ‘the same work’, however. Membership of AGUPI encompassed all whites employed by Union Minière; Heynen, for instance, had been employed as a secretary to a manager. Few whites in Katanga were directly involved in production and this is one reason why, along with swift repression, strikes by white mineworkers there failed. Mining operations did not cease when whites ceased work in Katanga, whereas strikes by white mineworkers were able to shut down operations in Zambia well into the 1960s.

The 1956 recognition agreement between NR MWU and the Northern Rhodesian companies stipulated that the workers represented by the union included miners, timbersmen, semi-skilled operators, banksmen, bricklayers, locomotive drivers, crane drivers, carpenters and electricians, all jobs performed in Katanga by African mineworkers.\(^32\) As a case in point, only one of the ten white Union Minière employees interviewed by the company magazine in 1957, a plumber, was employed in such a job. The other nine were mining professionals (geologists, mining or chemical engineers) or administrative personnel.\(^33\) When the International Labour Organisation compiled a comparison of European and African wage rates across the continent it concluded: ‘There can be few, if any miners in the world with a higher standard of living than that of the Europeans in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt’, but the Belgian Congo was excluded from this analysis because ‘the number of European wage earners is insignificant’.\(^34\)

One consequence of this was very different levels of conflict within white society during the 1950s. As Union Minière explained to new white recruits in the mid-1950s, ‘as a general rule, the European staff of the company is a managerial staff whose main task is to direct the work of Congolese workers’.\(^35\) The company emphasised racial solidarity among the whites

\(^32\) International Institute for Social History, Miners’ International Federation, Box 360, ‘Recognition Agreement between the NR MWU and Rhokana Corporation, 1956’.
\(^33\) ‘Tableau d’Honneur’, Haut-Katanga, April 1957.
they employed, pointing out to potential new arrivals that white employees worked, lived and socialised together so that, in contrast to Belgium, 'relations are more direct and almost constant, with both your bosses and your colleagues'. 96 The same was not true in Northern Rhodesia, where there were sharp and sometimes hostile divisions between white mineworkers and mine management, and industrial conflict persisted until the mid-1960s.

There were during this period intermittent contacts between the white workforces across the border. In 1958, a delegation of white mineworkers from Katanga attended the NRWMU annual conference, whom the NRWMU General Secretary claimed arrived 'quite unexpectedly'. One colonial official however drily noted 'the remarkable coincidence of the arrival of the Belgian delegates precisely at the time when the Union was holding its Annual Conference'. 97 Dissimilarities between the position and experiences of the white workforces may explain why nothing came of this meeting, though it's possible language barriers also played a role.

Still, despite regular industrial upheaval, there was no difficulty attracting white mineworkers to Northern Rhodesia as the high standards of living, common across the Copperbelt, proved an excellent advert. Recruitment material from all three companies emphasised both the quality of life and, as Roan Antelope put it, that 'earnings, job for job, are on a much more generous scale than in the United Kingdom or the Union [of South Africa]'. 98 Moreover, white employees and their families could enjoy a remarkable range of leisure activities, all subsidised by the companies. By the 1950s, the mines were accompanied with swimming pools, football and rugby pitches, tennis courts and golf courses at a minimum, along with evening entertainment in the form of theatres, dances, concerts and, above all, bars. 99 Corporate magazines from the 1950s – *Haut-Katanga, Rhokana Review*, etc. – contain virtually identical pictures and descriptions of their white workers' vibrant social life. This was partly a shared culture, as whites across the Copperbelt largely played the same sports, and teams regularly played their counterparts across the border (see Chipande, Chapter 4), or participated jointly in more

96 Ibid., p. 18.
97 ZCCM-IH, 10.5.8D, Notes of a conversation between Mr F B. Canning-Cooke and Mr J. F. Purvis, 31 December 1958.
99 For instance, see the wide variety of events organised for white employees at UMK for the feast of St Barbara (patron saint of miners) in December 1957, 'Fêtes de Ste Barbe', *Haut-Katanga*, February 1958.
ostentatious pursuits. In mid-1959, for instance, a speedboat club from Elisabethville took part in a regatta at the dam in Luanshya, having been invited after three speedboat clubs from the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt had visited Elisabethville. The creation of industrial towns with modern recreational facilities was heralded in company publications as the embodiment of modernity, making the Copperbelt ‘not Central Africa at all, but Pittsburgh or Wigan or Johannesburg’, a place where the ‘mere list of the amenities must read like a guide-book or even an advertisement’.

Union Minière did try and impress on its white workforce the importance of their role as colonisers in the Belgian Congo, stressing to new recruits that ‘you will contribute to the work of civilisation that Belgium tirelessly pursues in Congo’. The policy of training African workers was articulated in these terms, as Union Minière’s director of labour policy, Léopold Mottouille, wrote in 1946: ‘the colonizer must never lose sight that the blacks have the spirits of children, spirits which mould themselves to the methods of the teacher’. The extent to which white mineworkers in Katanga internalised this message is not clear, but it is noteworthy that the equivalent material provided to new white employees arriving in Northern Rhodesia contained nothing about the colonial project, and only mentioned the existence of the African workforce briefly.

White society on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt was much more uniform in terms of occupation, nationality and language than in Katanga, though more sharply divided along lines of class. Indeed, a snapshot of Katanga’s comparatively cosmopolitan white society is offered by the exodus of refugees who passed into Northern Rhodesia in July 1960. Among the 7,530 people who were temporarily housed on the Copperbelt, only 5,564 (74%) were Belgian nationals. The remainder included 690 Italians, 556 Greeks, 160 British, 154 Portuguese, 116 French, 53 Dutch, 45 Americans, only 25 South Africans, and then a smattering of other mostly European nationalities. The white population on the Northern Rhodesia Copperbelt were almost uniformly English-speaking. The 1961 census found that 94% of the 74,549 whites living in Northern Rhodesia had citizenship of

100 ‘Round the Group’, Horizon, August 1959.
102 Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, La vie au Katanga, p. 25.
104 NAZ, WP 1/14/58, Nationality List. Only 79% of Belgian Congo’s total white population held Belgian nationality in 1959: Vanthemsche, Belgium and the Congo, p. 280.
a state in the British Empire or Commonwealth. There was a noticeable presence of Afrikaners in Northern Rhodesia’s mining towns, but a study commissioned by the Chamber of Mines found that only 9% of their white workforce spoke Afrikaans as a first language.

Conclusion

Several weeks after Katanga’s secession, some whites in Katanga proposed constructing a monument in Kitwe ‘to thank our Rhodesian friends for their magnificent welcome’, and as a lasting symbol of the ties between whites across the border. It was never built, perhaps a fitting conclusion to the way that deep and enduring connections between the two white communities had been repeatedly thwarted. Many whites who left Katanga with the exodus in July 1960 did not return. In the National Archives of Zambia, there are many letters on file from white former Katanga residents requesting the return of their firearms from the authorities in Northern Rhodesia and asking them to be sent to their new addresses in Belgium, South Africa or elsewhere since, as one man bluntly put it, ‘I am no more interested in going back there [sic]’. Some did return, and white Union Minière employees were escorted back in a column guarded by Belgian paratroopers, but things would never be the same.

In contrast, life for whites in Zambia was much the same as it had been before independence in 1964. The historical experience of whites on the Zambian Copperbelt after 1960 was very different to their counterparts in Katanga who remained amid war and secession. White society on the Zambian Copperbelt also came to an end, though in a less dramatic fashion, when the deep recession in the global copper industry in the mid-1970s, alongside steady efforts towards Zambianisation, encouraged their departure.

The Copperbelt’s population of white mineworkers was never a stable one, and this was by design. Even in 1930, Union Minière asserted that ‘the worker… generally returns to Europe with better skills than when he left’, the assumption being that these white workers would naturally return to

108 NAZ, WP 1/14/58, Letter from Raoul Goutiere to District Commission, Bancroft, 2 September 1960.
Europe at the end of their contracts.\footnote{Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, \textit{Le Katanga}, p. 41.} Almost all members of this workforce were employed on fixed-term contracts and repatriated to Europe, from where they had been recruited, at the end of those contracts. In Northern Rhodesia, most of the white workforce were employed on contracts with a 24-hour notice period, until Zambian independence when all white mineworkers were put on fixed-term contracts with repatriation clauses, contracts that were partly modelled on those in Katanga.

This is a curious inversion of what is generally understood as the model of migrant labour in Southern Africa, with Africans as short-term labour migrants in industrial centres and whites as permanent settlers. On the Copperbelt, Africans were semi-permanent urban residents with lengthening careers on the mines, while whites were effectively long-distance labour migrants who usually left after relatively short periods at the mines. The presence of most whites on the Copperbelt, and virtually all white mineworkers, was ultimately temporary and tied to the mining industry and its needs. Without copper, very few would have migrated there.

Ultimately then, the histories of whites on the Copperbelt did converge, in the sense that white communities have disappeared and only a scattered white presence remains today, much smaller and more temporary than previously.\footnote{Rubbers, \textit{Faire fortune en Afrique}, pp. 38–9.} For much of the colonial period, however, it makes sense to think of two histories, as life and work on the mines in Katanga was in many ways quite different to that on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. The kind of militant strikes by white mineworkers that unsettled Katanga in the early 1920s were still going on in an independent Zambia some 40 years later. Nonetheless, their proximity meant that both white communities had close knowledge of the other and, at different times, each white community was imagined by the other as representing a possible future for itself.