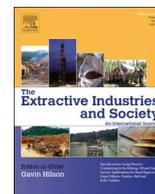




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Activist paternalism: Mozambican mineworkers' practices of cross-border organisation

Michela Mossetto Carini

Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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ABSTRACT

Situated at the intersection of studies of migration and labour organisation, this qualitative study of the Association of Mozambican Miners (AMIMO) reveals the complex workings of a non-union form of migrant labour organisation, shedding light on the possibilities of mobilising constituencies that have remained marginalised in trade union movements. Examining AMIMO's initial development in South Africa and its attempts to represent migrant mine-working communities vis-à-vis the Mozambican government, the article revisits E.P. Thompson's theory of the 'moral economy' where paternalism and contestation are not exclusive but mutually constitutive of workers' resistance. It then further develops Thompson's claim by proposing the concept of 'activist paternalism', wherein paternalism itself becomes constitutive of a mode of labour organisation at intersecting local, national and international levels. Looking beyond conventional notions of workers' collective action and focusing on mine-working communities' rather than shop-floor struggles, the article invites further studies to both uncover new worker solidarities and question the homogeneity of longer-standing African labour movements.

1. Introduction

In March 2014, at a conference held by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Moisés Uamusse, ex-mineworker and then Secretary General of the Association of Mozambican Miners (AMIMO), explained: "being migrant workers in South Africa, the National Trade Unions in Mozambique could not assist us...and the National Unions in South Africa could not extend their assistance to Mozambican migrant workers" (IOM, 2014:71). It was this perceived lack of assistance and representation on both sides of the border that led to the establishment of AMIMO in 1998.

AMIMO, a membership-based non-profit organisation managed by ex-mineworkers, aims to represent Mozambican migrant mineworkers employed in South Africa, and their families, who live mostly in southern Mozambique. Today it claims 11,000 members. Although based in Maputo, where it was officially registered in 1998,¹ AMIMO emerged in South African mines in the early 1990s from the concerted action of Mozambican mineworkers. South Deep Gold Mine, where Uamusse worked, was one of five mines where workers first organised to present claims primarily to the Mozambican government, rather than to their employers.

Situated between studies of migration and labour organisation, this paper sheds light on the experience of collective organisation of

mineworkers whose lives unfold in communities stretching across a national border, and whose efforts at organising have remained under-analysed in the literature. It explores the development and functioning of a non-union form of labour organisation aimed at representing migrant workers, and interrogates its role as a distinct site of identification and socialisation. While I analyse these issues in the context of the South African mine industry and based on the experience of Mozambican migrant workers, the paper more broadly demonstrates the need to challenge nationally and institutionally focussed accounts of labour movements and the existing notions of workers' resistance on which they rely. It also illuminates the potential and difficulties of mobilising working class communities both geographically and culturally distant from the workplace.

The paper analyses Mozambican mineworkers' marginalisation in the trade union movement that developed on South African mines in the 1980s. It then examines how the relationship between mineworkers and the Mozambican government influenced their collective mobilisation, drawing from E.P. Thompson's theory of the 'moral economy'. The article also problematises the widespread conceptualisation of workers' collective action as conflictual and identified with overt protest. The moral economy constructed by AMIMO members has in fact led not to strikes or protests but to a different – and less confrontational – mode of action. To characterise this, I introduce the concept of 'activist

E-mail address: michela.mossetto@gmail.com.

¹ AMIMO was registered as "based in Maputo, with the right to establish delegations or other forms of representation in the country and abroad" (BDR, 1999).

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paternalism', building on Thompson's assumption on the compatibility of paternalism and contestation.

2. The marginalisation of migrant mineworkers' experiences of labour organisation

In 1986, on the eve of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)'s first nationwide strike, mineworkers from Lesotho (20%), Mozambique (12%), Botswana and Swaziland constituted more than 40% of the workforce. Yet, as Von Holdt (2002) has noticed, the practices and collective identities of migrant workers received scarce attention in historical studies of the South African mine labour movement. This reflects broader gaps between and within two theoretical literatures – on cross-border networks and mobility, and on trade unionism respectively – that have obscured foreign migrants' initiatives within the labour movement.

On the one hand, the 'transnationalism' literature has helpfully challenged the supposed dichotomy between migrants' lives in origin and destination countries, recognising that national and origin communities remain relevant to how migrants act and identify (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt, 1998; Vertovec, 2001). However, the forms of migrant organisation that have received greatest attention within this literature – notably hometown associations (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Itzigsohn, 2000) and lobby groups (Baubock, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2000) – are largely defined by ties of kinship, ethnicity, religion or nationality. Organisations whose membership is based on a specific occupation remain instead under-analysed, and existing studies of such organisational forms largely concentrate on their development in destination countries (Anderson, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2004).

The works of Ford (2003, 2004, 2006) and Piper (2009) stand out as exceptions, seeking to bridge the "schism between the literature on labour migration and that on organised labour" (Ford, 2004:99), calling particularly for analyses of migrant workers' organisation developed in origin countries. Ford (2003:93) introduces the term 'labour NGO' for a non-union organisation advocating migrant workers' rights, usually run by a small number of professionals rather than relying on "a mass membership of workers". However, in focusing on labour NGOs' functions and role within a broader global labour movement, both Ford and Piper have neglected migrant workers' interactions and identification with these organisations, whilst also failing to capture the complexity and diversity of existing organisational forms.

While the migration literature has given limited attention to issues of labour, the literature on labour movements, and studies of Social Movement Unionism (SMU) in particular, have neglected modes of migrant labour organisation developing in bi-national spaces and, crucially, outside trade unionism. Social Movement Unionism refers to "a type of trade unionism that sees workers' struggles as merely one of many efforts to...change society" (Scipes, 1992:86). SMU scholars have long questioned the economic notion of trade unions in modernisation theory, having identified situations – including South African mining – where trade unions transcend shop-floor struggles to engage in socio-political issues and voice demands regarding broader racial and capitalist inequalities affecting workers' communities (Lambert and Webster, 1988; Seidman, 1994).

However, the SMU literature, including recent contributions (Moodie, 2010; Seidman, 2011; Masiya, 2014), has largely reproduced the Marxist assumption concerning the existence of a *national*, relatively homogeneous and cohesive labour movement. Reflecting this, analyses of SMU in South Africa, attracted by the prominence of the NUM in the liberation struggle, sought to explain how a class consciousness could have thrived in this segregated environment (Southall, 1986; Crush and James, 1995). The prevailing narrative told of the waning of the old migrant labour system: "the men of the union" were at last "replacing the men of migrant cultures" and introducing "a new moral order" (Moodie, 1994:305), ready to animate the struggle of a *national*

working class. While some recognised the continued presence of foreign migrants as a potential challenge to NUM (James, 1992:117; Crush et al., 1991:197), their experiences of the labour movement remained under-analysed.

Furthermore, the SMU literature has retained a focus on trade unions not only as the current dominant mode of labour action, but a normative paradigm for the future. A more recent literature discussed the adaption and 'revitalisation' of trade union strategies under the increasing pressures created by migrants (e.g. David, 2002; Haus, 2002; Wrench, 2004; Martinez Lucio and Perrett, 2009; Munck, 2015). Underlying the idea of 'union revitalisation' is the assumption that it is ultimately desirable for both citizens and migrants to unite in a single nationally based, yet cosmopolitan, form of trade unionism. Munck (2015:107), applying a similar argument to the South African context, has described migrant workers as previously mostly organised in "specifically migrant-oriented organisations, be they ethnic, faith-based or single-issue campaign ones", and interpreted the slow emergence of trade union-migrant alliances as reflecting a transitional phase in which, as Gramsci argued, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci, 1970:276 in Munck, 2015:225).

An important exception to this literature reveals the flaws of Munck's argument. The emerging concept of Community Unionism (CU) has challenged the dominance of trade unions in labour literature and enabled exploring the ways in which particularly vulnerable workers, including migrants, have organised in non-union forms (Wills, 2001; Fine, 2005; Greenwood and McBride, 2009). However, even critical contributions on SMU and CU have continued to focus on the *national* character of workers' struggles, where the relevant national space is that of migrants' destination countries in the Northern hemisphere, revealing little about migrant workers whose practices of labour organisation are rooted in multiple, yet clearly defined, national spaces. This paper analyses precisely such practices and subjectivities in the case of Mozambican mineworkers who, while employed in South Africa, have developed a form of organisation aimed at representing them and their families vis-à-vis the Mozambican government.

Given its cross-border existence, studying AMIMO required collecting data in multiple sites, trying to capture the experiences of its heterogeneous and mobile membership.² The findings presented in this article are therefore mainly based on a three-month fieldwork conducted in Mozambique and South Africa, as part of a two-year research project.

Carrying out participant observation within AMIMO, I spent time at its headquarters in Maputo, as well as travelling to villages in Gaza province where most of its activities are implemented. Alongside AMIMO senior managers, I also attended a conference in Johannesburg, organised by the Southern Africa Miners Association (SAMA), a regional coalition founded by AMIMO and other migrant mineworkers associations (from Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana) to advocate the rights of mineworkers across national borders. To gain further insight into the micro-politics of the organisation, independently from the organisation's leadership, I also repeatedly visited AMIMO committees in two South African mines.

Alongside participant observation, I conducted 68 semi-structured interviews³ with AMIMO members, including staff, current and ex-mineworkers and their wives and widows.⁴ In South Africa I also held three focus groups in South Deep mine and Marikana (Fig. 1) with working members of AMIMO. A further 18 interviews with mine-workers unaffiliated with AMIMO helped me understand the rationale of those who knew about the Association but had not joined it. Finally, analysis of various written sources – including AMIMO's present and

² See Appendix A for an organigram of AMIMO.

³ Referenced using respondents' names or pseudonyms.

⁴ This gender division, with only one female mineworker interviewed, reflects the low number of Mozambican women employed in South African mines (Mpedi and Nyenti, 2013).

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