CONTROLLING THE COOLIES:  
CHINESE MINeworkers AND THE STRUGGLE  
FOR LABOR IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1904–1910*

By Gary Kynoch

Mentally constituted as is this branch of the Mongol race, one cannot hope to attain the end in view without meting out to the individual justice administered in a manner within the limits of his comprehension.... Once allow the bonds of discipline to be relaxed, or the impression to get abroad that Government are riding with too loose a rein, it will be a matter of the greatest difficulty to keep this large army of men under restraint. And, should they get out of hand, I should hesitate to guarantee the safety of the lives of those employed on the mines. (Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department, 1905)

I beg to bring to your notice the fact that we are having a good number of desertions amongst our Chinese Coolies, and that while they are invariably recaptured they make it no secret that three or four weeks in Gaol is no punishment.... The hard labour they are subjected to in Gaol is much easier than the ordinary work in the Mine, and it would greatly help us in general control of them if their life in gaol was made irksome to them instead of luxurious. (General Manager, North Randfontein Gold Mine, 1905).

Between 1904 and 1907 some 63,695 Chinese men were imported into South Africa to work as indentured laborers on the gold mines. By 1910, with the exception of a handful of deserters who were unaccounted for, and those who had died, all had been repatriated to China. During their time in South Africa these men struggled against punitive working and living conditions designed to grind them into a compliant labor force. Labor relations were volatile and the workers

* The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Thanks also to Dunbar Moodie for his suggestions and comments.

1 Central Archives Depot, Pretoria (hereafter CAD), GOV 209, CON 33/05, Memorandum Regarding the Steps Which Ought to Be Taken in Order to Place the Working of the Foreign Labour Department on a Proper Footing. Superintendent Jamieson, 7 August 1905.

2 CAD, FLD 19, AG 34/05, General Manager, North Randfontein, G.M. Co. Ltd. to Superintendent, FLD, 22 August 1905.

3 Peter Richardson, Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal (London, 1982), 204.
rioted on a number of occasions. Clashes with the police called in to suppress these protests frequently resulted in fatalities and a number of laborers were executed for murders committed during riots.

This article explores the conflicts between management and labor and the tactics and strategies employed by both groups. Oppressive labor practices and restrictive living conditions, racist attitudes on the part of mine management and white supervisors and miscommunication due to language difficulties caused many of the problems between management and workers. This is a common story in the history of South African mining. There are, however, some aspects of the Chinese experience on the gold mines that were unique. Chinese laborers were a captive work force. They were indentured for a three-year period and no man was permitted to break his contract unless he had the means to reimburse his employer for the cost of transporting him to South Africa and returning him to China. Mine owners were determined to extract the maximum return from what was an initially costly investment and the Chinese could not seek work in other sectors or abandon their contracts, as African laborers were able to do. The British government's determination to get the mines producing at maximum output to help rebuild the colony in the wake of the South African War made it sympathetic to mine owners' approach to the Chinese labor force. This convergence of circumstances led to a particularly oppressive labor regimen on the gold mines, one that could not be replicated with African miners. As Patrick Harries reports, black workers confronted with wage cuts in 1896-97 simply "fell back on their most effective defence and returned home." Mine management was acutely

4 Africans working on the diamond fields in Kimberley were housed in closed compounds and subjected to intense surveillance, but these men were free to return home following the completion of their contracts, which were measured in months instead of years. Moreover, as Patrick Harries has pointed out, the diamond fields "had to attract men from competing areas of employment ... and, to do this, management and labour had to negotiate conditions that were acceptable to both parties." In this competitive environment, mine owners learned to limit the worst abuses and offer sufficient wages to induce experienced black miners to recontract. With their workers bound by three-year indentures, employers of Chinese labour had no such concerns. See Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1994), 68; William Worger, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 288–89.


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aware of this tactic: “The native method of striking is very simple... he is always going home, and if he is not satisfied with the conditions of employment, he simply does not come out again.”7 Chinese laborers deserted in large numbers, but ultimately had nowhere to go and were rounded up and jailed or returned to their mines. Even within such an environment, however, the collective resistance of Chinese laborers mediated the degree of oppression.

Importation of Chinese labor was a response to what was seen as a short-term labor crisis following the South African War (sometimes called the Boer War). Chinese mineworkers were brought in to boost production and keep the mines operational until a sufficiently cheap supply of African labor could be secured. The British government negotiated directly with the Chinese government and an agreement—the Anglo-Chinese Labour Convention—was signed in London in May 1904. Chinese workers were bound by the Labour Importation Ordinance (hereafter the Ordinance) that regulated the introduction of “unskilled Non-European Labourers” into the Transvaal.

By 1905, 35 mines employed Chinese men who lived in compounds and worked an average of ten hours daily, six days a week and various holidays off. For the six working days, the men were confined to the mine premises. Permits were granted upon request for laborers to visit town or friends at other mining compounds but Chinese mineworkers were forbidden by law to leave the Witwatersrand magisterial district. Refusal to work, desertion, changing employers, the failure to produce a mine passport off mine premises, and several other acts were defined as criminal offences under the Ordinance—to which amendments were added over time. The great majority of Chinese laborers worked underground. Of the just over 50,000 indentured workers employed on the Rand in 1906, fewer than 2,000 worked on the surface as sweepers and “sanitary boys” (578), police (532), cooks (404), or in various other capacities.8

Structures of Control

The supervision of Chinese laborers at each mine was overseen by a small contingent of Europeans. The mine manager directed the mining operation, but the European compound manager, known as the controller, dealt with the laborers on a daily basis. For example, the controller, who was supposed to have a degree of proficiency with Chinese dialects, was responsible for issuing passes to laborers who wished to leave the mine premises. White foremen accompanied teams of Chinese workers underground and served as supervisors. Given the small number


8 CAD, FLD 24, 2706, Walter Bagot, General Manager, Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency (CMLIA) to the Superintendent, FLD, 8 March 1906.
of Europeans on each mine, order within the compounds was maintained by Chinese mine police, most of whom had "served either in the British Army at Weihaiwei or in the Chinese Army." Approximately one policeman was employed for every hundred laborers and the police began their duties on board ship among the Chinese recruits en route to South Africa.

The Foreign Labour Department (FLD), which was created specifically to oversee the Chinese labor force, operated independently from the Chamber of Mines. The FLD employed a team of inspectors to ensure that housing, food, and sanitary conditions were up to standard and to record the grievances of Chinese mineworkers. Although relations between the FLD and the Chamber of Mines were sometimes tense, the two bodies cooperated to maintain control over the Chinese workforce. In 1905, the FLD also assumed a judicial function. The local courts were swamped by the sheer numbers of mining cases and were ill-equipped to deal with the language difficulties.

High Commissioner Lord Selborne provided the Colonial Office with a description of the FLD courts and lock-ups established on all mines by October 1905.

They will be endowed by the Ordinance with the powers of a Resident Magistrate for the purpose of the administration of justice to the Chinese in the compounds. If a Chinese coolie commits an offence in a compound the Mine Manager will be empowered to shut him up in a lock-up pending the visit of the Superintendent or an Inspector. Every Chinese compound will be so visited once every forty-eight hours, and if possible twenty-four hours, when summary justice according to the powers of a Resident Magistrate will be meted out by the Superintendent and Inspectors.

From October 1905 to January 1906, FLD Inspectors tried 2,771 Chinese miners, of whom 2,632 were convicted and 139 discharged. The FLD's role in dispensing judgement and punishment on behalf of mine management undoubt-
edly undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese laborers, who were told to regard the inspectors as advocates for just treatment in any disputes with mine officials.

Desertion was a particular concern to both FLD and mine authorities although only a portion of those convicted of desertion were actually attempting to escape employment on the mines. Stragglers who failed to return to the mine by Monday morning were classified as deserters, as were laborers who could not find their way back to the mine, a common occurrence in the rural areas surrounding mine properties. The governor of the Transvaal reported in September 1905 that “During the last three weeks the South African Constabulary have caught 243 wandering Chinese generally famished and only too glad to be brought in.” Whatever the cause, mine management resented any absence from work and were also under pressure from the white population of the Witwatersrand to prevent their laborers from wandering.

Both the FLD and the Chamber established committees to investigate the causes of and solutions to desertion and other offenses but, despite these efforts, between June 1905 and June 1906, the number of offenses under the Ordinance rose to 11,754, including 1,700 cases of desertion. Desertion was generally attributed to gambling and money-lending and very occasionally to the ill-treatment of Chinese miners by white supervisors. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Chamber refused to admit any responsibility for desertion and denied that the systematic abuse of Chinese laborers may have played an important role.

The Committee desire to state that they are convinced that such desertions as occur are not due to inhumane treatment.... The motive may rather be found in the natural restlessness and instability of purpose of the uneducated classes in any country, aggravated in the case of the Chinese on the Rand by, firstly, the indulgence in gambling and opium smoking, and secondly, the lack of penalties sufficiently severe to act as a deterrent.... A few days imprisonment, a trifling fine, or a caution have no deterrent influence and the Committee feels convinced that a little salutary severity would have an excellent effect.15

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13 CAD, LTG 166, Telegram from Governor, Transvaal to Secretary of State, 18 September 1905.

14 Richardson, Chinese Mine Labour, 174.

Following the report of the Special Committee on the Control of Chinese Labourers (consisting of the superintendent of the FLD, the general manager of the Chamber of Mines, representatives from the South African Constabulary, a magistrate and the Chinese consul-general) in May 1906, a new permit system and set of regulations were introduced that dramatically lowered desertion rates. Mines employed larger numbers of whites to monitor the movements of Chinese workers, improved their capacity to secure points of entry and exit on the mine premises, and kept more accurate records of the comings and goings of workers who had been granted permits to leave mine property. The increase in coercion, surveillance, and summary punishment produced the desired results. According to FLD Inspector Crocker, "statistics prove absolutely that the number of defaulters, deserters, and offenders in any one particular mine is in inverse ratio to the control exercised on that mine."

Flogging was a regular punishment for offenses against the Ordinance until a public outcry in Britain ended this practice in June 1905. FLD Superintendent Evans had obtained permission from High Commissioner Lord Milner to authorize mining officials to "inflict slight corporal punishment, in the case of minor breaches of discipline," but it became apparent that many mines routinely administered severe beatings. Milner's successor Lord Selborne wished to retain flogging for serious crimes, but reluctantly concluded that although "stripes are the punishment which would control the Chinese.... I have set my face against this as I do not believe that public opinion at home would tolerate that form of punishment."

Reports of abuse and torture carried in various South African and British newspapers, along with Chinese protests, forced mine authorities to deal with the problem of white supervisors assaulting Chinese workers. Although mine owners publicly denied any connection between labor disturbances and supervisory violence, a member of the Executive Committee of the Chamber of Mines

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17 CAD, FLD 168, 34/00, Report by Major McAndrew, Inspector, FLD, April 1907.

18 CAD, EC 86, 82/06, Lord Selborne to the Colonial Office, 29 January 1906.

19 CAD, FLD 225, 62/51, Lord Selborne to Secretary of State for the Colonies, July 1905.

20 CAD, FLD 7, 147/20/11A, Secret Telegram, Governor, Transvaal to Secretary of State, 12 July 1905.

conceded in confidential correspondence that "trouble is not infrequently caused by ill-treatment of the coolies by white miners." The FLD stated unequivocally that "assaults by white miners on coolies have been the original cause of some of the worst riots which have taken place on the Rand." The attorney-general for the Transvaal observed that while "such assaults do take place... I am not aware of any case in which a white miner has been convicted." FLD Inspector E.C. Mayers voiced his frustration:

On July 3 [1905] coolie No. 21696 of New Modderfontein came to make a complaint to me: he had one eye and cheek bruised and discoloured and the skin had been torn in several places on his head: he stated that this had been done by his white boss, one Stewart. On July 4 Stewart charged No. 21696 with assault: after hearing the case I found 21696 not guilty, and the same day laid a charge against Stewart, also for assault. On July 6 the case came on for hearing before the Assistant Resident Magistrate at Boksburg: although the coolie No. 21696 had two witnesses who swore to witnessing the assault, and although coolie No. 21696 bore considerable marks of violence, the case was discharged. This is by no means an isolated instance: my experience here for one year has convinced me that it is impossible to obtain justice for a Chinese coolie in the Court at Boksburg.

The discrepancy between a mine manager's report of a beating and a district surgeon's description of the injuries sustained by the victim is indicative of mine officials' tendency to minimize the abuse of Chinese employees by white staff. The manager claimed that the controller "gave the delinquent a few strokes with a light whip." Following the beating, the laborer fled the compound, only to be arrested and charged with desertion whereupon he revealed his injuries and was taken for a medical examination. The district surgeon judged that "the man had been systematically flogged by some heavy horse whip or raw ox-rein.... The bruises extended from the lower part of the back, across the buttocks and upper part of the thighs ... the skin being quite destroyed. The man was suffering great pain and was unable to move." The controller was fined £1 by a magistrate who remarked that it was a trivial case.

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22 CAD, FLD 7, 147/20/11A, Chaplin to Sir Arthur Lawley, 24th July 1905.
23 CAD, GOV 209, Con 33/05, Jamieson to Colonial Office, 7th August 1905.
24 CAD, GOV 872, PS 37/12/05, Richard Solomon to Playford, 10 October 1905.
25 CAD, FLD 7, 147/20/17, E. C. Mayers, Inspector to Superintendent FLD, 7 July 1905.
26 CAD, FLD 225, 62/20, H.L. McDonald, Manager, Durban Roodeport Deep Limited to F. Raleigh, Acting General Manager, Rand Mines Ltd., 27 March 1905.
White miners had little to fear from the law but were occasionally dismissed in 1904 and 1905 as a result of complaints lodged by their victims.\(^{28}\) Furthermore, Chinese laborers retaliated against physical abuse. Instead of reacting on the spot, victimized laborers often obtained the assistance of friends to launch calculated attacks on their assailants. A conflict on Roodepoort Mine in mid-1905 illustrates the potential consequences for whites who assaulted Chinese workers.

A miner named Kairis assaulted a coolie at 12 o'clock midnight, 3\(^{rd}\) instant. The coolie, No. 28155, returned to the compound and his friends called out some of the coolies from the compound, who went in search of Kairis. Whilst searching for him they came across a white man named Frost and struck him as they thought he was Kairis. As soon as they discovered their mistake they helped him back to the room.... About 2:30 a.m. the Compound Manager was called out and found a crowd of coolies at the gate. He ... discovered that they had put a miner named Dahman into the lock up.... he was informed by the coolies that Dahman had incited Kairis to beat them, so they had tied him up and placed him in the lock up.... The Manager informed me that both Kairis and Dahman were discharged immediately after the disturbance.\(^{29}\)

This type of action greatly disconcerted white miners who sent an official deputation from the Transvaal Miners' Association to the Chamber of Mines demanding "more protection when working with coolies."\(^{30}\) The FLD also noted the Chinese propensity for vigilantism: "If anything goes wrong instead of appealing to the government for assistance, they boil up into a rage, take the law into their own hands and settle the matter for themselves."\(^{31}\) A Chamber of Mine official judged that "the white miner has at least as much to fear from the coolie as the coolie has from the white man ... on some mines there is among the white employees a feeling of extreme nervousness."\(^{32}\) The combination of laying

\(^{28}\) CAD, FLD 7, 147/20/4, Manager, Witwatersrand Deep Limited to Chamber, 3\(^{rd}\) April 1905; FLD 7, 147/20/3, A Letter from the General Manager of the Geduld Proprietary Mines, 4\(^{th}\) April 1905; GOV 872, PS 37/12/05, Report on Slight Disturbance at Roodepoort on 3\(^{rd}\) July, 1905.


\(^{30}\) CAD, LTG 166, Transvaal Miner's Association Deputation, 11\(^{th}\) July, 1905.

\(^{31}\) CAD, GOV 872, PS 37/12/05, Acting Superintendent FLD to Lieutenant-Governor, 16\(^{th}\) May 1905.

\(^{32}\) CAD, FLD 7, 147/20/11A, Chaplin to Sir Arthur Lawley, 24\(^{th}\) July 1905.
complaints and physical retaliation seems to have been successful in significantly reducing the incidence of assault by white miners.

The Chinese police were notorious for the beatings they administered. Lord Selborne admitted that they sometimes overstepped their authority and were responsible for "oppression" in the compounds, but believed that the secretive nature of the "coolies" made it almost impossible for the FLD to uncover many cases of abuse. Given the linguistic barrier and the segregation of the Chinese labor force on the mines, it is questionable whether any white mine officials had a good understanding of the social networks and rivalries within the compounds. Perhaps because of this, Selborne believed that most disputes between Chinese laborers and police were best resolved between these two groups without outside interference.

The life of the Chinese coolie in a compound, is, after all, not unlike that of boys in an English public school, the compound police occupying a position analogous to that of prefects or monitors. So long as discipline is maintained and authority is not abused the headmaster of the school is content to leave the settlement of their internal differences to the boys themselves.... Popular opinion is, as a rule, an adequate safeguard against the abuse of authority either in a compound or in a school; moreover in a compound any serious abuse of authority by the Chinese police would infallibly bring its own retribution at the hands of the aggrieved coolies.33

"Aggrieved coolies" frequently meted out retribution to heavy-handed Chinese police, but Selborne's analogy may well have been accurate in the sense that Chinese police, much like prefects, were free to pursue their own agendas as long as they assisted the authorities in keeping general order. On the one hand, Chinese police were subject to the orders of the mine manager and controller. Police were paid better wages and supplied with superior quarters than underground laborers and their work was far less demanding. If a policeman fell into disfavor with the controller or manager, he could be relieved of his position and sent underground. This power compelled the police to do management's bidding. Conversely, management was almost totally reliant on Chinese police for day-to-day discipline. As a result, Chinese police possessed enormous influence over the regular laborers and management did little to curb abuses. An environment that encouraged a culture of impunity among the Chinese police contributed to a climate of fear and repression on the mines. It also provided mine and FLD officials with a scapegoat. Desertions and riots were often blamed on the Chinese police, while mine policies and practices were conveniently ignored.

33 CAD, EC 86, 82/06, Lord Selborne to Lord Elgin, 29 January 1906.
Despite the routine abuses endured by Chinese laborers, checks and balances existed that moderated the worst excesses. Chinese workers who brought complaints before the FLD or a sympathetic mine official were occasionally successful in having their grievances redressed and retaliation against assaults seem to have been effective. However, when Chinese workers engaged in collective action, the FLD abandoned the men whose interests it was supposed to safeguard and the full machinery of the state was used to ruthlessly suppress dissent.

**Riots and Disturbances**

Perhaps the most striking difference between the Kaffir labourers and the Chinese is the Kaffirs do not possess, what is particularly characteristic of the Chinese, the idea of concerted action and common responsibility.... It is obvious that special measures, which are not required in the case of the Kaffirs, are necessary in the case of the Chinese, both for dealing with disturbances when they occur and for the preservation of discipline and good order among them at all times with a view to the prevention of disturbances.34

At its most extreme, Chinese resistance manifested itself as organized, militant action. As with desertion and other offenses against the Ordinance, such episodes were more common in the first two years of the Chinese presence. Prior to 1906 there were at least 25 protests sufficiently serious to require outside police intervention. Management and the state were determined to subdue those they regarded as troublemakers and dealt harshly with offenders, but protracted protests were costly and mine officials made concessions to prevent further disruptions to mining operations. Chinese miners learned firsthand of the coercive machinery arrayed against them while management discovered the conditions that provoked organized resistance. Both sides made their point and while this was a decidedly unequal struggle, Chinese miners were not without leverage. Following the initial period of violent protests, which were often bloodily suppressed, Chinese laborers seem to have resigned themselves to a degree of oppression as an inevitable by-product of employment on the mines, but also decided that certain issues merited the risk of collective action. Management made similar calculations and large-scale violence diminished considerably with only four significant episodes recorded after 1905.35 Disputes over rations, rates of pay, and assaults, which sparked riots in 1904 and 1905, were not listed as factors in later protests. This suggests that management addressed some of the laborers' concerns

34 CAD, GOV 209, CON 33/05, Lord Selborne to Alfred Lyttelton, Colonial Office, 7 August 1905.

35 Dunbar Moodie refers to similar accommodations between African miners and mine management as a moral economy. *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration* (Berkeley, 1994).
to prevent work stoppages and that a mutual recognition of acceptable terms of employment was established. Thus, the last four years of the Chinese labor experiment were marked by a relative degree of peace and collective violence erupted only when management blatantly transgressed the terms of the contract and denied Chinese miners a peaceful means of registering their grievances.

Chinese laborers arrived on the Rand in late June and early July 1904 and the first incidence of a "disturbance" was recorded on July 22, 1904, following an explosion underground that killed two Chinese mineworkers. The night shift reportedly stoned mine officials who tried to force them to go to work and "a number were arrested and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment." Chinese laborers protesting "ill-treatment and bullying" attacked white miners at Geduld Proprietary Mines in October. Government officials and mine owners considered these incidents an inevitable part of the process of a new labor force adapting to a foreign situation. FLD Superintendent Evans judged that "The majority of these disturbances have arisen from misunderstandings and the more old hands there are to whom newcomers can appeal for explanation the less chance there will be of riot." Instead, protests continued in 1905 as Chinese laborers resisted the totality of control to which they were subjected and insisted on a fair payment system.

A serious threat to mining operations took place in April 1905 when Chinese laborers at North Randfontein Mine protested against their rate of pay. For the first six months of a laborer's contract he was to receive one shilling per ten hour day. Thereafter, working on the assumption that as laborers gained experience they would become more productive, Clause 6 of the Contract of Service stipulated that the average rate of pay for Chinese laborers was to be 50 shillings per month. Incentives and penalty clauses were also in force. Twenty-four inches drilled per ten-hour shift was considered the minimum acceptable amount and laborers were paid an incentive above the basic daily rate for hammer work over 24 inches and another increment if they reached 36 inches. As a penalty, wages were reduced by half a penny for any hole less than 12 inches. North Randfontein received its complement of Chinese labor in early August 1904 and on 22 March the laborers submitted a petition to the mine manager asking that their wages be raised to a minimum of 50 shillings per month. The manager replied that Clause 6 did not guarantee each man 50 shillings per month, only that the average wage should not fall below this amount. Conceding that the average rate of pay fell short of the required minimum, he proposed a counter-offer on 28 March directed

36 CAD, GOV 159, GEN 894/04, Governor Milner to Lyttelton, Colonial Office, enclosures from FLD, 12 December 1904.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
to the Chinese headmen and designed to undermine the unity of the Chinese workforce.

In addition to the one shilling per ten hour shift the "boss" boys should receive the sum of one penny for each hole of 24 inches or over drilled by any member of their gang plus a bonus of sixpence per shift if all the coolies in their gang drilled 36 inches or over.39 If the headmen had accepted, they would have done so at the expense of their fellow laborers and alienated their comrades. "For men whose moral and material position depended to a large extent on the degree to which they were integrated into the general working experience of the Chinese miners, this was obviously an impossible offer."40 Instead, the headmen resigned en masse and requested that they revert to the position of hammermen. The manager's refusal to accept their resignations led to a slow-down supported by virtually the entire Chinese workforce. They adopted a calculated strategy of staying within the dictates of the contract, yet dramatically decreasing production by reporting for work and drilling 12 inches, not a bit more. Refusing to acknowledge the legitimate nature of the protests, white officials instead attributed the work action to a reign of terror imposed by a handful of decrepit gamblers.

It is believed on the Mine that the old gamblers and opium smokers, who are too debilitated to do more than 12 inches and who cannot earn sufficient by means of their work to enable them to compete when gambling against coolies earning large sums at the end of the month, have frightened the "boss" boys into demanding this minimum wage of fifty shillings. The fact however remains that these boys have now decided to organise a huge strike amongst the 2000 coolies on the Mine. The whole night shift of the 29th refused to drill more than 12 inches and ceased work when they had completed that amount. It is evident that the "boss" boys had the coolies entirely in their power and that the latter lived in great terror of them, for those who had drilled more than 12 inches during the shift either plugged up anything in excess of that amount with mud or begged the shift boss not to sign more than 12 inches, as they were afraid their "boss" boys would kill them.41

39 CAD, GOV 165, GEN 266/05, Acting Superintendent FLD to Lieutenant-Governor, 5 April 1905.
41 CAD, GOV 165,GEN 266/05, Acting Superintendent FLD to Lieutenant-Governor, 5 April 1905.
After learning from an informant the names of 53 headmen alleged to be leading the strike, management abandoned negotiations, refused the assistance of the FLD, and called in the police to arrest these "ringleaders" for refusal to work, despite the fact that there was no legal basis for such a charge. The Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency's (CMLIA) general manager was determined to use force and requested that the FLD refrain from interfering "as the principle involved was of such vital importance to the mining industry that he considered it advisable to try to allow the employers to show the coolies that they had power enough to settle the matter for themselves without the intervention of the government."  

Thirty-six of the 53 headmen were arrested in the compound without difficulty on the morning of 1 April. When the underground shift came up some two and a half hours later and saw what was happening, they gathered various bits of weaponry and assumed a position on top of a mine dump. Faced with a potentially hostile and numerically superior force, the inspector in charge of the 22 mounted police decided to retreat.

When marching the prisoners out the 1300 coolies attacked the police, and with sticks, stones and bottles attempted to cut off our only means of escape, which was through the Compound gate. Fortunately all the Police succeeded in getting outside and turned about with a view to keeping the coolies inside, but the shower of missiles was so strong that we were compelled to retreat.

The police abandoned their prisoners and a running battle ensued as the Chinese miners moved out of the compound. After receiving reinforcements late in the afternoon, the mounted police charged through the ranks of the laborers numerous times and herded the exhausted mineworkers back to the mine where they arrested all 53 suspected leaders. The commissioner of police judged this to be "the most serious disturbance we have had" and the inspector remarked that "the determination of the Chinese was a great surprise to me, as each time we charged them..."
they waited for us and threw their missiles when we were almost on to them. All the horses and men were hit several times.”

The 53 headmen were convicted of public violence and assault with intent to do harm and all received nine-month prison terms. Despite the fate of the headmen, the laborers at North Randfontein had exhibited a tactical appreciation of their legal position as well as an impressive solidarity in the face of management's coercion. Their actions secured some initial concessions when a new wage agreement was instituted on April 14. Laborers on piece work obtained the removal of the penalty limit and a more favorable bonus system: halfpence per inch up to 36 inches, with bonuses of threepence for 36 inches to 47 inches; fivelpence for 48 inches to 59 inches and so on up to ninepence maximum. Those on day rates were to receive a shilling and sixpence. No further attempt was made to reward headmen for the performance of their work crews at the expense of ordinary hammermen.

However, the government and mining interests moved rapidly to limit the options of Chinese laborers in any further disputes and to ensure that wages remained depressed. Lord Selborne lamented the existence of Clause 6, which is clearly understood by every Chinaman and which is a very powerful weapon in their hands because as you will observe it is entirely one-sided and makes no provision to protect the employer and ensure a fair day's work for a liberal day's pay. A wholesale combination among the coolies to do the least possible work and claim high wages—such as occurred on the North Randfontein—is always liable to happen as long as this clause remains in the contract.

The attorney-general's department ruled that employers had no obligation to maintain the average pay referred to in Clause 6 after the expiration of six months. Furthermore, the original contract clearly stated that Chinese laborers had the right to choose between day rates and piece work; this right was widely ignored and employees were obliged to do piece work whenever instructed by the employer. Penalty clauses crept back into use and it became customary for laborers not to be paid at all if they failed to drill at least 24 inches. Peter Richardson concludes that “despite sophisticated response from the Chinese workforce, the

47 Richardson, “Coolies and Randlords,” 171.
48 Ibid., 172.
49 CAD, LTG 166, Telegram, Lord Selborne to Secretary of State, 18 April 1905.
greater degree of coercive state power available to the mine owners ... enabled them to add a greater degree of control than had existed before."\(^{50}\)

It took several months for the combined powers of the mine owners, the FLD, and the government to secure the desired level of control and Chinese laborers continued to protest over work and pay conditions. Chinese miners rioted at the Princess Gold Mine on 28 April in support of two of their comrades who had been arrested for refusal to work. A mounted police force was called in and fighting immediately broke out. The commanding officer provided the following account:

I took the party of men along the main road some forty yards off the Compound and was at once attacked by three parties of Chinese who were hiding in a trench and also poured out of the Compound with bottles, sticks, crowbars, and stones. I drew the men off some three hundred yards, the Chinamen following, but the ground was too rough and the night too dark for anything to be done.... The Chinese returned to their Compound.... they buried drills in the ground with the points sticking out at an angle to stop the horses and had scouts out who stoned the Police at intervals.\(^{51}\)

After sustained fighting throughout the night, the Chinese laborers were subdued and two badly injured laborers were arrested.

Management was determined to make an example of the leaders and enlisted the assistance of the police to have them removed and charged. The managing director of Princess Gold Mining Company met with the commissioner of police and it was "decided that the Chinese should not be permitted to over-ride the law since there were clear cases of inciting to refuse work against some of the Chinese laborers."\(^{52}\) A strong police force returned to the mine on 2 May and arrested a number of individuals pointed out by mine officials. One man was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and 25 lashes, twelve to six months' imprisonment, and another five received prison terms of four months.\(^{53}\)

In late June and early July of 1905 the Witwatersrand Deep Mine experienced rioting, apparently over pay, which an FLD inspector blamed on the arrival of the first Chinese consul-general, Lew Yuk Lin. He claimed that Lew's visit

\(^{50}\) Richardson, "Coolies and Randlords," 177.
\(^{51}\) CAD, LD 1067, AG 1905/05, Assistant Commissioner of Police, West Rand, Florida to Acting Deputy Commissioner of Police, Johannesburg, 28 April 1905.
\(^{52}\) CAD, LD 1067, AG 1905/05, Commissioner of Police to Secretary of the Law Department, Pretoria, 3 May 1905.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 6 May 1905.
excited the laborers into believing they were being treated unjustly and that many subsequently refused to work. In the end, “107 coolies were arrested for refusal to work and were sentenced to a fine of £5 or 5 weeks imprisonment.”

Riots and protest became less common towards the end of 1905 primarily because the combined might of the state and the mine owners took a toll on Chinese mineworkers, but also as a result of resistance that persuaded management to respect some basic rights to prevent further disruptions.

The next large protest did not erupt until August 1907 at the Cason Mine. The FLD’s enquiry is especially revealing, not least as to the role played by the FLD itself. It was not a matter of dispute that management had unilaterally and illegally imposed a new piecework contract on the Chinese laborers. Under these conditions any laborer who drilled less than 30 inches would not be paid. A failure to drill 24 inches would result in restricted rations—bread and rice, no meat, fish, or vegetables—although it appears that this punishment was sometimes instituted for amounts less than 30 inches. It also came to light that the controller punished hammermen who failed to drill 30 inches by forcing them to stand for hours outside his office. Furthermore, he routinely humiliated “loafers” by forcing them to wear a hat with an emblem that was a mark of extreme disgrace and allegedly compelled offenders to assume undignified poses while loudly proclaiming themselves to be sodomites and bastards.

For the purpose of the enquiry, laborers were instructed to nominate spokesmen. Each of these five individuals stated that the workers rioted to protest the imposition of the new contract and the punishments meted out by the controller. Numerous Chinese witnesses called to give testimony corroborated these statements. No. 4351 asked, “How can a man be expected to do heavy manual labour if the food is insufficient, if one is tired with standing, and one is an object of ridicule?”

No. 56331 made the following reply when asked about the laborers’ grievances: “We wish to complain about the footage. If we drill under 30 inches we receive no money; unless we drill over 30 inches we get no food ticket.”

Chinese witnesses insisted that they resorted to violence only after management blocked their attempts to bring their grievances to the FLD. The immediate incident that sparked the riot was the controller’s arrest of a laborer circulating a pamphlet calling on the Chinese miners to unite and put their case before the FLD. No. 56331 pointed out that “a man named Sung did wish to complain on

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54 CAD, FLD 19, AG 10/05, B.C. Fairfax, Inspector FLD to Superintendent FLD, 25 July 1905.

55 CAD, LD 1487, AG 3168/07, Cason Riot Enquiry and enclosures, 52.

56 Ibid, 61.
behalf of the coolies, but he was sent to the police room by Mr. Foxcroft.... the Controller shut this man into the police room and the coolies got angry.”

Foxcroft confirmed this account: “I asked the man with the pamphlet what his reasons were for distributing it; he replied: that the meeting was to discuss the recent alteration in the inches drilled. He was very cheeky so I put him under arrest and confined him in the police room.” A general riot ensued and in the fighting between laborers and the Chinese police four men were killed.

Despite this preponderance of evidence, R.I. Purdon, the chief inspector of the FLD and the man in charge of conducting the enquiry, categorically dismissed the possibility that the riot was in any way connected to the grievances the laborers had voiced. Instead, he reached an entirely different conclusion.

With regard to graver charges which have been laid by coolies No. 4351 (page 56) and 54484 (page 63), which statements appear to be substantiated by No. 54525 (page 67), No. 62651 (page 69), and No. 62667 (page 71), I can only say that I believe these statements to be untrue.... I cannot believe Mr. Foxcroft would be so inhuman as to punish coolies in this manner.... Having carefully considered the evidence ... I have come to the conclusion that the riot was stirred up by bad characters for the purpose of paying off old scores against the compound police and others.... The question of inchage was used as a pretext to riot.

However, with four dead and 15 seriously injured, neither the Chamber nor the FLD could wish away the conditions that caused the riot. Superintendent Jamieson, who was under fire from the attorney-general, adopted an indignant tone and claimed that his department had been duped by Cason officials. He eagerly accepted Purdon’s interpretation of events, but added that he could not “help thinking that the Management played into the hands of the disaffected coolies, by their extremely ill-advised action in connection with the new piece-work agreement.” Jamieson stated that the proposed contract had been received by his office, where it was translated and sent back to Cason management with the understanding that no laborer would be compelled to accept the new terms. Instead, only those who voluntarily agreed to work for no pay and less food if they did not manage thirty inches per shift were to be bound by these conditions. Jamieson professed great shock that the new contract was then imposed on the

57 Ibid, 62.
58 Ibid, 1.
59 CAD, LD 1487, AG 3168/07, Cason Riot Enquiry, enclosure, Chief Inspector Purdon FLD to Superintendent FLD, 23 August 1907.
60 Ibid., enclosure, Superintendent FLD to Honourable J. de Villiers, Pretoria, 26 August 1907.
entire workforce. “It was not unreasonably supposed that the Management would loyally carry out these directions, but so far from having done so, they would appear to have endeavoured to bluff both the coolies and myself, the former by saying that they must accept, and the latter by saying that the coolies had accepted, the published terms.”61 At best, the FLD was easily circumvented by mining officials determined to subvert the terms of the contract. At worst it was complicit in this oppression. Whichever applies, it is telling that the institution charged with the protection of the Chinese labor force summarily dismissed the complaints of Chinese laborers even when it knew their concerns were legitimate and attributed the riot to some shadowy vendetta within the compound population.

The Cason riot may have had a cautionary effect on other mines looking to exploit their Chinese employees. Management was ordered to observe the original contract and the attorney-general issued a stinging rebuke. “I consider that your company are to blame for the recent regrettable occurrences at the Cason Mine…. The laborers appear to me to have been smarting under the unjust and tactless treatment which they received at the hands of officials…. They resented and I think they resented with reason the violation of their contracts of service.”62

Two other work-related protests resulted in police involvement and loss of life in 1907. The police were summoned to Wits Deep Mine in September to quell a protest by miners who were being forced to continue working after the expiry of their three-year contracts. The duplicity of FLD Superintendent Jamieson clearly emerges in this particular circumstance. The attorney-general had responded to a query from Jamieson, informing him that Chinese mineworkers were not obliged to work once their contracts expired. In August 1907 Jamieson circulated a confidential memorandum to his inspectors with explicit instructions regarding the handling of time expired laborers.

It would be inexpedient to send to the Depot in Durban large batches of coolies to await the steamer which is to convey them to China, and it would be undesirable to have them living in idleness in their compounds here. You should, therefore, whilst withholding this information from them, although imparting it to the Mine Managers in confidence (not the Compound staff) endeavour to induce all such to continue quietly to work…. Should your endeavours prove unsuccessful you will exercise

61 Ibid., enclosure, Superintendent FLD to Secretary to the Law Department, Pretoria, 20 September 1907.

62 Ibid., enclosure, Attorney-General to Secretary, East Rand Proprietary Mines, undated.
your discretion, and, if necessary, cause all leave permits to be stopped, and have them strictly confined to their Compounds.63

Later that same month Jamieson observed that mine management was prone to take advantage of the time between the end of laborers’ contracts and the availability of a ship to return them to China. “In sullen resentment at the prospect of being deprived of a skilled labour force [mine management] are, in many instances, seeking to grind the last ounce out of them before they leave.”64 Armed with the FLD’s unofficial approval, management at Wits Deep pressured their employees to work. When the laborers protested, the police were called in and fired several volleys. Seventeen Chinese were wounded before they retreated to their quarters.65 In October, laborers at New Modderfontein mine demonstrated against management’s attempts to force them to work on Sundays. Once again the police fired on the crowd, this time wounding 20 and killing one.66

The last large confrontation was also the bloodiest. In January 1909, management at the Village Deep Mine urged laborers to forgo the three-day holiday—Thursday 21 to Saturday 23—to which they were legally entitled during the Chinese New Year. The laborers interviewed at the inquest testified that they were ordered to work and given no choice. When they attempted to negotiate with the controller in the mess hall, a white gate guard by the name of Evans began to shout at them to go underground and hit several men with a stick. A number of laborers responded by yelling and breaking windows. The controller and Evans retreated and more laborers congregated in the mess hall, determined at this point not to work. The mine manager called the police, who attempted to disperse the laborers by turning fire hoses on them through the broken windows of the mess hall. The laborers responded by hurling debris at the police, who retreated to await reinforcements. Suitably reinforced, the police contingent advanced into the compound and opened fire. Seven men were killed and another ten wounded as the laborers scrambled for safety.67

63 CAD, LD 1487, AG 3169/07, Confidential: To All Inspectors, Superintendent Jamieson, 8th August 1907.
64 CAD, FLD 179, 36/32 Superintendent FLD responding to a Memorandum based on a confidential despatch from the Secretary of State addressed to His Excellency the Governor—Transvaal, 26 August 1907.
65 CAD, LD 1507, AG 3773/07, Acting Commissioner of Police to Secretary to the Law Department, 26 September 1907.
66 Ibid., 22 October 1907.
Purdon, who had succeeded Jamieson as FLD acting superintendent, submitted his private opinion in a hand-written confidential report.

Last year the Village Deep lost a lot of money through their mill and everything being stopped for the three New Year days. It is clear that notwithstanding my warning they were endeavouring this year to prevent the stopping by making the coolies work. They could have got [FLD Inspectors] Rushton or Sir John Walsham on the telephone but evidently preferred to call in the police to aid in coercing the coolies.... On the police action I think their position is absolutely accurately summed up by Johnston the manager to me after the Inquiry: "They completely lost their heads, blazed away with their guns." 68

Once again we have a situation in which management used coercion to squeeze extra labor from its Chinese employees. Resistance was met with deadly force and seven men lost their lives, including one whose contract had expired and was due to leave for China the next day.

Conclusion

The importance of the gold mines to the development of South Africa and the need for cheap labor to offset the low grade of ore united government and mine owners in a partnership to keep labor costs down. 69 As a result, mineworkers of all races engaged in labor disputes throughout the first half of the century. The politics of race prevented collaborative action and several strikes by white miners concerned with working conditions, wages, and a proposed relaxation of the color bar in the first two decades of the century culminated in a massive confrontation between armed strikers and government troops in 1922. White miners were initially forced back to work on the mine owners’ terms but government’s handling of the strike and the punishment of strikers was a major factor in its defeat in the next election. Black miners were unable to register their protest at the ballot box, but they could vote with their feet and desert the mines to seek work in the manufacturing, service, and agricultural sectors. Indentured Chinese laborers had no such options and management’s capacity to exploit the “coolies” had few constraints. Mineworkers were forced to accept a certain degree of oppression but continually tested the limits of management’s control in the first 18 months of the Chinese presence on the Rand. With the backing of state police and the judiciary, management forced workers to accept most policies that


directly affected production. However, resistance was not entirely futile. The Chinese workforce demonstrated an awareness of their contract conditions and a capability for coordinated action that caused management to make some concessions. Assaults on Chinese workers became less common and most mines adhered to the terms of the contract. These initial struggles led to an informal understanding regarding the minimum standards of acceptable employment and dramatically lowered the incidence of collective protest and violence after 1905.