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The union has reoriented towards entrepreneurship: neoliberal solidarities on Zambia's Copperbelt

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ABSTRACT
Extensive labour subcontracting has decimated workers' incomes and unions' power on Zambia's Copperbelt. In response, miners and workers with permanent contracts provide each other daily material support, and unions sell credit-based services to members, enabling their daily lives and subsidising subcontractors' unionisation. These interactions make Zambia's low-wage resource extraction viable. They can therefore be understood as 'neoliberal solidarities': struggles to refashion material and social relations in a more equitable way, which structurally support neoliberal political economies and projects of self-making. These solidarities entrench union–company interdependence, empowering unions to make more radical demands, yet making the realisation of these demands more difficult to imagine.

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Shimaini – literally miner in ciBemba – is both an occupation and a status on Zambia's Copperbelt. Mining was long a manual profession that offered middle-class wealth, imbued with substantial material aspiration and extensive responsibilities to kin and community (Ferguson 1999). For decades, a disconnect has been growing between *shimaini* personhood and the wages that financed this identity. Workers' salaries stagnated under nationalised mining, and wage and employment levels were slashed in the 1990s with mine privatisation (Fraser 2010). The increased use of labour subcontractors by Zambia's mines has exacerbated this rupture. By 2012 over half of mine-work was done by *kontraktas* – subcontracted miners (Lee 2018). These workers attempt to fulfil their *shimaini* personhood without employment security, while earning wages of a few dollars a day.

One such *shimaini* was George, a *kontrakta* who worked as a carpenter for Rig Resources in Kitwe's Mopani Copper Mine (MCM).[1] For five years he had earned 2200 ZMW a month (220 USD in 2018 – almost 400 USD in 2013). Most of this salary went to renting a house that he shared with his wife and child, one brother who also worked for Rig Resources and another brother who was seeking mine employment. George was the primary provider. However, his wife and brothers also contributed from their more irregular incomes. Further, while a larger household necessitated more expenses, it also ensured greater networks of material and social support. His wife could seek assistance from her family, while George and his brothers borrowed, lent, gifted and received from peers, invoking their shared *shimaini* status.

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Like many *shimaini*, but only a minority of *kontraktas*, George was unionised. His union solidarity was built through and interacted with his relationships with co-workers, family and kin. He was a member of the Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ), which had been Zambia's only pre-privatisation mining union. Like its *shimaini*, MUZ was devastated by privatisation, and subcontracting subsequently threatened its viability. MUZ and new, smaller mining unions, increasingly focussed on selling members services, enabling daily *shimaini* personhood, while financing union work. This focus was pragmatic, reflecting the need to fund unionism as members' salaries decreased. It was also ideological, combining a Copperbelt veneration of entrepreneurialism with unions' need to – despite worsening wages – conceptualise themselves as powerful and righteous. MUZ's finance manager explained: 'This current [MUZ] administration, they have reoriented towards entrepreneurship, so they are no longer dependent, they do not need [union] fees and they do not need the [mining] company'.

MUZ's businesses helped George to support his family. Most months, George borrowed money from Bayport, a high-interest payday loan provider co-founded by MUZ, and his wife paid a 40% markup to buy food on credit from MUZ's branch store. George received gifts and loans from union leaders, and from mutually supportive co-workers who were similarly dependent on their unions' debt-based products. When showing me his home, George proudly explained that 'Without MUZ, we would have to go to the village. None of this would be possible'. George was right; without the solidarity of his co-workers and his union, his limited fulfilment of *shimaini* aspirations would be untenable. Yet in enabling George to obtain credit, to live off 2200 ZMW (220 USD) and to support his brother's search for work, these solidarities facilitated mine subcontracting.

This article explores how Zambian mine subcontracting was shaped by the relationships and aspirations of miners and unionists. It conceptualises these subjectivities through *neoliberal solidarities*: struggles to refashion material and social relations in a more equitable manner, which structurally support neoliberal political economies and projects of self-making (see Featherstone 2012). Several theorists explore how neoliberal aspirations and socio-legal structures drive distinctions among workers, discourage unionisation and weaken workforce power (Hann and Parry 2018; Kasmir 2014). I argue instead that Zambia's workforce fragmentation was made possible through sentiments of solidarity and the union structures these sentiments inspired. Unemployed former miners, *kontraktas* and permanent workers shared the *shimaini* identity. By materially supporting their peers' projects of self-making, these *shimaini* inadvertently created a reserve labour pool and subsidised wages below the cost of living. Unionists' tactics reflected *shimaini* expectations, which combined with unions' predilection for narratives of strength and eventual triumph (Lazar 2017), inadvertently leading union leaders to facilitate extensive subcontracting.

Conceptualising neoliberal solidarities as a response to subcontracting and to labour's disempowerment provides pragmatic and theoretic insights into unionism's changing role in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Botiveau 2017; Rizzo 2016). Precarious labourers are expensive to represent and scholars debate how and even whether to unionise these workers (Crush et al. 2001; Mwanika and Spooner 2017). A controversial recommendation is union-run businesses, which can fund union activities but often extract their profits from members (Jauch 1998; McQuinn 2018). In Zambia, debt-based, member-servicing businesses facilitated miners' daily expenses and financed union representation. However, they also covertly subsidised the mining sector and assisted labour subcontractors. In discussing these business- and service-based responses to labour fragmentation, I highlight the limited, yet important, victories they enabled, while showing how these victories, couched in liberal economics, impeded more substantive change. Unions' narratives of moral righteousness and eventual victory (Keskula and Sanchez 2019; Lazar 2017), when combined with the lived experiences and structures of Zambian mining, encouraged imagining a powerful entrepreneurial union. This union's supposed strength was linked to its independence from employers, rather than to workers' skills and sacrifice. Interdependence between unions and management made Zambia's fragile, subcontractor-ridden mining industry possible. I argue that foregrounding this should have emboldened demands for substantive change.

My claims reflect 12 months of ethnography conducted between 2016 and 2019. During fieldwork, I lived primarily with a union branch official and studied in MUZ's Head Office. I interviewed over 120 unionists and assisted MUZ with surveying subcontracted miners. My interviews snowballed, while incorporating purposive criteria. Across each of Zambia's five mining unions, I interviewed the Union President and General Secretary (GS), at least three workplace-based union representatives, a shop steward and two ordinary members. Interviews branched out through these respondents' kin and co-workers. It was through following workers' and unionists' networks of support and obligation that I affirmed the solidarities of mining and unionism, and that I witnessed how these solidarities supported neoliberal aspirations and political economic structures.

Neoliberal solidarities

In Zambia, solidarities between workers – mediated by their unions – drew upon and reinforced neoliberal aspirations and political-legal structures. These solidarities were crucial for reproducing the labour force under conditions of extensive, exploitative subcontracting. Inspired by studies that present political economies as shaped by, while shaping, subjectivities (Bear 2015), I use the term 'neoliberal solidarities' to describe workers' and unions' attempts to challenge unjust employment relations and enable workers' personal moral projects – attempts that reinforced neoliberal social norms and economic practices. This analysis rejects the common presentation of service unionism as forced upon members by union leaders (Botiveau 2017; Durrenberger 2017; Zlonlniski 2019), and the depiction of solidarity among workers and between workers and their encompassing society as a panacea for combating unions' disempowerment (cf Fredericks 2018; Werbner 2014). Neoliberal solidarity is therefore empirically important to those studying unions' survival strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa (McQuinn 2018; Von Holdt and Webster 2005), and contributes theoretically to the analysis of capitalism's reproduction in environments where neoliberal values are pervasive, but where specific economic practices are fragile (Appel 2019; Blanchette 2020).

Neoliberalisms are sets of logics that valorise private capital and promote market-based public policy (Bear 2015). These are melded with local cultural histories and social norms, almost inevitably extracting wealth from poorer community members and frequently transferring resources from the Global South to the Global North (Rizzo 2016). Intra-national neoliberalisms typically involve socio-cultural narratives that justify unequitable wealth distributions (Shever 2012). These are combined with legal structures that privilege capital (Rizzo 2016). While the political economies that emerge valorise individuated wealth and minimal government, they are inevitably subsidised by 'socially thick' relationships. Kin-and-community networks recruit workers, enforce norms and underwrite business ventures.

Classic feminist scholarship observed that households have always been a background to labour (re)production and to motivating paid employment (Federici 1975). Intra-national neoliberalisms obfuscate these household and community networks by creating myths about individuated subjects operating in efficient markets, while relying on social networks and obligations to subsidise production and incentivise consumption (Prentice 2015).

Entrepreneurs are venerated within many Global South neoliberalisms; their success obfuscates their dependence on family and community. Trinidadian textile workers recast themselves as small businesspeople, working for a single employer and enlisting kin to produce garments and reproduce the domestic unit (Prentice 2015). In Kenya, 'Avon Ladies' sell make-up and hygiene products, primarily to family members and friends (Dolan and Rajak 2016). Their 'self-made' entrepreneurial projects are enabled through kinship and solidarity relations, which create networks of obligated buyers and provide unpaid labour. Such subjectivities co- and reproduce the political economy, ensuring the continued value of Global North intellectual property (Avon), while reducing labour costs and opening markets in the Global South. Several authors have explored similar economic practices on Zambia's Copperbelt, where entrepreneurship is often seen as necessary to fulfil household aspirations (Mususa 2012); and where 'moving' is personal growth, signified by material wealth (Haynes 2017). This article utilises these insights to explore aspirations among unionised industrial workers. These workers influenced their unions, which attempted to enable an individuated entrepreneurialism aimed at personal advancement, within a *shimaini* identity built through a socially unified mining workforce.

Key to many neoliberal political economies is labour fragmentation, where workers reproduce increasingly scarce and oppressive workplace conditions (Bolt 2015). In nations including Zambia this occurs through extensive subcontracting and casualisation. A near-consensus view is that subcontracting reduces a workforce's 'marketplace power' (the availability of skilled replacements) and 'workplace power' (militancy's effectiveness in impeding production) (Mwanika and Spooner 2017; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). Linking these structural factors to identity, subcontracting and casualisation also reduces a workforce's 'associational power' (strength gained through unity with one's co-workers) (Britwum 2018). Ongoing employees forge identities through comparison to temporary workers, who they believe threaten their incomes and social standing. Simultaneously, precarious employees adopt subjectivities that discourage alliance with permanent workers, often seeing themselves as entrepreneurs (Bear 2015; Prentice 2015).

Labour fragmentation, subcontracting and the outsourcing of workers have encouraged some academics to predict the end of traditional labour unionism (Durrenberger 2017; cf Miyamura 2016). Casual workers have been expelled from permanent workers' unions or have left them to form their own associations (Britwum 2018; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). Common stresses include casual workers perceiving the unions to prioritise permanent employees, and workers with secure contracts resenting the difficulties and costs of unionising insecure labour (Britwum 2018; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). Unions that attempt to meet permanent and subcontracted workers' needs often engage in anti-militant activities. Some trade whole-of-worksite unionisation for minimising strikes; others sell services to their members, often to financially support unionising subcontracted workers (McQuinn 2018). Union-run businesses are a divisive solution: they can exploit workers, indebt customers (often members) and entwine members' wealth with the profits of their employer (Jauch 1998; Lazar 2017). Critics depict service-and-business unionism to be shaped by union leaders rather than members, serving these leaders' interests but impeding structural change. Service unionism is also said to generate 'particularism' among workers – a failure to convert workers' personal struggles to broader aspirations for justice, dignity and the good life (Durrenberger 2017).

Where subcontracting, business unionism and neoliberal sociality are perceived to drive distinctions among workers, 'solidarity' is presented as their antonym. It is understood to turn worker subjectivities into a collective resource, which can be used to refashion material and social relations in more equitable ways (see Featherstone 2012; Fredericks 2018). Key to solidarity is the creation of class consciousness and links with workers' identities as community members, churchgoers and kinspeople (Werbner 2014). This solidarity is often understood to be enacted through militancy, with strikes creating associational power and encouraging alliances outside the union (Hickel 2015; Werbner 2014). Solidarity is also tied to narratives of union strength and eventual righteous victory. These narratives inspire members' and unionists' affective labour for their co-workers and their broader community (Keskula and Sanchez 2019).

I show, by contrast, that far from being antonyms, solidarity and neoliberalism were coproduced in Zambia's mines. Embedded in local cultural logics, Zambian solidarity incorporated the mutually obligating hierarchies of patron–clientism and kinship networks (Haynes 2017). It was also entwined with a Copperbelt neoliberalism where churches, families and even unions have long asserted the righteousness of entrepreneurship and individual advancement (Ferguson 1999; Mususa 2010). I contend that unionised workers and union officials rejected particularism, inspired themselves through narratives of union strength and righteousness and attempted to fashion more equitable relationships with capital. However, workers' projects of self-making and unions' narratives of success and organising tactics reflected and reproduced neoliberal social norms and political economies. I show that as workers enacted (and enabled peers') entrepreneurial identities, they subsidised a precarious workforce that reduced their bargaining power. Simultaneously, their unions aspired to refashion unjust relationships through developing businesses that would make them independent of, and equal to, mines and subcontractors.

Copperbelt neoliberalism and shimaini solidarity

Zambian neoliberalism has been shaped by one of the world's most extensive structural adjustment projects (see Fraser 2010), overlaid on cultural norms where individuated wealth has long been filtered through mutually obligating hierarchical relationships. Social and economic change has been most drastic on the Copperbelt, where urbanised, formerly permanently employed miners have experienced ongoing lay-offs, wage reduction and ever worsening economic inequality (Fraser 2010). As Copperbelt residents attempted to fulfil their personal and communal aspirations, they increasingly venerated an individuated, entrepreneurial identity (Mususa 2012). I show that for permanent and subcontracted miners, this identity was entwined with, and subsidised by, support from kin and co-workers. It was this solidarity, rather than distinctions among workers, that weakened miners' bargaining power.

All Zambians, but particularly Copperbelt residents, experienced wage decline after the nation's independence. Having entered the 1970s among Africa's wealthiest workers, Zambians' household wealth grew below living costs for over two decades (Ferguson 1999).

Decline became crisis with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-enforced privatisation of Zambia's assets, including the 1997 sale of Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM), a moment typically identified as beginning Zambia's neoliberal era (Fraser 2010). In 1994 there were 60,000 permanent pensionable miners in Zambia, but by 2000, the total mine workforce was approximately 22,000 (Uzar 2017). Privatisation precipitated occasional mine closures, waves of lay-offs and near-continuous pro-market reforms. Over a 10-year period, sympathy strikes were outlawed, multi-unionism was introduced and collective bargaining shifted from an industry to an enterprise level (Lee 2017). Inequality and poverty exploded. Access to company resources created profitable arbitrage opportunities, workers' salaries varied greatly across employers and unemployment encouraged petty entrepreneurship (Mususa 2012).

Perhaps the most devastating change to the lives of Copperbelt miners has been the expansion of subcontracting (Fraser 2010). By 2018 there were 74,000 Zambian miners, but only 28,000 had permanent employment. Previously a mine's workforce would rotate among working in tunnels, digging shafts, constructing scaffolding and extracting copper. Now, each task in each shaft is assigned to a discrete contract. This has enabled rolling lay-offs and re-hirings. Between 2016 and 2018, total mine employment rose, yet 10,000 Zambian miners were retrenched, 1700 workers were placed on forced leave and subcontracting companies shut down almost weekly. In 2017 miners employed directly by MCM earned 3630 ZMW a month, less in dollar-denominated salaries than in 2012, and some *kontraktas* earned as little as 650 ZMW a month.

Subcontracting reduced miners' workplace and marketplace power, suppressing wages. Copper mining's high capital-to-labour ratio and shut-down costs traditionally made militancy effective (Lee 2018). However, while *kontraktas* could rarely stop production themselves, they curtailed permanent miners' ability to strike. Mining also requires extensive training, making employees difficult to replace (Lee 2018). Yet Copperbelt townships were filled with skilled, experienced, un- or under-employed miners, who subcontractors could hire and deploy instantly. While permanent miners had greater workplace and marketplace power, subcontracting decreased promotion opportunities, discouraging assertiveness.[2]

The worsening wages of a neoliberal labour market interacted with a Zambian sociality built through hierarchical material differentiation. Rural sociality is enacted through patron–clientism and, all over Zambia, material wealth – everything from cookware to satellite dishes – entwines economic and social position (Haynes 2017). Individuated prosperity evidences personal righteousness, but generates redistributive obligations to kin and community (Englund 2018). A 'developed' Zambia will not necessarily be one where everyone is rich, but one in which those with wealth are numerous enough to become benefactors to the poor (Haynes 2017).

Copperbelt residents link social differentiation to privatisation, mine closure and the unstable employment environment. Even before privatisation the region's social reproduction necessitated resource-circulating relationships with kin, built through both rural and cosmopolitan identities (Ferguson 1999). Responding to growing demands in their homes and from rural relatives, Copperbelt residents evaluate who is 'kulibonesha ta', performing success through the ownership of expensive goods, often linked to entrepreneurship (Mususa 2012). Citizens consider whose responses to the increasing uncertainty of Copperbelt life have enabled them to 'do well', 'do ok' or 'get by'. A key Copperbelt concept is 'moving':

obtaining durable commodities, privately schooling children and assisting rural kin (Haynes 2017). 'Moving' links a family's economic status to hard work, judicious opportunism and supportive relationships with relatives and community.

Shimaini levels, solidarity and extractive economics

For the *shimaini* that I studied, 'moving' was intimately tied to reaching or maintaining one's social 'levels'. Copperbelt residents cared deeply about their *amalevels* – the hierarchical societal strata on which a person 'belonged'. *Amalevels* convolved religious righteousness, education and material consumption. Suits and imported scotch were 'manager level', home-brewed spirits and sandals were 'village level'. Both the Seventh Day Adventist Church and its nearest computer store displayed posters reading '2018: Year of Changing Levels'. Like 'moving', levels determined what material affluence a person 'should' have, but also the obligations that came with this; and like moving, elevating or even maintaining one's levels increasingly necessitated entrepreneurship. Ongoing miners, *kontraktas* and retrenched workers all desired to be '*shimaini* level'. They would assert that 'we miners, we are supposed to be the middle class' and claim that it was miners' responsibility to ensure their children received private education. Juxtaposed against the support they gave rural relatives, miners would argue that a *shimaini* home must 'look like a townhouse, not a village', with internal walls, electricity and whitegoods. Maintaining *shimaini* status required new forms of solidarity among miners, *kontraktas*, families and kin. They offered each other loans, supported each other's micro-enterprises and provided accommodation. Counterintuitively, these relationships subsidised copper extraction and reduced miners' bargaining power.

As subcontracting reduced all miners' structural power and therefore their incomes, permanent workers and *kontraktas* increasingly utilised kin-and-community support to finance their *shimaini* identities. This process entrenched the legitimacy of *shimaini* aspirations, while further weakening miners' bargaining power. This claim builds upon works that explore how workplace identity and kinship can support neoliberal structures (Shever 2012); and upon studies that describe family and sociality complicating (and rectifying) divisions created through labour fragmentation (Sanchez 2016). It therefore contrasts with research calling for investigations of how political and social processes drive distinctions among workers and with works exploring how these distinctions reduce employees' structural power (Bolt 2015; Kasmir 2014). On the Copperbelt, solidarities, rather than divisions, disempowered miners and facilitated subcontracting.

At the worksite, permanent employees and *kontraktas* experienced labour differentiation and the weakening of workforce power it entailed. Distinction was optically obvious; under ZCCM miners wore standardised equipment; now reputable subcontractors provided their own uniforms, while smaller operations had their workers bring high-vis work-wear from home (see Lee 2018; Uzar 2017). This visually represented unequitable salaries. Employees performing the same task for different contractors received vastly different wages. Aaron, a shaft blaster for Reliant Mining at MCM earned 1400 ZMW a month. He explained:

> Among us operators, you will find four or five salaries, with a huge difference … where the colleague that I'm working with in the same job … but I find that he is getting one-hundred-percent-plus my salary, so that hurts me.

Permanent miners and *kontraktas* knew that subcontracting reduced their bargaining power. Directly referencing his limited marketplace power, Matthews a young electrician who had been selected for a prestigious Mopani training programme, recalled his supervisor ordering him to turn on electrical cables with a higher voltage than he was qualified for. Matthews had initially refused and his supervisor then assigned him mundane tasks until Matthews begged this supervisor's forgiveness. Matthews explained that as Morganite's electricians were in his shaft, he didn't want to be known for 'making noise' that could limit his career. Reducing miners' workplace power, permanent mine workers and *kontraktas* diminished each other's ability to impede production. At Non-Ferrous Africa Mining Corporation Chambishi, a construction company with fewer than 100 employees struck for five days. They could not slow production and returned to work without improving their 1200 ZMW (120 USD) monthly salary. In October 2017, MCM stood down their permanent workforce to pressure the national government. *Kontraktas* were redirected from mining to perform MCM's essential maintenance. Tensions occasionally boiled over into angry accusations that *kontraktas* were not *shimaini*, or that permanent workers had bribed human resources (HR) to obtain their contracts.

However, outside the workplace, permanent miners, *kontraktas* and the unemployed affirmed a shared *shimaini* identity that superseded employment relations in terms of self-understanding. Previous studies found little differentiation between subcontractor and miners' worker identities (Lee 2018; Uzar 2017). There was significant movement between these categories. Most *kontraktas* were retrenched permanent workers, many *shimaini* had initially been employed by subcontractors, and miners moved to contractors to either seek promotion or receive a severance package, which was used to pay down debt or start a business. *Shimaini* would observe that 'tomorrow that could be me' when describing a *kontrakta* who had found secure work or a permanent miner who had been laid off.

Almost every household and extended family, like George's, contained a combination of permanent, subcontracted and unemployed Copperbelt residents, all of whom were *shimaini*. While permanent miners were often better paid, almost no one could maintain *shimaini* levels on a *shimaini* salary. Households were therefore embedded in webs of debt and mutual support that drew in each resident, their family and their peers. *Shimaini* lent each other money, housed retrenched miners and offered *kontraktas* discount accommodation. However, they also borrowed from these *kontraktas*' termination packages, received food from their rural kin and utilised their labour, social networks and credit ratings. This sharing was not necessarily harmonious. A permanent miner I befriended frequently muttered that his semi-employed younger brother (a blaster) must be drinking heavily, as he did not contribute to the household. Another miner often quarrelled with his wife, who demanded that they pay school fees for the children of her unemployed brother. Yet resource sharing, as well as the claims, counterclaims and accusations that flowed from it, was embedded in the *shimaini* identity and in the belief that *kontraktas* and their families deserved '*shimaini* levels'.

For *kontraktas* and most permanent workers, being *shimaini*, and even Copperbelt residency, required secondary income. Entrepreneurial employment infiltrated *shimaini* subjectivity. Miners were constantly discussing how to achieve 'empowerment'; a combination of business training and soft loans, used to generate additional income. Almost every miner desired 'empowerment'. Matthews had a good salary, yet he worried he and his wife were not empowered and would not be able to achieve their 'levels'. Matthews claimed: 'I now know that I should be mining and doing something [additional employment], and my wife should also be doing something'. *Shimaini* personhood encouraged searching for entrepreneurial empowerment. It also dictated familial responsibilities, which consumed nearly half of Matthews' salary, and obligations to co-workers. Matthews allowed a *kontrakta* to live with them and sought-out peers' micro-enterprises.

While framed as empowerment, *shimaini* businesses primarily diffused the costs of unemployment and underpayment through miners' social networks. Kanda was a retrenched MCM welder, who worked semi-regularly with several subcontractors. He 'empowered' himself through welding the gates of his former co-workers' homes, at prices determined through their relationship and their immediate financial capacity. Kanda negotiated reduced rent from his landlord (another miner) and a payment plan at his daughters' fee-charging school. In private, permanent employees were despondent about their attempts to remain *shimaini*, often personalising failure while financially supporting kin and co-workers' aspirations. Martin, an electrician at MCM, explained:

> I am paying for my wife's sister to go to university, for my brother to go to teachers' college and am trying to find something to help him [fees for his child's private preschool]. I am sacrificing my future for theirs, I can say that my chances have already finished.

On his rest days, Martin installed electricity in miners' houses, reducing the cost of electrification while topping up his salary.

Permanent miners, *kontraktas* and their families also combined their limited resources through various solidarity structures. Ongoing miners and *kontraktas* came together to form the Miners for Diversification Initiative. This used union loans to form farming collectives. These would 'empower miners through diversification into agriculture' and 'create an income B, for when miners could not rely on income A [Mining]'. Almost every social institution, from scout groups to churches to football clubs, facilitated credit-and-savings associations, similar to those offered by the unions (see Haynes 2017).

Solidarity among Matthews, Martin, Kanda and their families discouraged questioning 'levels' and 'empowerment'. It also subsidised the Copperbelt's subcontracting system and weakened miners' bargaining power. Matthews and Martin had paid Kanda to fix their gates and were allowing former co-workers to stay with them for inconsequential rent. Their additional jobs, combined with loans and assistance from family, complemented professional wages below the cost of living. Their support of *kontraktas* and the unemployed allowed these workers to live in Kitwe, creating a labour reserve that impeded militancy and suppressed wages. Scholars have explored how the individuating aspects of neoliberal subjectivity enable labour fragmentation and impede solidarity (Kasmir 2014; Prentice 2015). In contrast, for Zambian miners, exploitative subcontracting was rendered possible through solidarity: the labour and material resources workers shared; their support of their co-workers' entrepreneurial projects; and the collective institutions – from savings clubs to unions – that they shaped under neoliberal hegemony.

Neoliberal unionism as a solidarity structure

Zambian union solidarity entwined the aspirations of unionised miners with the structural needs of unions and the dictates of Zambia's labour economy. Unions attempted to contest the unjust material and social relations between workers, subcontractors and mining companies. However, they fought for visions of dignity and the good life inspired by *shimaini* subjectivities and kinship and built within the legal and economic structures of the Copperbelt. While all projects of social change somewhat reflect social, cultural and political positionality, unions are specifically challenged by their need to forge narratives of success (Keskula and Sanchez 2019). Discourses of strength, righteousness and victory motivate union members and leaders (Werbner 2014). For Zambian unionists this created incongruity: embedded in miners' communities and families, unionists experienced the pain of workers' failing projects of self-making; yet they self-motivated through conceptualising these workers' union as powerful. Unionists were therefore encouraged to focus on improvements in workers' lives, within the unalterable 'reality' of the Copperbelt labour system, and to see both miners and the unions as entrepreneurial.

This section explores how union practices were influenced by the relationships between and subject-making of unionists and members. It therefore builds upon literature exploring how workers' subjectivities, and their interdependence with management, maintain fragile, yet exploitative, economic regimes (see Blanchette 2020). This analysis departs from many studies of unionism, which downplay the role of cultural norms and of workers' expectations in shaping union tactics. Instead, such works present unions as structures that either guide members' struggles or use service provisioning to discourage militancy (Botiveau 2017; Fredericks 2018; Rizzo 2016). Ethnographies depicting the latter often present leaders as solely responsible for union tactics (Zlonlniski 2019). They rarely consider how these leaders' decisions are shaped by members' culturally embedded personhoods, in this case the entitlements of *amalevels* and the obligations of being *shimaini*. I argue instead that in Zambia, miners and unionists engaged in social and economic practices that allowed a limited, precarious achievement of a *shimaini* identity, funded unionism and enabled narratives of union victory. Crucial to this was unions' financial services. These assisted with members' projects of entrepreneurial self-making; paid for the recruiting and advocacy procedures of the union; and, union leaders claimed, offered eventual independence from the mining companies. Unionists saw themselves as enabling social justice and personal dignity through allowing workers to become independent of their employers, obscuring the way workers' sacrifice and self-making made the industry possible.

Zambia's mining unions have long been criticised for rarely engaging in industrial action (Larmer 2007). Unionist leaders' appetite and resources for militancy have been further damaged by the regular bankrupting of subcontractors, irregular closure of mines, the weakening of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)[3] and most importantly by subcontracting and multi-unionism. On the eve of privatisation, MUZ had 56,482 members, all permanent pensionable workers (Uzar 2017). In 2018, just under 30,000 miners were unionised across five unions. In 1994, most MUZ branches had thousands of members. In 2018 MUZ's 15,652 members were scattered across 51 branches, 38 of which represented subcontractors. Only two branches had over 1000 members; 11 branches had under 100. MUZ's smallest branch was Ndola Lime, with 29 unionised workers. A combination of lower membership contributions, poor investments and the cost of (re)unionising subcontracted miners led to creditors seizing MUZ's Head Office in 2006. The National Union of Mine and Allied Workers (NUMAW) considered bankruptcy in 2016, and all mining unions were heavily in debt.

The roles of union leaders, organisers and branch executives has been substantively changed by unions' disempowerment. Branch executives and recruiters increasingly focussed on service provision. Union Head Office leaders challenged subcontractors, while self-conceptualising as businessmen and working with mine management. Before privatisation, workplace-based, volunteer six-member union branch executives had represented thousands of miners. By 2018 Branch Chairmen at worksites like Ndola Lime represented a handful of easily fireable workers, and were precariously employed Zambians themselves. While Zambians have the right to union representation if 25 employees sign a petition, the pre-privatisation mining sector was fully unionised. However, by 2015, 85% of MCM's permanent workforce were union members, but only 17% of subcontracted employees (Uzar 2017). The unions' professional organisers helped *kontraktas* to unionise, or to re-join after being retrenched and rehired. Branch executives and organisers funded union work and facilitated daily, credit-based assistance. This encouraged miners to use union resources to improve their own lives.

Union organisers and branch executives

Professional organisers were engaged in a constant, and expensive, struggle to unionise (and re-unionise) *kontraktas*. Organisers were typically high-school-educated former miners, or miners' relatives, and much of their work involved socialising with mine workers and learning which subcontractors were un-unionised. While seeking signatures from subcontractors' employees, Lloyd, a union organiser, would camp outside worksites, loiter at bus stops and arrive at workers' homes during dinner. In March 2018, when Lloyd had the signatures of 25 of the 50 employees at Jan's Construction (a rigging company), he organised an appointment with Jan's management. Jan's informed him that they had fired seven of the workers who had signed the unionisation request, taking the number of valid signatures below 25. MUZ engaged a lawyer to petition Jan's, who then quickly signed the recognition agreement. However, in February 2019, Jan's created a new, identical company instead of renewing its workers' contracts.

Lloyd was proud of MUZ's service-based approach. He had the MUZ Maize Mill insignia painted on his 4WD, so that miners could see that MUZ was both a union and a business. He was frustrated when smaller unions claimed that they would achieve better salary rises than MUZ, a promise he felt did not reflect the 'realties' of the Copperbelt. Lloyd explained:

> Most of the time they [NUMAW] say 'MUZ has failed to negotiate for you, but us, we will get what you want'… you have to convince someone based on the truth and on what is existing … I say to them, join us because the benefits are immense, we will be having a milling plant, we will be producing mealie-meal and that mealie-meal be sold to you at a subsidised price. We are being real … that is existing.

Lloyd's focus on what was 'real' and 'existing' appealed to many miners. It reflected their ongoing cynicism about unions' ability to improve wages and echoed their entrepreneurial aspirations (see Lee 2017).

Union branch executives assisted members through facilitating loans, pensions and secondary incomes. They were waged miners themselves who experienced unions' disempowerment, yet they motivated themselves and their co-workers by attempting to demonstrate that unionism made workers' lives better.[4] Combining their unionist and *shimaini* identities, branch executives created financial schemes, which linked members' existing social networks and norms to their union's resources. Workers depended upon union credit and its profits subsidised union work.

Branches worked with company HR to facilitate major financial services. These replaced the 'fixed benefit' plans miners held before privatisation. At Chambishi Copper Smelter (CCS), employees and management each made pre-tax contributions of 5% of the worker's wage to the Mkuba Pension Fund. Mopani Nkana was creating a partnership with M-Life Insurance, where miners would make monthly contributions of 60 ZMW for funeral insurance and savings for children's tertiary education. The union received significant service fees from both companies. After seeing members participate in Nkana Football Club's savings scheme, the Mopani union branch executives plotted to use their access to payroll to undercut the football club. Mirroring *shimaini* entrepreneurship, branches 'empowered' members to obtain secondary income using their services. Nelly, one of MUZ's few female branch secretaries, encouraged miners' wives to buy goods on credit at union stores and then resell them at a markup.

Branch executives' businesses were symbiotic with workers' entrepreneurial subjectivity and their perceived personal responsibility for their economic circumstances. When describing a union–mine partnership, a branch chairman explained:

> This is all the mines can do for us, so it is up to us miners to change how will live, the mines can give us options, they can help us buy funeral insurance, and education insurance, but they cannot pay for our lives and families.

Service provisioning offered a way to respond to workers' demands, while enabling workers to (though debt) subsidise their own lower wages. It also encouraged seeing miners and employers as ideally independent of each other, a narrative that appealed to Union Head Office leaders, who were typically businesspeople themselves and were concerned about mine closure and workforce mechanisation.

Head Office

Branch executives' disempowerment has centralised responsibility in union head offices. 'Head Office' for each of Zambia's mining unions includes a 10-member national executive and, at MUZ, a professional staff of tertiary-educated researchers and business managers. The salaried employees were well paid and their office employment, union cars and expense accounts affirmed their professional status. Becoming a union leader necessitated wealth (to obtain support in union elections). Most executives were already successful entrepreneurs and some former Head Office leaders had become government ministers. Union head office executives and staff were therefore 'manager level' or 'businessman level' rather than *shimaini* level, and their solidarity with miners incorporated obligations of unequal interdependence. The neoliberal political project that union leaders enacted combined workers' kin-like relationships with these leaders' increasing role as businesspeople, and with the decline of Copperbelt livelihoods. In this 'solidarity' workers could fulfil their responsibilities to family, and union leaders could meet their obligations to workers and challenge the most exploitative subcontractors, without impeding mines' viability and while accepting the 'reality' of labour flexibility and mechanisation.

Shimaini ambitions were embodied by the Head Office representatives. Wealthy, well dressed and focussed on making money for their union, Head Office staff's signification of neoliberal success led to both praise and backbiting. Workers complemented the 'muscle' of the Head Office staff, signified by their generous gifting and conspicuous consumption. When other miners complained about Head Office buying 4WDs, paying themselves large per diems or finding jobs for their relatives, union organisers would explain that this was a function of leaders' 'levels', and that and the worker should focus on raising their own levels, instead of 'jealousy'. Unionism was organised through hierarchical structures of Copperbelt familial interdependence. Head Office staff and representatives were the 'household heads' of the mining 'family'. In the same way that a miner was a higher 'level' than their rural kin, union leaders were higher again, which conferred prestige and came with significant kinship responsibilities. Head Office executives' passion for union-run businesses, their sympathy for company management and their belief in market-based solutions incorporated their experiences as successful businesspeople in Zambia's brutal markets and the responsibilities of their station.

Being 'management level' and the head of the mineworkers' 'family' built upon *shimaini* obligations and came with unending responsibilities to miners and Copperbelt residents. Leaders met a constant stream of members, who needed help fulfilling their projects of *shimaini* self-making. Members would queue for hours at union leaders' offices to beg for financial assistance or help finding work. While leaders frequently gave from their own wealth, they preferred to connect workers to union businesses. MUZ's treasurer would call Bayport and organise a loan; the finance manager would help a member draw from their union-facilitated pension or would direct them to their branch store, where they could buy essentials on credit. These processes financed the unions, but they manifested as moral responsibilities. When MUZ's finance manager could not source mealie-meal for every branch store, the research manager berated him, shouting 'then you must say, I have failed our members!' Confrontations over union business were frequent and personal, with everyone in Head Office having friends and family who needed credit-based assistance.

When they were not personally assisting members and Copperbelt residents, Head Office representatives performed their official roles, advocating to the government and companies on miners' behalf. Being 'management level' allowed union leaders to meet with mine HR at prestigious restaurants, where they would 'sort out problems of *kontraktas*'. Union leaders were attractive to politicians for their ability to deliver a voting bloc, which they evidenced through wealth and spending on overt patronage. Their success often demonstrated the frailty of subcontracting companies. Having obtained their contracts by promising to perform tasks below costs, many subcontractors were financially stretched and had poor relationships with mines' HR. Union leaders achieved concessions for subcontractors' employees by threatening legal action and invoking their connections with mine management. Similarly, in response to consistent shut-downs and lay-offs, Head Office successfully lobbied the government for ex gratia payments of 18,000 ZMW (1800 USD) for each of 4300 Mopani employees who were retrenched between 2016 and 2018, and often extracted small payments from 'bankrupt' subcontractors.

Union Head Office leaders were entrepreneurs, who were 'management level', and shared HR's concerns about mine closure. They were also *shimaini*, and as the head of the miners' 'family', they attempted to both alleviate miners' daily suffering and refashion unjust power relations that harmed miners and Copperbelt residents. Head Office staff therefore attempted to improve workers' status and bargaining position without disadvantaging their employers.

Nyrongo, the United Mineworkers Union of Zambia GS, explained a counterintuitive project that married union leaders' experience as businesspeople with *shimaini* solidarity and familial hierarchical interdependence. He described his primary responsibility as

> To sustain operations. [To tell workers] You don't kill the goose that gives you the golden egg, because tomorrow there will be no eggs … you take care of the goose by supporting the goals, ideas, the vision of the company.

He explained how he saw unionism empowering members:

> You as a union you have to give services to the member. For example … we have established a pension scheme …, when an employee is fired … he will get a pension package …. In an event where an employee is injured at work … as a union you need to come in.

This was not a pure service project. Rather, embedded within Nyrongo's concerns was the neoliberal solidarity that guided the union Head Office staff. To renegotiate the balance of power between workers and investors as Copperbelt livelihoods worsened, union leaders aspired to use business to become like the investors they were negotiating with, and to obtain independence from them.

Union Head Office projects accepted the 'reality' of the mining industry. When focussing on what was 'real' and 'existing', union leaders depicted a future where all miners would be subcontracted or replaced through mechanisation but would still be *shimaini* and unionists. At this time, the union-as-business could still advocate for, and support, *shimaini*. MUZ's GS explained to workers:

> Who here is driver? [MCM has] a 40-tonne truck, so all of you truck drivers, soon there will only be one of you. This is the reality ….
>
> Who here is from KCM [Konkola Copper Mine]? … soon you will be working for a sub-contractor and will have no pension. So this is the reality as well.
>
> This is why we are building the milling plant …. The union must become financially strong; it must become independent of the companies.

This narrative hid the role of retrenchment and re-hiring practices in creating an economy where more Zambians than ever worked in mining, yet where their bargaining power consistently deteriorated. It also obfuscated the profits of many of the major mining companies (but rarely of labour subcontractors – see Uzar 2017). It was, however, a solidarity built through workers' and unionists' cultural norms and aspirations for the good life, rather than merely dictated by Head Office. To be *shimaini* and a unionist mean to be involved in the hierarchical mutual obligation of 'levels', and often to have entrepreneurial aspirations. These norms encouraged sympathy for market-based solutions and 'the realities' of the Copperbelt. Unions' need to create narratives of strength within Copperbelt hegemony influenced this solidarity. This disguised the role of miners' debt and social support in enabling both union-run businesses and workers' low wages – a situation of grave exploitation but one that held the potential for demanding radical change.

Limited victories, debt and union–company interdependence

Unions' centralisation of power and their growing businesses had some positive impacts for workers, especially for unionised *kontraktas*. Unions slightly improved wages and working conditions, and their cash gifts and credit were crucial to Copperbelt life. Union work manifested through a solidarity that was consistent with *shimaini* social norms, yet naturalised the 'reality' of an exploitative labour system. The union was both a family that fought against employment injustices and an entrepreneur that was (supposedly) growing independent of mining companies. As many scholars see subcontractors as un-unionisable and business-based unionism as cowardly, these achievements are laudable (Crush et al. 2001; Mwanika and Spooner 2017; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). Such scholars often present the reproduction of labour under increasingly insecure and oppressive conditions as an inevitable result of an ever more powerful international capitalism. Exploring how labour subcontracting interacted with union-facilitated services shows the inverse: a tenuous political-economic system that was only viable through the sacrifices of unionists, miners and their families, facilitated through union–management interdependence. In this final section, I argue that the problem with Zambian business unionism was not that it dampened solidarity, but that its small, day-to-day victories discouraged more radical action (Appel 2019). This opens space for considering how, if workers' solidarities make the tenuous capitalism found in Zambia's mining industry possible, union–company interdependence could be redeployed to demand structural change, while maintaining the narratives of strength that shape unionism.

In describing unions' strength, miners and unionists linked kinship to entrepreneurial independence. Entwined with the solidarities between people like Matthews, George and Kanda, unionists depicted *shimaini* as kin and attributed union victories to familial unity. When an Opermin mine loader collapsed in an MCM shaft, killing three unionised workers, MUZ quickly mobilised. A subcontracted chairman proudly exclaimed:

> [Union Head Office leaders] have been at all three funeral homes, and have been feeding the families for three days. Because the union is a family, because the mine is a family and these men are breadwinners. So the union is telling management that they must take [employ] people from the families of men who have died, so that their families will suffer less.

Unionised *kontraktas* achieved better wages and conditions than the un-unionised. They received approximately one-and-a-half times the incomes of their un-unionised peers, and almost all unionised *kontraktas* had appropriate safety gear. They were less likely to be involved in workplace accidents and received more compensation when injured. In contrast to MUZ's response to Opermin, when an un-unionised *kontrakta* had his eye gouged out by a crane's hook, the subcontractor, but not Mopani's mine shaft, temporarily shut down. His employer offered little compensation, instead falsely claiming that paying more could bankrupt them.

Workers linked their debt relations to the narrative that their union was becoming a powerful entrepreneur. Miners claimed that union leaders fought harder to prevent the retrenchment of debt-burdened miners, due to their unions' role in facilitating these loans and its financial responsibility for retrenched debtors. They also argued that MUZ's maize-mill, 4WDs and even union leaders' suits (all funded through union dues and miners' debts) enabled the union to speak to management 'eye to eye, as equals'. Many miners also hoped that their union would expand its businesses and then hire them, positing unions as an exemplar of a (somewhat) virtuous, entrepreneurial capitalism. While in other nations union-run businesses have been used to build strike funds, MUZ instead aimed to produce wealthy union-owned companies.

Rather than powerful, entrepreneurial unions combating equally powerful subcontractors, union–company interdependence facilitated subcontracting's extremities. Interdependence between unions and company management shaped Zambia's mining economy, yet was built upon members' debt. Impeded by prohibitive interest rates and a consistently deflating currency, the unions' only successful businesses sold transport to employers and credit-based services to members. Because HR gave the unions access to members' payrolls, they could offer branch stores, payday loans, and insurance at lower interest rates than other private providers, with instant deductions from members' pay packets reducing defaults. Demand for these loans was immense, with almost all miners having a consumption loan and still needing additional credit (Musonda 2021). Through controlling miners' debt, the unions reduced the minimum salary needed to live in Kitwe.

In the context of the abysmally low salaries that subcontractors paid, management used union-facilitated credit to ensure that subcontracted miners attended work. Before MUZ offered loans at KCM, *kontraktas*' debt-induced absenteeism was so rampant that the company coordinated monthly 'men at rest' days, which workers used to find credit (Lee 2017). CCS paid lower wages than KCM, and many workers received almost no monthly salary after repaying banks and other credit providers. However, perfect work attendance was a requirement to use CCS's union branch store or to access its loans scheme, making absenteeism rarer.

Workers' reliance on short-term credit was underwritten by unions' pensions and savings plans. These encouraged even the most indebted *shimaini* to have some savings. Miners' savings could be claimed by creditors, allowing unions, employers and (sometimes) banks to continue lending to workers. This credit-based capital then flowed through Kitwe, financing Martin's mortgage, and the short-term loans that kept Matthews and his under-employed housemate in the labour market.

The symbiotic relationship between unions and management guided the limited gains *kontraktas* received though unionisation. Facilitating loans necessitated that management work with unions. This gave organisers and leaders opportunities to confront HR if a subcontractor delayed unionisation or if a unionised subcontractor failed to provide protective equipment or engaged in (extremely) unsafe practices. Unions' day-to-day victories, built upon cooperation with management, and tied to debt-based entrepreneurialism, reduced the space for more radical change. These practices were often embedded in narratives that depicted a powerful, righteous union, using market finance to fight against powerful, amoral subcontractors. Yet in Zambia, near-bankrupt unions worked with members and myriad, constantly closing and reopening contracting companies to enable a market that primarily enriched mining houses. Union–management mutual dependence, which ensured workplace attendance and subsidised the labour market, should have empowered unionists to make more radical claims – for example, threatening to cease running union stores if mines neither provided drastic wage increases nor reduced exploitative subcontracting. Narratives of union strength could have foregrounded how workers' expertise and sacrifice made the industry possible, describing and questioning this interdependence.

Conclusion

In Zambia, neoliberal solidarities led to workers, often through their unions, subsidising a fragile, subcontractor-ridden economy. These solidarities enabled limited, specific improvements in the wages and conditions of subcontracted workers. Financial services provided miners the credit to meet their immediate needs, while relationships between union leaders and mine HR curbed subcontractors' most egregious behaviour. These small, daily victories, embedded in narratives of economic righteousness and entrepreneurial independence, obfuscated an interdependence between employers and unions, which should have inspired greater union claims. Appreciating this tension is important for those interested in unions' tactical responses to increased precarity in Zambia and in Sub-Saharan Africa more generally (see McQuinn 2018; Mwanika and Spooner 2017; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). More theoretically, foregrounding the roles of solidarity in making fragile labour economies viable challenges narratives that present labour fragmentation as caused by powerful, coherent capitalist projects, and which proscribe equally coherent union action as the only way to resist them (Durrenberger 2017; Zlonlniski 2019). I have shown that in Zambia, the neoliberal labour system was simultaneously hegemonic and fragile. Narratives of union strength could therefore be reshaped by highlighting that mine subcontracting was only possible through the social knowledge, energy and resources of workers and unionists.

This article builds upon, while diverging from, analysis that argues neoliberal subjectivities prevent workers from finding common cause (Kasmir 2014), and that families subsidise 'worker' identities and their encompassing economies (Shever 2012). In contrast, I have shown that miners attempted to enable their co-workers' projects of self-making and in doing so, subsidised employers and weakened workers' bargaining power. This subsidisation occurred through a solidarity that was both political and personal: workers provided immediate material assistance to their peers, while their unions attempted to shift the balance of power between miners and employers (Featherstone 2012). This solidarity was also neoliberal – miners were motivated by their attempts to enable their own and other miners' entrepreneurial success, to empower them and to reach their 'levels'; and union Head Office staff believed that they could best renegotiate the relationship between workers and management by becoming powerful business leaders themselves, a process that presented Zambia's labour laws as 'reality'.

Intrapersonal and communal support inadvertently reinforced and subsidised Zambia's neoliberal mining economy. Exacerbating this for unions was their reliance on narratives of strength and teleological paths to triumph (Keskula and Sanchez 2019). This predisposed them to support workers' living costs and to present worsening labour conditions as embedded in an unalterable 'reality'. If believing the union is strong is necessary for union action, this discourages acknowledging that Global South unions increasingly serve as triage in subcontracting-and-outsourcing systems designed to extract value from the poorest workers and their communities. In Zambia, intra-dependence with the mining companies gave unions the power to demand more radical change. However, demanding change required an acknowledgement that the current industrial relations system was harming unionists and miners – a truth obfuscated by union discourses of strength and workers' attempts to maintain their *shimaini* identity.

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Notes

1. To prevent identification and recrimination, miners, junior unionists and small contractors have been anonymised or given pseudonyms (Jan's Construction is the sole company with a pseudonym). However, union leaders and larger mining companies have not. These are public figures and institutions that have been frequently studied and that were familiar with my work. This approach follows discussions with union leaders and the ethics approval process of European Research Council grant no. 646802.
2. Even where miners held significant workplace power, branch executives typically discouraged militancy, further reducing wages. For an exploration of the interplay between wage negotiations, militancy and branch executives' containment in union ethical-political projects, see McNamara 2021).
3. ZCTU has also been disempowered. The 1990s Labour Relations Act generated multiple union mother bodies and privatisation weakened the professional workforce. Further, Zambia's Labour Minister had founded one of these alternative mother bodies, the Federation of Free Trade Unions.
4. Unlike union leaders and paid staff, branch executives were volunteers who were the same 'level' as miners and daily experienced the inconsistencies unions' narratives of strength. Their tangible solidarities with co-workers, explored in McNamara (2021), encouraged subjectivation to unions' political projects even when these projects' failings and contractions were most obvious.

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