

# A reasonable negotiation? Workplace-based unionists' subjectivities, wage negotiations, and the day-to-day life of an ethical-political project

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This article analyses how, through adopting responsibility for their co-workers' livelihoods, workplace-based unionists shaped Zambian mining capitalism. I argue that union branch executives learnt that they could best assist their co-workers through offering them financial services and through co-operation with company HR. During wage negotiations, unionists drew strength from this understanding, encouraging them to see ever-decreasing salaries as market-driven, and discouraging the militancy that has on occasion raised wages. Building upon the anthropology of trade unionism, I detail how tangible solidarities within a workplace shape unions' ethical-political projects; and argue that subjectivation through union ideologies can discourage scrutiny of structural injustice. Linking anthropology that explores capitalism through relationships and moral norms to liberalized capital's disempowerment of unions, I claim that unionists' moral, technical, and physical labour mitigated, yet inadvertently enabled, worsening working conditions.

In December 2017, Joseph, Richard,<sup>1</sup> and I were examining financial records stolen from Mopani Copper Mines (MCM), a Zambian Glencore subsidiary. Joseph and Richard were employed by MCM as miners and volunteered as union branch executives. Mopani renegotiated wages with the unions annually, and Joseph hoped to use these records to demonstrate that MCM could afford a significant pay rise. Fearing retribution against the miner who had stolen the records, Joseph would only use them to triangulate data obtained legally: workers counting trucks leaving the mine-site, production numbers provided by sympathetic line-managers, and Glencore's semi-annual financial reports. Seemingly strengthening the unionists' position, the global copper price had recently hit a four-year high.

When the Mineworkers Union of Zambia's (MUZ) President presented Joseph's arguments to Mopani, its HR officer claimed that the mine was not profitable. MCM had supposedly been buying copper from an entrepreneur in the Congo and was counterintuitively disadvantaged by the increased copper price. That night, Richard drove across the Zambia-Congo border, searching unsuccessfully for the entrepreneur

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to scrutinize this claim. Wage negotiations continued for three months. Each evening, the branch executives formed moral and technical arguments from data about Mopani's health, the copper industry, and the cost of living. These were delivered by MUZ's President and rebutted by Mopani's HR. Management's responses frequently appeared dubious: when explaining why Mopani could not afford funeral insurance, HR mis-converted kwacha to USD, increasing costs tenfold. At each day's end, MUZ's President obtained the branch executives' reluctant agreement to reduce the pay increment demanded and HR occasionally increased MCM's offer.

After two months, the pay raise commanded by the unionists had fallen from 35 per cent to 12 per cent and Mopani had increased its offer from 0 per cent to 4 per cent. Management told the branch executives to update miners on the negotiations. (Union policy disallowed discussing negotiations without HR's permission.) Joseph, Richard, and Kanda, another MCM branch executive, briefed members. Outraged workers told Kanda that they knew MCM was making money and bemoaned that once-proud miners were now 'like beggars'. Kanda replied that Mopani was not profitable and repeated the financial statistics HR had utilized during their negotiations. Tensions slowed production. Joseph and Kanda implored miners to work harder, arguing that profits would enable MCM to increase salaries.

Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted eleven months of ethnography on Zambia's Copperbelt, living with Kanda and working from MUZ's offices. Long-term immersion allowed many conversations with Joseph and Kanda, and I came to understand that, despite the inconsistencies between the stolen financial records and management's spurious data, they genuinely believed that their wage agreements were fair and market-driven. In the negotiation's final weeks, Kanda began complaining that miners needed to 'appreciate that the company has many worries'. When they agreed upon a 7 per cent pay raise (their third below-inflation increment in five years), he messaged me to articulate how proud he was of both the unionists and management. Kanda knew that his co-workers' lives were becoming harder and he planned to provide miners with financial training and expand their access to union-affiliated bank loans. This would enable increasingly poor workers to maintain their middle-class identity:<sup>2</sup> renting a home, paying school fees, and supporting rural kin. Joseph believed that a strike or go-slow may have raised wages; however, he would have felt responsible for any workers fired after industrial action and he feared that overly generous salaries could cause MCM to close. He explained:

I would say it [7 per cent] is a good thing to me because I don't have anyone complaining that I made them lose their jobs ... I wouldn't want anyone to lose employment because I know how people are suffering on the Copperbelt. So I would rather sacrifice their increments, so that I know that I have maintained their job.

Joseph (and unionists everywhere – Botiveau 2017: 95) experienced a tension between maintaining employment levels and increasing salaries. This dichotomy has often gone unscrutinized by anthropologists, who have sympathized with professional unionists' frustrations about workers' unreasonable expectations (Lazar 2017: 117). In Zambia, such analysis would be incomplete: almost every mine offered salary increments of between 0 per cent and the inflation rate, yet currency devaluation reduced wage bills and several operations made annual profits of above 100 million USD (CNMCL 2017; FQM 2017). I show instead that during wage negotiations, Joseph drew upon union training and discourses; these inadvertently encouraged him to accept a false

incompatibility between salary rises and company viability and to understand himself, rather than Mopani, as responsible for workers' ongoing employment. Similarly, union resources and ideologies enabled Kanda to mitigate decreasing wages' effects on his co-workers' lives, yet encouraged him to justify inadequate salaries to them. Through their relationships in the workplace and the union, and through the personhoods unionism helped them to create, union branch executives like Joseph and Kanda performed the emotional and technical labour of sustaining Zambian capitalism.

This article argues that adopting moral responsibility for their co-workers' well-being inspired workplace-based, volunteer unionists to engage in professionalized, anti-militant relationships with company HR; relationships which facilitated wage deterioration. In explaining how unionists' subjectivities influenced Zambian industrial relations, I am inspired by recent economic anthropology, which explores political economies through relationships, moral norms, and concepts of self and community (Bear 2015; Shever 2012). I link these insights to a key contradiction of contemporary unionism. Unions motivate their members through discourses of strength, assertiveness, and eventual, righteous victory (Keskula & Sanchez 2019; Lazar 2017). Yet deregulation and globalization continuously disempower organized labour, with unions increasingly ensuring employees' survival through working with employers instead of confronting them (Durrenberger 2017; Soul 2020). Tying labour's enfeeblement to studies that present workplace conditions as emerging from workers' and their interlocutors' attempts to create meaningful lives, I explore how unions guide and enable workers' personhoods through mitigating, rather than challenging, unjust labour regimes (cf. Prentice 2015).

The disjuncture between narratives of militant strength and conciliatory daily practices is particular conspicuous in Zambia. Nationalized mines historically dominated Zambia's economy and MUZ created a powerful reputation through miners' agitation for decolonization and democratization (Epstein 1958; Ferguson 1999). Yet the union has traditionally discouraged militancy, working with industry and government to ensure workers' dignified livelihoods in exchange for undisrupted copper production (Burawoy 1972; Larmer 2007). When Zambia's mines were privatized in the 1990s, MUZ lost much of its influence over working conditions (Fraser 2010). It now increasingly resembles a civic association, brokering miners' relationships with employers, banks, and the community. I therefore explore how junior union representatives created personal moral projects through acts like organizing loans for their co-workers and begging for leniency in these co-workers' disciplinary hearings; as well as how MUZ reframed these experiences as evidence of union strength. I show that unionists' labour, combined with structural disempowerment, led to them discouraging the strikes that have sometimes significantly raised miners' wages.

Through focusing on workplace-based representatives, rather than professional activists, this article makes two novel contributions to the ethnography of trade unionism. I demonstrate that drawing strength from a union's ideology encourages discounting that ideology's weaknesses (cf. Lazar 2017; Werbner 2014); and I show how intra-workplace, tangible solidarities can inspire anti-militant political action (cf. Harvey 2001; Zloliniski 2019). Recent anthropology explores unionism through ethical-political projects, in which union leaders cultivate self-mastery and empathy (Lazar 2013; Werbner 2014). Unionists embed their personal disposition for leadership within shared idealized histories, kin-like relationships, and proscriptions for social change (Keskula & Sanchez 2019; Lazar 2017). To respond to unionism's inherent difficulties

and setbacks, these leaders obtain strength through drawing uncritically from their union's ethical-political project. There are important variations between how theorists conceptualize unionist self-making and political action,<sup>3</sup> and I draw primarily from Lazar's (2017: 5-13) concepts of 'containment' and 'subjectivation'. 'Containment' is the process through which a unionist becomes encompassed within a collective ethical-political self – the union – by accepting shared political philosophies and kin-like social support. This containment enables 'subjectivation': a self-discipline taken unreflectively from union-derived ideologies and deployed during moments of hardship. Lazar (2017) witnessed union activists use subjectivation to insulate themselves after an electoral loss, enabling the personal sacrifice required for political resistance. In contrast, I observed Zambian unionists' subjectivation to MUZ's technocratic ethical-political project, even when (during wage negotiations) this project's inconsistencies were most visible and its impacts most detrimental.

In detailing the hardships that encouraged workplace-based unionists' subjectivation, I explore how these unionists' anti-militant ideology was shaped by caring for their co-workers. Ethnographies commonly follow passionate activists, who attempt to forge alliances between unions, civil society organizations, and left-wing political movements (Collins 2012; Werbner 2014). Union leaders hope that through these alliances, often described as 'social movement unionism' or 'community unionism', workers and shop-floor representatives will 'move from tangible solidarities' (Harvey 2001: 173) and 'reach beyond the workplace' (Moody 1997: 207; see also Waterman 1993). This activism is dichotomized against anti-militant 'business unionism', which focuses upon serving members' daily needs, and which scholars frequently attribute to union leaders' corruption, cowardice, or un-ideological pragmatism (Zolniski 2019). Mollona rightly notes that resisting global capital entwines the practices of business and community unionism. However, he argues that community unionism requires un-ideological workers and junior unionists to look past workplace relationships and towards political change (Mollona 2009: 660). I show instead that workplace-based unionists forged their moral projects through assisting their co-workers and argue that an ethical-political project inspired by tangible solidarities resonated with their sacrifices. In this article, I describe Zambia's low-wage political economy; then explore unionists' encompassment within a technocratic, anti-militant ethical-political project; and then recount how subjectivation to union ideology impeded negotiating higher wages. I conclude by arguing for a reconsideration of the relationship between unionists' motivation and unions' ideologies, and for ethical-political projects that reach 'through', rather than 'beyond', the workplace.

### **Zambia's political economy of industrial relations**

Zambia's mining unions have long attempted to represent workers' demands while tempering militancy (Larmer 2007). However, their decreasing ability to protect wages has encouraged accusations that they stifle mobilization and imbricate themselves with national governments (Uzar 2017). Academics have therefore depicted union leaders as corrupt (Lee 2018: 140) and described mining unions as 'collapsed, institutionally and ideologically' (Fraser 2010: 18). These studies under-emphasize the workplace-based branch executives, who (rather than national leaders) explain and justify Zambia's industrial relations to miners and attempt to limit wage deterioration's effects on workers' livelihoods. Zambia, like many Global South nations, attempts to attract international investment through externalizing costs onto workers, their families and

communities (Fraser 2010 on Zambia; Prentice 2015 on Trinidad). Its political economy therefore requires subjectivities that make exploitative markets appear moral (cf. Bear 2015); as well as intra-community relationships that provide resources previously obtained through employment (cf. Shever 2012). In this context, Zambia's workplace-based unionists offer miners financial services and moral support, yet their intra-personal assistance is intertwined with union narratives depicting working conditions as market-determined. I now briefly describe Zambian mining unions' shift towards electoral politics and business management, before examining how union branch executives self-justify the reduced militancy this necessitates. This links the article's exploration of unionists' lived experience to Zambia's national political economy of regressive industrial relations laws.

Miners' militancy precipitated a decolonized, democratic Zambia, while mining unions have shaped the relationship between the nation's key industry and its employees. The African Mineworkers Union (AMWU), the precursor to MUZ, emerged through workers' rejection of company-appointed Tribal Elders, an intermediary chieftaincy common throughout British Africa (Epstein 1958; see Gluckman, Mitchell & Barnes 1949 on chiefly brokerage). Between 1935 and 1964, miners struck frequently, linking their material demands to nationalization (Larmer 2007; Mitchell 1969). While AMWU often discouraged strikes, its support enabled decolonization, and upon national independence in 1964, it was among Zambia's most powerful institutions and its miners some of Africa's wealthiest workers (Ferguson 1999). However, with nationalized mines central to Zambia's economic future, the union adopted a conciliatory stance, attempting to balance rank-and-file livelihoods with its (self-perceived) responsibility to all Zambians (Burawoy 1972). Copper prices declined for thirty years, reducing income nationwide. Miners' strikes and political action then became crucial to democratization and many unionists joined the new government (Larmer 2007).

Zambia's 1991 democratization foreshadowed disastrous privatization and liberalization processes. Over fifteen years, Zambian mines were privatized, collective bargaining shifted from the industry to enterprise level, subcontracting was legalized, and the 'one-union one-industry' rule was removed (Lee 2018). These changes decimated the unions and hobbled wages. In 1992, MUZ had 56,482 members, all permanently employed workers (Uzar 2017). There are now under 20,000 permanent miners and 60,000 subcontracted mineworkers in Zambia (Kumwenda 2015). MUZ has 15,652 members, the National Union of Miners and Allied Workers (NUMAW) has 12,418, and three smaller unions have a combined membership of approximately 5,000. In 1995, miners earned a minimum monthly basic salary<sup>4</sup> of 100,498 ZKM (107 USD). In 2018, permanent miners at First Quantum Minerals (FQM) earned 1,602 ZKW (136 USD), while some subcontractors earned 650 ZKW (55 USD).

Facing declining membership and inadequate salaries, Zambian unions use electoral politics and businesses to maintain their relevance and financial viability. Executives from MUZ and NUMAW have frequently been elected into government and headed ministries, including Labour and Mines (Uzar 2017). However, rather than enacting progressive laws, unionist parliamentarians have focused on organizing financial assistance when mines are closed, workers subcontracted, or salaries reduced (Larmer 2007; Rakner 2011). Wage reduction has diminished miners' ability to live off their earnings and to support the unions through their fees. Unions now work with mines, running stores that sell miners essential commodities on credit and providing payday

loans through Bayport, a lender that partners with MUZ. Although unions' stores charge 40 per cent above retail prices, their commodities and loans are in constant demand, with 50-90 per cent of miners having consumption-based debt (Lee 2018). In 2017, MUZ earned as much revenue selling mealie-meal as it received through membership fees.

Unions' focus on national political office and company-backed businesses has necessarily reduced militancy. However, it is only through militancy that Zambian wages and workplace laws have historically improved (Larmer 2007; Rakner 2011). Copperbelt miners are well positioned to utilize strikes: demonstrating structural power, their work has a high capital-to-labour ratio and exorbitant shut-down costs; showing associational power, Zambia's miner identity is entwined with unionism (Larmer 2007). Low wage bills have frequently encouraged Zambian mines to quickly end strikes by raising salaries (Lee 2018). While miners' energy for militancy is cyclical (and strikes often fail), industrial action has declined significantly since privatization. However, above-inflation wage increases only occur during periods of industrial unrest (Uzar 2017).

Without the threat of militancy, Zambia's collective bargaining laws favour employers. While wage negotiations should occur during the final three months of a collective agreement, management often ignores this timeline. If negotiations are ongoing at a collective agreement's end-date, the current contract continues, without automatic back-pay on any new accord. The only legal directive guiding negotiations is that both parties should be 'reasonable'. Reasonableness is undefined, but norms dictate that degree-holding HR officers admonish uneducated unionists for being 'unreasonable', rather than vice versa. If agreement is not reached, negotiations go to non-binding arbitration. Only after management ignores arbitration's outcome can a union petition the court or call a strike ballot. Strike ballots have onerous requirements and there has never been a legal Zambian mining strike. The 2011 negotiations between MUZ, NUMAW, and FQM ended in court. Demonstrating Zambia's labour laws' inadequacy, the court accepted a government-brokered wage deal, finding that 'we cannot and are not expected to determine mathematical [salary] rates'. This process took ten months and cost each union 500,000 ZKW (80,000 USD). In this context, companies' reduced fear of militancy has diminished incomes, with branch executives' anti-militant activities being crucial to Zambia's wage regime.

Ever-decreasing militancy, profitable businesses, and a growing distinction between wealthy union leaders and poor miners has inspired academic criticism of Zambia's mining unions (Fraser 2010; Lee 2018). With few exceptions (Larmer 2007), these works do not unpack the different statuses and subjectivities within each union. Unions follow a pyramidal structure. Its peak is 'Head Office', a ten-member National Executive Committee (NEC: President, General Secretary [GS], General Treasurer [GT], Deputy for each [DP, DGS, DGT], and four National Trustees [NTs]) and a small professional staff. Between 90 and 95 per cent of union funds go through Head Office, which guides national strategy and interacts with politicians and company executives. At the pyramid's base are shop stewards, approximately one per ten to twenty members. These stewards are miners' primary point of union contact, but hold little power. Connecting the two is the six-member volunteer branch executive (Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary, and Vices of each) or 'the branch', which represents anywhere between twenty-five and 1,200 members. These branch executives perform significant unpaid labour: organizing microloans and branch stores, representing co-workers in

disciplinary disputes, and scrounging together cash for funerals and school fees. They also do the work of discouraging militancy, often expending the goodwill they have generated through assisting members to persuade them to accept below-inflation pay increments.

During negotiations and shortly after their conclusion, branch officials worked hard to prevent strikes and go-slows. Many feared that strikes could lead to members being fired or force the company to pay more than it could afford. However, when talking more abstractly, the same unionists frequently perceived a need for labour law reform. When asked about militancy during or after their negotiations, branch executives would point to the Baluba mine (closed in 2009), and the unstable subcontracting industry as evidence of what could happen if wages were raised through ‘negotiating with a gun to their [management’s] head’, or an MP interfering and ‘politicizing’ the process. Shortly after his negotiation, I asked a chairman who was a significant local politician why the government supported neither an increased minimum wage nor the right to strike. He explained: ‘The government cannot do that because they trust the union leaders. It is us union leaders to negotiate with the companies ... There are labour laws that we follow in Zambia ... We believe in the bargaining table’. This narrative, that industrial relations laws were fair and that salaries reflected market realities, was something almost every branch official claimed, but only when describing their own wage negotiations.

When removed from the demands of the bargaining process, branch executives frequently criticized workplace law. Six months before his own negotiations, Joseph explained:

You can have all the facts you want: all the negotiations go the same way. We say, you are making money; the company says, we are not. We say, yes you are; they say, no we are not. We say, yes you are; they say, no we are not. So do what you will. So what can we do? We can declare a dispute, but the courts here are very slow, so it will mean no increment for five years. We cannot strike because here we do not have the constitutional right.

Yet Joseph, Kanda, and Richard persuaded themselves that their negotiation was market-driven and discouraged a slow-down that could have improved their bargaining position. Their risky document theft and expensive cross-border travel evidenced that they were not ‘ideologically collapsed’ (Fraser 2010: 17) but were instead deeply embedded within an ethical-political project. The remainder of this article explores how branch executives came to understand their own wage negotiations as reflecting economic realities and to believe that the best way to assist members was to offer services and discourage militancy. It details how daily life and union training shaped workplace-based unionists’ engagement with their union’s ethical-political project; and how the need to draw upon union discourses and relationships during wage negotiations discouraged considering structural constraints. These processes enhanced the perceived legitimacy of Zambia’s industrial relations regime (cf. Bear 2015).

### **The mundanities of trade unionism**

In addition to negotiating wages, branch executives worked daily to support miners as their incomes fell. Theirs was a physically and emotionally demanding role which encouraged encompassment within their union’s kin-like structures and its ethical-political project. Yet this daily labour also shaped branch executives’ experiences of union ideologies. In describing how unionists cultivated leadership through service provisioning, I demonstrate that their personhoods and moral projects were guided



as much by tangible solidarities as by political discourse (cf. Keskula & Sanchez 2019; Werbner 2014); and I examine why non-militant ethical-political projects resonated with Zambian unionists (cf. Zolniski 2019). I also contribute to literature which analyses capitalism through workers' subjectivities and personal obligations, demonstrating how unionists' relationships with their co-workers influenced Zambia's daily labour regime (cf. Prentice 2015).

Being *shimaini* – literally a miner in ciBemba – was an emic middle-class identity, a culturally situated structure of feeling that embedded personal aspirations and intra-communal obligations (cf. Kasmir & Carbonella 2008). Mineworkers would frame their purchases and bemoan their expenses through statements like 'We miners, we are supposed to be the middle class'. They drew upon an imagined history, where their antecedents imported European cars and suits (Burawoy 1972; Ferguson 1999). They linked this history to remittances to, and distinction from, their 'villager' kin, involvement in civic associations, and purchases aimed at ensuring their family's advancement, or at least dignity, as the economy worsened (Haynes 2017). Being *shimaini* meant placing children in private schools, investing in pensions and life insurance, and playing an active (and expensive) role in one's church, all while supporting rural relatives (Mususa 2014). *Shimaini* obligations were unachievable on miners' wages<sup>5</sup> and, as is the case elsewhere in the Global South, the interplay between their workplace regime and social relations both reshaped and reflected miners' subjectivities (cf. Prentice 2015). Unions, and particularly branch executives, were crucial to the stability of Copperbelt employment and sociality (cf. Shever 2012 on familial associations). They facilitated miners' relationships with company HR, credit providers, and even occasionally with their families and churches. Through their own moral projects and through assisting with the projects of their co-workers, these unionists shaped and enabled Copperbelt capitalism. In their attempts to mediate the grossly unequal disjuncture between workers and managers, unionists wedded themselves to an ethical-political project aimed at helping miners survive, rather than challenging, ongoing wage reduction.

Union branch executives' personal ethical projects centred upon assuming moral responsibility for workers' well-being. Key to their subjectivities (and seemingly those of other unionists – e.g. Botiveau 2017: 165) was self-identification as a leader and the ability to motivate themselves through a union's ethical-political project. Werbner (2014) describes union leadership as knowledge mastery in dialogue with compassion and humility, where self-discipline is generated through accepting a cause greater than oneself. Lazar (2017) argues that empathetic leadership is a disposition cultivated through habit. She claims that this necessitates a theoretical underpinning that guides and gives political salience to unionists' actions. Containment, described earlier, incorporates the mutual support provided by unionists to each other and by union ideologies. Unionists subjectivated themselves to these ideologies to obtain strength in the face of hardships. Lazar (2017), Werbner (2014), and others (Collins 2012; Durrenberger & Erem 2005) have explored overtly political union projects where unionists cultivated leadership to move past tangible solidarities and agitate for civil society engagement and social justice. Zambian branch executives similarly habituated a disposition for empathetic leadership, yet enacted an anti-militant, service-based ethical-political project.

Studies frequently treat bread-and-butter service provisioning, and the unionists who perform it, as un-ideological or as co-opted by government or employers. Business



unionism and member serving is sometimes understood to be an apolitical but humane goal, where focusing on the particularities of one's workplace inhibits considering social change and structural injustice (Harvey 2001; Mollona 2009). More commonly, service-provisioning unionists are depicted as cowardly or corrupt, reducing militancy to enrich themselves at workers' expense (Lee 2018; Moody 1997; Zolniski 2019). Such depictions disregard the personal sacrifices of workplace-based union executives and shop stewards, who assist members for little or no material reward.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Zambia's workplace-based unionists habituated a disposition for empathetic leadership through the daily fulfilment of an ideology that framed members' loans as evidence of union strength and reduced militancy as professionalism. Rather than discouraging politicization, tangible solidarities with their co-workers gave union branch executives the fortitude needed to struggle for social change. However, it was through assisting these co-workers that they both conceptualized societal improvement and expended the strength that political activity requires.

#### *An ethos of member servicing*

Passionately contested union branch elections occurred every four years. Those elected were typically civic and community leaders, including scout masters, church elders, and aspiring politicians. Branch executives were rarely re-elected.<sup>7</sup> Their constant churn meant that unionism was learnt through daily practice, before receiving formal training, with branch executives drawing upon their pre-existing leadership experience when assisting their co-workers.

Union branch executives were constantly reminded of their importance to workers' well-being and class identity. Branch chairmen's official role was informing miners about management's decisions and representing workers to HR. They read out announcements, navigated administration, and helped members with disciplinary appeals. However, chairmen spent at least as much time facilitating their branch's union stores and organizing loans and assistance for miners. Unionism consumed branch executives' home lives. Kanda was on Mopani's internal speed-dial, meaning any of Mopani Kitwe's 4,000 employees could phone him by pressing '7' on a Mopani phone. He constantly received calls, sometimes a miner enquiring about their disciplinary dispute, or complaining about the lack of maize in their branch store. Much more commonly, someone needed financial assistance to fulfil their daily needs or familial expectations. Examples included 100 ZKW (9 USD) for a daughter's school excursion, 60 ZKW (5 USD) for bus fares to hospital for an ailing spouse's relatives, and any spare cash for a sibling's funeral. There were never enough branch funds for everyone and Kanda would offer his own money, and ask MUZ Head Office, before ultimately failing to help many members.

A good relationship with HR enabled branch executives to materially assist miners and to minimize their co-workers' chance of dismissal; and interactions between unionists and management encouraged the former to empathize with the latter. Almost every branch ran a store where members and their spouses could buy essential items on credit. These stores were the only way many mining families obtained food, soap, and cooking oil, and ensuring a well-stocked shop was a core task of branch executives. Union branches also brokered miners' loans, negotiating mortgages with banks and emergency credit with payday lenders. Some of the most active chairmen facilitated partnerships with private pension funds, life insurers, or specialist savings providers for children's tertiary educations. All these services were expensive, but they

were many miners' only reliable sources of commodities, savings, and credit. They were made possible through payroll deductions from members' future salaries, which reduced default rates. HR periodically disallowed this when it believed a branch was 'troublesome'.<sup>8</sup>

Branch executives handled disciplinary cases' final appeals. Rather than arguing over the details of an infraction, or of Zambian labour law, they would typically beg HR for leniency. Branch chairmen would establish rapport with management through phrases like 'you know miners' and accept moral responsibility for correcting the worker's behaviour. Absenteeism was rampant among lower-paying subcontractors. One HR officer claimed that instead of dismissing everyone who committed a fireable offence, she fired a few absentees per month and overtly considered her relationship with each union's branch executives when determining whom to let go. HR and chairmen would affirm each other's reasonableness, while working together to train members on 'financial management', 'hygiene', or even 'marital harmony'.

Most branch executives were not significantly wealthier than other miners, and many who worked for subcontractors earned under 1,500 ZKW (126 USD) a month. There were nevertheless advantages to union positions. Branches had average monthly budgets of 3,000 ZKW (257 USD)<sup>9</sup> and larger branches had cars. Executives used union funds to pay themselves 50-200 ZKW (4-17 USD) attendance fees for two to three monthly meetings and would occasionally lend themselves emergency funds. Unionists whom management did not consider 'troublemakers' would often find places at their mine's selective low-fee school 'opened up' for their children after about six months (most considered this unionism's biggest perk).<sup>10</sup> Union Head Office supported the campaigns of the approximately 10 per cent of branch executives who ran for minor political office, regardless of their party allegiance.

More than material benefit, branch executives felt rewarded through being recognized as leaders in the mine and community. A young branch treasurer proudly described being called 'honourable' by older miners and 'top tres [treasurer]' affectionately by his age-mates. A chance meeting with a member would lead to Joseph being introduced to an entire family as *wachair*,<sup>11</sup> and the member's spouse and children queuing to shake his hand. Kanda's church often prayed that God guide him as he helped their community. Illustrating the tension between their elevated status and financial precariousness, a chairman and I went to a bank to monitor workers' pensions. While we waited in the boardroom, the receptionist gave us freshly cooked steak. Later that afternoon, the chairman discreetly entered a payday lender and obtained a 500 ZKW (43 USD) salary advance, to be repaid as 650 ZKW (55 USD) at month's end.

Because workers' dignity faced ongoing assaults, miners abused branch executives as often as they praised them. Accepting this abuse was key to the emotional labour of unionism. Executives would be constantly consoling members who were unable to fulfil their middle-class obligations. However, workers would also slander unionists after being disciplined by management, or humiliated by borrowing money from a spouse's parents. Occasionally, a chairman would intercede in a family or church dispute, embarrassingly assuring a member's relatives that wages were inadequate after the miner had been accused of parsimony. Denigrating a branch chairman who could neither provide financial assistance nor influence management was a consequence-free outlet for workers, who would have been charged if they abused HR.

Members' abuse cemented branch executives' self-perception as leaders, confirming that they (like HR) had a 'reasonable' temperament that 'miners' did not. Joseph

claimed that members' abuse was interdependent with the community's acceptance of his leadership, stating 'they can only abuse me because they know how to address me ... they know I am chairman.' Another chairman described his emotional labour:

This job is tiring; every day I sort out problems ... Members complain about me whenever things are bad ... When they are caught drunk or when management is difficult ... [But] I am party to many decisions that make this place so positive ... This makes me proud to be a chairman.

Through their attempts to ensure miners' well-being and through their co-workers' praise and denigration, branch executives entrenched their habitus as empathetic leaders. Through organizing loans and stores, begging for leniency for disciplined members, and accepting abuse when their assistance failed, these unionists shaped miners' experiences of Zambian capitalism. Their labour necessitated containment in an ideology assuring them of the righteousness of their actions and a theory of how these actions improved society. The experience of caring for their fellow workers provided branch executives with strength for their substantive self-sacrifice and predisposed them to anti-militant ethical-political projects.

#### *An ideology of professionalism and recruitment*

Belying depictions of apolitical business unionism (see Fraser's [2010] depiction of MUZ), Zambia's mining unions held ethical-political projects. Through using businesses and political influence to assist mining communities, the unions would recruit more members, creating a virtuous cycle where the union grew stronger, and could mitigate the effects of economic liberalization on miners, Copperbelt residents, and rural kin, and, thereby, all Zambians. This ideology responded to the constraints of Zambia's political economy, even while inadvertently entrenching these. It contextualized branch executives' labour and their self-perception as technocratic, empathetic leaders, while overstating the power of the unions they represented.

Newly elected branch officials received union training after about six months. MUZ's Head Office provided a day-long syllabus, which began with union history. This described how 'in the past we [miners] threw stones [during strikes]' and provided a narrative of growing professionalism. It observed that, among the mining unions, MUZ had the most former executives as MPs and the largest business portfolio. History was followed by lessons on safety and disciplinary disputes. These were co-taught by company HR and overtly positioned the unionists as morally responsible for anyone fired. An HR officer explained:

One of the biggest issues we have is to change the mind-set of our workers, isn't it? For me, to do your job well means that everyone stays in their job ... You will be shown to be the best union branch on record by having no one fired ... But to do this you must change people's mind-sets.

Training concluded by describing collective bargaining, which was presented as a market-driven partnership with management. The branch should create a research dossier combining information about the company, the copper price, and the cost of living. This would enable them to 'bring percentages that the company is able to pay' to negotiations. HR would respond to this by 'making sure they give what they [the company] can afford'. Training ended with a story about a union branch which came to negotiations with statistics proving that they deserved an 8 per cent increment, to which HR agreed immediately. After the story, the trainer provided a hand-out entitled 'Do's in Collective Bargaining'. This was a list of bullet points including 'concentrate', 'observe aggressively', and 'watch your body language'.

Unionists' daily actions were positioned within a national political project through whole-union events, including quadrennial Head Office elections. MUZ's national executive election involved three days of songs, speeches, and stories of the union's infallibility. The proceedings began with a rousing chorus of '*Twikatane-umu-yayaya*' ('Solidarity Forever' in ciBema). After this, MUZ's President orated, celebrating the union's strength. His speech labelled branch executives' labour 'recruitment', and stated that 'recruitment is the main and key activity of the union and its primary existence'. Through offering loans, begging for leniency in disciplinary disputes, and providing small cash gifts, branch executives were recruiting members (who would have otherwise joined another union) and were therefore strengthening MUZ.<sup>12</sup>

Each union's political project focused on using recruitment to become 'stronger' and leveraging this strength to mitigate worsening working conditions, which were presented as inevitable. During MUZ's election, Head Office gave speeches identifying the threats of mechanization, casualization, and decreasing wages. In response, MUZ had opened a maize mill and further recruitment would fund future businesses, with economies of scale reducing prices for members, Copperbelt residents, and eventually all Zambians. These businesses would also make MUZ financially independent of members' dues, as new technologies rendered miners redundant. Recruitment would simultaneously enhance MUZ's gravitas, enabling it to persuade the government to finance development projects in mining communities and to provide assistance to retrenched miners (achievable patronage rather than changing labour laws). MUZ's 2018 GS's report claimed credit for government payments to retrenched miners in Chambishi.

Parliamentarians and businesspeople spoke at MUZ's elections. Their speeches foregrounded the anti-militant characteristics of the union's ethical-political project, while affirming MUZ's success. In 2018, MUZ's maize mill's manager explained that the company relied upon subsidized maize, unsubtly discouraging conflict with government. After this, the Minister for Labour claimed partnership with MUZ, overtly discounting any need for structural change. She stated:

The Zambian labour laws have been looked at by my colleagues in other countries as very fair, but we Zambians have not been taking advantage of them ... We need to learn to interpret the financials ... The world has moved. We can't act like our parents [by striking], so you need to convince the company on reasoning ... We are aware that you have minimized strikes, which shows you have improved your grievance-handling skills ... Your members deserve more than salary increments; they are looking for 'empowerment'. That is more beneficial to them ... Loans to encourage them to own a home before they retire.

She was followed by Zambia's High Commissioner to Ghana, a former MUZ President, who declared: 'Productivity! When you produce, you create the capacity to negotiate. When you do not produce, you create no capacity to negotiate'. MUZ's GS thanked the parliamentarians and promised to work with the branch executives, ensuring that they provided more loans to 'empower members' and learnt to 'interpret the financials' during negotiations.

As Zambian branch executives' containment necessitated confidence in the union's ethical-political project, dissent was rarely tolerated. Negative posts were deleted from the whole-union WhatsApp group, and those posting them were suspended. During union meetings, branch executives would shout 'Point of order!' if they believed that a peer was questioning Head Office's wisdom or union strategy. MUZ's DGS explained to

me that preventing dissatisfaction and celebrating the union's strength were necessary to maintain the solidarity that motivated unionists, while branch chairmen said that they found criticisms of Head Office disrespectful of their own sacrifices. This near-unquestioning acceptance of a union's ideology as key to unionism's effectiveness can be seen as an explication of containment in an ethical-political project and subjectivation to it to obtain strength. Based on other union ethnographies, intolerance for dissent is found among many unions (Botiveau 2017: 1-6; Durrenberger & Erem 2005: 153-9) and in what Lazar (2013: 120) describes as 'the practices of solidarity that are common to unions everywhere'.

Like the workers and families described by Shever (2012), Zambian unionists, miners, and Copperbelt residents shaped local capitalism through intersecting subjectivities. Branch executives fulfilled their self-perception as leaders by offering loans and pleading with HR, creating a workplace where miners could (partially) fulfil their class-based identity (cf. Prentice 2015). Their anti-militant ethical-political project responded to (and overtly denied) the union's weakness, enabling branch chairmen to mitigate the effects of capital's empowerment on miners with whom they shared a tangible solidarity, even as they reduced the likelihood of militancy. However, containment within this ideology discouraged reflection upon the union's methods and its relationship with political structures. Nowhere was this more apparent than with unionists' subjectivation during wage negotiations.

### **Subjectivation and subjectivity in wage negotiations**

As foreshadowed when describing Joseph's interactions with Mopani, branch executives were most fully contained within their union's ethical-political project during wage negotiations. Mirroring Lazar's (2017) understanding of subjectivation, these unionists drew upon their self-conception as leaders, their relationships with HR and Head Office, and the negotiating techniques they had learnt in training to make meaning of weeks of isolation, hard work, and an inevitable failure to substantively improve their friends' and co-workers' salaries. Where Lazar (2017) and Werbner (2014) show unionists' submission to a collective ethical-political project driving national political change, I demonstrate that in Zambia this submission entailed a reduced scrutiny of negotiating structures, inadvertently diminishing wages.

There is little anthropological literature on wage negotiations. Ethnography occasionally follows professional unionists, who attribute collective bargaining outcomes to unions' decreasing structural power and to management's superior technical knowledge (Botiveau 2017: 109-11; Lee 2018: 81-2). Such studies frequently recount company representatives positing an incompatibility between raising salaries and maintaining employment levels, but do not investigate the implications of this trade-off for workplace-based unionists (Durrenberger & Erem 2005; Lazar 2017: 117). In this section, I explore how negotiation's physical and emotional demands made threatening lay-offs a particularly effective tactic within Zambian industrial relations. I draw upon Ho's analysis of markets through the subjectivities of key actors, where she describes Wall Street bankers who 'legitimized their work and its effects by appealing to their own work ethic ... [Their deals] must be good because, well, they work so hard on them' (2009: 106-7).

For Zambian unionists, wage outcomes were similarly made moral through the labour of negotiations, with hard work both being evidence of the wage agreement's fairness and necessitating subjectivation to their union's ethical-political project.

Branch executives' negotiating strategies reflected their union's technocratic ideology, convolved with their daily responsibilities to members and their ongoing relationships with HR. In exploring how Lloyd, an MUZ branch chairman, experienced two years of negotiations at a Chinese Non-Ferrous Metals Corporation Limited (CNMCL) subsidiary, I argue that tangible solidarities and union ideologies taught unionists that negotiations were successful if they did not end in militancy, even if they achieved poor wage increments. By embedding these negotiations within the daily practices of unionism, I analyse them as key moments for challenging or stabilizing a political economy.

Lloyd became a MUZ branch chairman in 2017. During the preceding two years, he and his co-workers had received 0 per cent increments on monthly wages of less than 1,200 ZKW (104 USD), despite CNMCL spending approximately 3 per cent of its total outlay on direct staff costs and making a 11.8 million USD annual profit. Workers' dissatisfaction had caused MUZ and NUMAW to hold branch elections and Lloyd had run a populist campaign, accusing the former chairman of corruption and promising outlandish pay rises. Despite this, he had a tertiary education and considered himself a technocratic leader. This self-conception was shared across the unions' executives, which included two aspiring politicians and a scout master. Union training's depiction of negotiations as market-and-research-driven had inspired them to ask CNMCL for an increment of 2,500 ZKW (260 USD). To support this claim, they had produced a document explaining that salaries of 3,700 ZKW (383 USD) were below the industry average for permanent mineworkers and the cost of living. Evidencing workers' contribution to CNMCL's health, they had photocopied an all-staff memo stating that production targets had been beaten. When they showed their arguments to NUMAW's DGS, he admonished their 'unreasonable' requests. He suggested instead asking for 1,000 ZKW (103 USD) and stressed the need to manage miners' expectations: 'You are new leaders, no? Did you come into power by denouncing your former compatriots? Did you promise your members more? ... What will happen now if you promise them 2,500 ZKW and can only deliver 300 ZKW?' Later, MUZ's GS called Lloyd to remind him that the negotiations were confidential and suggested that he avoid members until they concluded.

Negotiations were scheduled to begin two days later, and the branch executives distanced themselves from members. However, management delayed meeting for another three weeks. When negotiations commenced, CNMCL's Zambian HR manager and Chinese director detailed the company's economic fragility and explained that they could not increase salaries. They claimed that the kwacha's diminishing value was reducing profits, that the government had removed their energy subsidy, and that they had no market for sulphur, copper production's primary bi-product. Each night, the branch executives planned their negotiation strategy and each day NUMAW's DGS spoke on their behalf. Lloyd found a CNMCL annual report stating that the only impact of the kwacha's devaluation was an 11 per cent reduction in CNMCL's USD wage bill. Executives compiled shopping lists demonstrating increased living costs. Negotiations continued as a back-and-forth of offers and statistics. HR acknowledged workers' growing expenses and apologized for their 'mathematical error' regarding the weakening kwacha. However, they could not find a sulphur buyer, preventing any pay rise.<sup>13</sup> Members desired negotiation updates, but Lloyd avoided their calls. He instead bonded with Head Office staff, who sympathized with him, bought him dinner, and advised him to 'take plenty of notes'.

After three weeks, HR gave the unions two options: they could increase the transport allowance (30 ZKW/3 USD monthly) or could accept the union's demands (1,000 ZKW/103 USD), but would balance operational costs by laying off 47 per cent of their employees. The branch executives were given the evening to decide. While it seemed unlikely that the company could function without half its workforce, they refused to gamble with their co-workers' livelihoods. The next day's meeting was brief. The unions would accept a 10% increment (approximately 100 ZKW) if CNMCL did not lay off workers. The HR manager declined their offer. She said that if the unions did not accept 0 per cent, CNMCL would declare a dispute, as the unionists were being 'unreasonable'.

That evening, MUZ's DGS told Lloyd that he must sign. MUZ would not pay for mediation and CNMCL might fire him if negotiations continued. Lloyd was devastated: he was still developing a rapport with members and had been elected promising to achieve higher wages than his 'corrupt' predecessor. He had not spoken to members since telling them a month earlier that he would demand 2,500 ZKW (260 USD). He would soon have to explain that he had only increased monthly salaries by 30 ZKW (3 USD). While mulling these concerns, he received constant calls. Responding to one, he bemoaned: 'The trouble with you miners is that you will always be asking. I will give you information and you will ask for more and I will be forced to lie'. The calls became more frequent (and aggressive) throughout the night.

The next day, it was agreed that CNMCL would increase the transport allowance and retrench no workers. The branch chairmen were sent to inform members. They were instructed to read off a fact sheet detailing CNMCL's struggles to sell sulphur, without mentioning its threat of retrenchment. Workers violently abused the chairmen and shut down the plant. To the unions' and management's surprise, the area's MP quickly arrived. She requested that a specific allowance be converted into salary (a 35 per cent pay rise) and that no one be disciplined for striking. CNMCL's CEO agreed and the MP addressed the striking workers. She also obtained Lloyd's phone number for future communication.

CNMCL's HR manager blamed MUZ for the shut-down, creating what she described as 'a period of difficulty' between Lloyd and herself. While no one was fired for striking, over the next six months nearly thirty MUZ members were dismissed and were not reinstated despite Lloyd's appeals. While performing union duties, the branch staff were charged with loitering. HR did not allow MUZ to open a branch store and rejected its Bayport loans partnership. A quarter of MUZ members then transitioned to NUMAW.

Desiring reconciliation, HR suggested that MUZ co-ordinate the company's Christmas hampers. Lloyd earned 55,000 ZKW (5,700 USD) for Head Office by buying eggs, chicken, and peanut butter wholesale and charging CNMCL retail prices. Lloyd's efficiency pleased members, and his status improved further when HR revoked the firing of a miner who had absented himself after falling sick. HR allowed workers to obtain Bayport loans. Bayport then sponsored the MUZ branch secretary's wedding, at which the HR manager was the guest of honour. One-third of workers undertook loans and many returned to MUZ.

In 2018, CNMCL's semi-annual report predicted a 131.4 million USD profit. As in 2017, branch executives created a dossier combing this with information about industry-average wages and living costs. They planned to ask for 35 per cent, but would consider 20 per cent a successful negotiation. The firing of workers, harassment by management, and Head Office training had convinced most branch executives that the previous year's strike signified their failure and that it was crucial that 'the union, not



the workers, secure the increment'. Lloyd was conflicted. As an entry-level employee, the strike had increased his salary by 30 per cent. However, he had represented many miners who had been dismissed since this shut-down and many others whom he had saved after reconciling with HR. Lloyd maintained secret contact with the area's MP and they agreed that he would not sign below 20 per cent. This would create a work stoppage and she would intervene.

While negotiations again began several weeks late, improved relations between management and unionists created a cordial atmosphere. This time the HR manager explained that CNMCL could not offer a pay rise because its record profits must reward shareholders. The union and HR again spent three weeks making counter-offers and contesting each other's statistics. The branch staff spent each night attempting to disprove management's arguments, while avoiding contact with the members they desired to help. During negotiations, HR would question unionists' technocratic acumen. When the unions suggested three annual 'school fees' allowances of 500 ZKW (51 USD), HR incredulously asked, 'Do you even know what that would be as an increment? It could be 35 per cent!' (It was 4 per cent of the wage bill.)

During proceedings, HR and Head Office empathized with the branch executives about negotiations' gravity. They stressed that the company was like a family and that the negotiators were the household heads. Together they must make members 'understand' the need for low wages. Over lunch, HR asked Lloyd whether she should be lenient in specific disciplinary cases, overtly juxtaposing his competing responsibilities for daily well-being and for improving salaries. Once, while driving myself and the branch executives home, the HR manager implored, 'We know that we both want to do what is best for our workers, but please do not close the company'.

After three weeks, negotiations were deadlocked. CNMCL was offering 6 per cent (about 80 ZKW/8 USD) and the union was demanding 30 per cent (about 320 ZKW/32 USD) and three annual payments of 500 ZKW (51 USD). The HR manager said that she would take this demand to CNMCL's directors, but that:

We must be directed by the union. If people here want 500 ZKW and they want this increment, then we can bring it, but we will have to lay off workers. You know this because of the pressures on the company. We can do the maths. If you want too much, it must come from somewhere, so we can do this together, because we are partners. You tell us how to proceed and who to lay off.

The branch executives were given a week to consider the offer, without consulting members.

Over the next few days, with Head Office's guidance, the branch executives decided to accept 6 per cent. However, HR convened an emergency meeting. Rumours that the union were signing an unjust wage agreement were circulating, which caused a go-slow. The CEO would offer 8 per cent if the union accepted and briefed members immediately. MUZ's DGS cautioned the branch chairmen to be firm with workers so that the MP did not come and 'politicize things'. I discreetly asked Lloyd if he planned to call the MP, as they had received under 20 per cent. He explained that involving the MP would falsely signify that the union had failed, when 8 per cent was an excellent result.

The CNMCL employees I knew socially were disappointed but did not consider striking. Lloyd's ability to facilitate loans and defend disciplined miners made him popular. This contributed to members interpreting the branch executives' multi-week disappearance and fatigued demeanour as evidence that the negotiations had been hard

and fairly fought. One worker explained that he was upset but that ‘everyone on the bargaining table agreed that management had reasons for their decision.’ The branch executives considered the negotiations a success: they had increased wages by 100 ZKW (10 USD) without endangering workers’ livelihoods. The NUMAW treasurer explained: ‘This 8 per cent, we can even sacrifice it for the sake of ensuring there is food on a family’s table [by keeping CNMCL open].’

Considering CNMCL’s parsimony, 8 per cent was impressive. However, despite record copper prices and profits, this agreement ensured that workers ended the year further below the poverty line and the industry average. This obviously contradicted narratives about the company ‘offering what it could pay’ and wages being determined by branch executives’ ability to ‘read the financials.’ Disputing the limited ethnography of wage negotiations, CNMCL’s high capital-to-labour ratio and the previous strike’s success implied that workers had substantive workplace power, while access to data rendered wage debates (facetiously) technical, impeding the union’s simultaneously technical and moral claims (cf. Botiveau 2017; Lee 2018). The tension between wages and employment levels was not an economic barrier, but a tactic utilized by management (cf. Durrenberger & Erem 2005). As branch-based executives adopted moral responsibility for workers fired after a strike or who would lose their jobs if CNMCL closed, this tactic guided them to discourage militancy, limiting a critical aspect of unions’ negotiating power.

CNMCL’s wage negotiations reflected the interplay between HRs’, unionists’, and workers’ subjectivities. These interacted with, and de-politicized, legal structures that discouraged wage growth (cf. Bear 2015). In accepting the outcome of the 2018 negotiations, miners were in part demonstrating their approval of Lloyd as a conduit for their *shimaini* aspirations. Lloyd’s popularity reflected his success in representing disciplined workers and his management of the branch store and loans (which low wages necessitated). Though their salaries were inadequate, miners represented by Lloyd could still contribute at funerals, pay school fees, and were unlikely to be fired.

Understanding Lloyd’s transition to seeing 8 per cent as a success foregrounds a danger of subjectivating oneself to a union’s ethical-political project. Lazar states that no collective ethical subject should be considered ‘internally consistent, static or without contestation’ (2017: 11). However, she also argues that key to subjectivation’s usefulness is that it enables unionists to be unreflective when experiencing the hardships of union work, allowing them to persevere by insulating themselves from doubt (2017: 67). In Zambia, this insulation compounded unions’ lack of legal negotiating power, hidden within their ethical-political projects. Outside the rigours of negotiations, both Joseph and Lloyd questioned MUZ’s bargaining strategy and their ability to produce meaningful change without political intervention. However, when isolated from members and constantly working, these branch executives subjectivated themselves to their union’s ideology, where technical data, good relations with management, and ‘reasonableness’ would produce the highest salaries that the market allowed. Linking unionists’ subjectivation to Ho’s (2009) insights on how workplace subjectivities make economic outcomes ‘moral’, unionists believed that increments they achieved must be the best, because they had followed this formula and worked so hard. This discouraged interrogating unions’ ethical-political projects at a key moment of injustice within Zambian capitalism.

## Conclusion

Lloyd's, John's, and Kanda's attempts to improve their co-workers' daily lives and to increase their salaries foregrounded a key contradiction of modern unionism. Unions motivate their leaders and members through narratives of strength, assertiveness, and righteous victory, yet unionists' work is increasingly intermediary, striking compromises with management to improve workers' day-to-day lives, rather than their structural position (Durrenberger 2017; Keskula & Sanchez 2019). This incongruity, and unions' disempowerment, can be particularly overt during collective bargaining. Many unions depict wage agreements as being guided by the skill of negotiators, constrained by market realities (Botiveau 2017; Lee 2018). However, where strikes are illegal and neither labour laws nor social contracts compel global companies to provide fair salaries, the wages agreed will often only satisfy workers' most basic needs. Unionists' support for their co-workers then subsidizes these employees' survival, enabling lower salaries; while unions' linking of service provisioning and wage negotiations discourages workers from rising up in militant protest.

In Zambia's mining industry, unions that were crucial to decolonization and democratization have been decimated by attempts to attract international investment. These unions increasingly resemble civic associations and reframe their weakness as professionalism (Fraser 2010). They sell food and financial services to miners; facilitate leniency in workers' disciplinary disputes; and negotiate (ever-decreasing) wages through technocratic discussions about the copper price, shareholder entitlements, and the cost of living. This article has explored how volunteer, workplace-based branch executives drew upon union ideology when adopting moral responsibility for their co-workers' well-being. I have combined a focus on unions' structural weakness with insights from works that conceptualize political economies through relationships, subjectivities, and moral norms (Bear 2015; Durrenberger 2017). I argue that unionists' disposition for empathetic leadership, encompassed within an anti-militant ethical-political project, diminished wages while enabling Zambian capitalism. Branch executives guided miners' middle-class subjectivity through discourses of technocratic professionalism and through facilitating miners' relationships with company management, credit providers, and even their families and churches (cf. Prentice 2015; Shever 2012). Union discourse, combined with the demands of the wage negotiations, encouraged branch executives to accept a trade-off between increasing salaries and laying off co-workers (cf. Ho 2009). Seeing their negotiations' outcomes as just, they then leveraged their popularity to discourage strikes, reducing workers' bargaining power within the national political economy (cf. Bear 2015).

In investigating junior unionists within an anti-militant ethical-political project, I provide important caveats to recent advances in the anthropology of trade unionism. Ethnography rightly celebrates unionists who draw uncritically upon union ideologies and histories as they engage in political action that creates substantive change (Lazar 2017; Werbner 2014). However, Zambian mining unionists encompassed themselves in a political project aimed at mitigating, rather than challenging, the power of liberal capital. Reflecting common forms of unionist self-motivation, their labour was embedded in narratives of solidarity, strength, and righteous victory, with little tolerance for dissent (Keskula & Sanchez 2019). This victory would occur through 'recruitment', where a larger union would offer cheaper, better goods and services, and would pressure the government for more financial assistance. Recruitment would enhance the quality of life of miners, Copperbelt

residents, and rural kin, and eventually all Zambians, even while (market-necessitated) casualization and mechanization reduced wages. During moments of hardship, where the unions' disempowerment was most apparent, the need to draw strength from solidarity discouraged interrogating this ideology and the unjust capitalism it legitimized (cf. Lazar 2017). The global weakening of labour encourages studying how unions can (or already do) enable members to scrutinize their ethical-political projects while maintaining the enthusiasm that solidarity generates; as well as how unionists can self-motivate as discourses of union strength become untenable (cf. Werbner 2014).

I have therefore argued for exploring how unionists' motivation combines their tangible solidarities with their union's ethical-political projects. This is a significant departure from many studies, which conceptualize member servicing and anti-militancy as un-ideological or corrupt (Moody 1997; Zolniski 2019). Tangible relationships encompassed in union politics encouraged branch executives to cooperate with those who could materially assist their co-workers (banks, the government, and employers). Yet this same politics and solidarity (and the free market ideologies it inadvertently contained) motivated Richard to risk his job by utilizing stolen documents. Evidencing the potential to be driven primarily by solidarities, as opposed to discourses of union strength, Kanda consistently lent his meagre savings to any miner who asked. Future studies should explore how differing solidarities between unionists, their families, and communities interact with national political structures to shape, challenge, or mitigate capitalism (cf. Collins 2012; von Holdt 2003). Academics interested in unions' role in social change should consider tangible solidarities as an entry point, rather than a distraction, exploring how unions can reach 'through', rather than 'beyond', the workplace (cf. Harvey 2001).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All informants' names, but not names of companies or public figures, are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> I do not engage with the substantive debate around defining Africa's middle class (see Southall 2016; Visagie & Posel 2013). Rather, despite being industrial workers, Zambian miners' historic wealth and urbanization mean that they self-conceptualize as middle class and their subjectivities are entwined with this label (Mususa 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Werbner (2014) draws heavily on Thompson's concepts of class (1971) to describe whole-union mobilization. Keskula and Sanchez (2019) focus on the affective labour of branch executives, built through 'sentiments of identification'. For each of these theorists however, union leadership requires self-disciplining through union ideologies (see Werbner 2014: 39-59; Keskula & Sanchez 2019: 114-16).

<sup>4</sup> 'Basic salary' represents 60 per cent of full salary; ZKM is pre-debasement kwacha.

<sup>5</sup> The Jesuit Centre for Social Research claimed that 4,082 ZKW (405 USD) covered the monthly basic costs for a Kitwe-based family; annual school fees cost 2,000 ZKW (198 USD) per person.

<sup>6</sup> In an important exception, Von Holdt (2003) demonstrates how representing their co-workers under apartheid inherently radicalized African shop stewards.

<sup>7</sup> Under 10 per cent of MUZ chairpersons were re-elected.

<sup>8</sup> See the next section.

<sup>9</sup> Branches received 5-10 per cent (200-10,000 ZKW) of their union dues.

<sup>10</sup> A few chairmen owned mining subcontractors.

<sup>11</sup> *Wā* is an honorific in ciBebma, so *wachair* translates loosely to 'honourable chairman'.

<sup>12</sup> NUMAW's election was almost identical.

<sup>13</sup> Acid provided under 4 per cent of revenue.

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## Une négociation raisonnable ? Subjectivités des syndicalistes de terrain, négociation des salaires et quotidien d'un projet éthico-politique

### Résumé

Cet article analyse comment, dans un souci de responsabilité envers leurs camarades de travail quant à leur moyen de subsistance, les syndicalistes ont façonné le capitalisme minier en Zambie. L'auteur avance que les dirigeants des sections syndicales ont pris conscience que le meilleur moyen de soutenir leurs collègues était de leur proposer des prestations financières, tout en coopérant avec les ressources humaines. Dans les négociations salariales, les syndicalistes sont sortis renforcés de cette compréhension, qui les a encouragés à considérer la baisse constante des salaires comme dictée par le marché, tout en décourageant un militantisme qui a parfois permis de revaloriser les salaires. À partir de l'anthropologie du syndicalisme, l'auteur détaille comment les solidarités tangibles sur le lieu de travail façonnent les projets éthico-politiques des syndicats ; il avance par ailleurs que la subjectivation à travers la ligne idéologique d'un syndicat peut décourager un examen approfondi des injustices structurelles. Établissant un lien entre l'exploration anthropologique du capitalisme à travers les relations et les normes morales et le rôle du capital dérégulé dans le recul des syndicats, l'auteur affirme que le travail moral, technique et physique des syndicalistes a involontairement permis la dégradation, bien qu'atténuée, des conditions de travail.

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