

South Africa's clandestine miners defend their work (and want it to be legal)

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Protected from the rain and the sun by plastic sheets tied to sticks, dozens of muscle-bound youngsters apply their strength to making heavy metal cylinders turn. They are pieces of piping, soldered closed, or elongated gas canisters that end in a point and, at first glance, look like missiles. They are attached to iron crank handles and rest on two thick branches firmly lodged into the ground. Their constant rotation produces an incessant roar, the sound of fine wet gravel moving, a noise that hovers over the hustle and bustle of the shanty town and gives it a surreal air, like that of an enchanted city.

Day after day, hundreds of artisanal miners bring the material they have extracted to this settlement to the west of Johannesburg, where the gold is separated from the stone and the metal is prepared for sale. The miners unload their sacks filled with broken rock into large iron bowls, and workers armed with large vertical mallets pound it into a kind of sand, which is then introduced into the cylinders, along with water and heavy metal balls that will finish the job of milling the gravel containing the gold. During the next stage, mercury is added and then, after filtering the finely ground rock, it is removed with a blowtorch, which releases the gold from the amalgam.

"It's called division of labour," says Smiley, one of the Zimbabwean migrants involved in this artisanal production system in South Africa. He is one of the many who work tirelessly, every day of the year, to secure a modest income from an activity that provides sustenance for the thousands of people living in the settlement, most of whom come from neighbouring countries.

"Everyone takes their share," he adds, referring to all those taking part in the operation, around which informal grocery stores and food stalls have arisen.

"There are no jobs, neither in our countries nor in South Africa," Smiley tells Equal Times, explaining what pushes people into clandestine mining. "It's the law of the jungle here, only the fittest survive," he adds, referring to the dangers they face, not only underground but also above the surface, where they have to grapple with organised crime and police extortion. Smiley also underlines the low prices at which they have to sell their valuable product, but nevertheless defends the need to preserve the activity. "If [the mines] are closed, all these people will turn to crime, to armed robberies of cars or houses, to be able to eat."

The road to legalisation, still in the making

The same view is held by David van Wyk, who works for the Bench Marks Foundation and grew up living around various mines across southern Africa, to which his father, a prestigious mining engineer, was posted. The foundation, set up by a coalition of South African faith-based organisations, exposes and fights against the injustices in the mining sector. Van Wyk has come to

the settlement with two of his colleagues. They offer miners and gold processors assistance with the process of legalising their operations, an aspiration shared by the majority of workers in these informal cooperatives, which are very efficient but also very vulnerable – given their irregular status – to blackmail, theft and abusive price-setting by buyers.

Van Wyk and his two colleagues hand out papers with their proposals. The workers in charge of crushing the mixture of stone and gold with mallets look on attentively, leaning on their implements. Those in charge of operating the cylinders stop turning the crank handles, but the noise does not cease : the grinders keep on turning in other parts of the settlement. The papers refer to the search for support for an initiative launched by the foundation, which is working with the authorities to secure the formalisation of their activities. The idea is to establish an official register of all informal miners and the abandoned mines in which they operate, to legalise the undocumented immigrants working in the industry, to organise existing networks into legal business entities, such as cooperatives, and to periodically monitor mining operations, to minimise the accidents caused by cave-ins or lack of oxygen, in which miners often lose their lives.

Formalised artisanal mining is already a reality in the historic mine town of Kimberley, where hundreds of previously unregulated diamond miners were granted permits last year, thanks to the joint work of social agents, companies that own abandoned mines and the national and regional governments.

Back in Smiley's settlement, the all-encompassing poverty is broken by the arrival of buyers, in the few vehicles ever seen in the shanty town. They park on the far edge of it and negotiate the payments with the residents appointed for the task. It is, precisely, these well-fed, well-dressed men that are the most strongly opposed to the formalisation plans.

Buyers act as intermediaries between the informal miners and licensed precious metal dealers, who are the gateway to the legal market. If the gold on offer in the settlement were legal, its inhabitants would be able to cut out the middleman, and the same people in the community that risk their lives underground and put all their wits and efforts into processing the metals would be able to sell the gold directly on the legal market, at higher prices than they currently charge. It would spell the end of the middlemen's business.

Despite the advantages of formalisation, the local people do not let down their guard and maintain a degree of mistrust towards Van Wyk and his team. The miners make their living from an illegal activity. Many are in the country without papers and fear arrest or deportation if they are identified.

The buyers' opposition is another obstacle to their cooperation. The miners will continue to depend on these intermediaries until the formalisation process is complete and they are able to establish the contacts and secure the transport they need to be able to sell the gold they extract themselves.

Not surprisingly, the middlemen do not want, at any cost, to be excluded from the business. During the visit of the Bench Marks Foundation, one of the buyers addresses Van Wyk's colleagues in a menacing tone, insisting that they stop any negotiation that does not also include the intermediaries.

According to estimates of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), the illegal mining sector employs some 30,000 people in South Africa. Unregulated miners operate with different degrees of organisation and in different ways. Some work in operational mines, from which they extract minerals with the complicity of corrupt security agents. Other communities, such as that visited by Equal Times, obtain the gold from abandoned mines. "We don't work in operational mines, we only extract gold from closed mines," says Smiley, to support his case for legalising a cooperative

that is already operating underground and is viable.

Much of the gold that reaches this community comes from what is left of Crown Mine. Located next to the city centre, it was one of the richest gold mines in the world in its heyday. It began operating in 1886 and was Johannesburg's first industrial mine, founded in the same year as the South African gold rush.

At the entrance to the gallery, three young Zimbabweans are preparing to start one of their five-day shifts underground. They are carrying backpacks that they have made themselves from synthetic raffia sacks, filled with enough water and food to survive down in the depths. They are no more than 30 years old, but they have more than enough experience and knowledge of the trade to be able to go down into the mine with no other support than a helmet, a lantern, a pickaxe and a hammer. They have been working in mines in Zimbabwe and other southern African countries since they were teenagers. "Artisanal mining, like here," says Lindo Sabata, as he goes with his fellow miners into the hole, which is propped up with iron rods.

A few metres from the mouth of the tunnel, Alex Shange and three of his colleagues stand guard. "I'm here to protect the guys who go down the mine," says the 30-year-old South African, who is a Zulu. "The miners are from countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique or Malawi. They know how to work underground, and when gangsters find out that they are making money, they come with guns and beat them or steal what they get. That's why they come and seek protection from the Zulus," explains Shange.

Known for their tradition as warriors, the Zulus are the largest ethnic group in South Africa. As Van Wyk explains, the apartheid regime already placed them in charge of mine security. Shange and the other guards also live in the settlement and are part of the 'division of labour' outlined by Smiley. "The police come and steal what we have to sell. If we want to get it back, we have to pay the officers," says one of the security guards, who also explains that the police sometimes open fire with their weapons. "We can't report them to anyone, because what we do is illegal."

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