

From Coercion to Compensation: Comparative Living Standards of Copper Mine Workers in the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia, c. 1910-1970

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Abstract

This paper explores the living standards of African copper mine workers in the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia in a quantitative comparative perspective. We reconstruct real wage series from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, which suggest that coerced labourers lived at barebones subsistence levels in the first years of mining operations, but experienced rapid gains in labour compensation from the mid-1920s onwards, in contrast to stagnant real wages earned by South African miners. From the 1940s onwards, copper mine workers were among the best paid of manual labourers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Living standard improvements coincided with a shift from coercive labour recruitment practices to labour stabilization programs designed to raise welfare conditions of workers and their families. Although real wage trends in the Copperbelt mines were largely comparable, other welfare facilities such as medical care, education and housing quality, were further advanced in the Congolese mining compounds. We interpret this difference as a result of the full embracement of labour stabilization policies in the Belgian Congo, while in Northern Rhodesia these policies were contested and adopted more hesitantly.