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Working Group “Labour in Mining”

Session

Mining and Agriculture relationships: Influences on labour organisation and labour markets

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The historical relationship between mining and agriculture is long and multifaceted. Both economic sub-sectors are part of the primary sector and are based on human exploitation of the natural environment, both mineral and vegetable.

As a consequence, agriculture and mining often share a physical environment, which they often compete with each other in various ways. Both sub-sectors share space, financing, infrastructure and, especially, labour markets. They are developed in places that depend on specific characteristics: mineral resources in the first case and soil endowments, water resources and climate mainly in the second. The difference lies in the greater time constraints of mining, which exploits non-renewable resources. It is normal for mining activity to have an impact on agricultural areas, influencing each other in different ways. Historical mining has until recently been (and still is in some areas) labour intensive, so there is a heavy dependence on the labour market, both for unskilled and more skilled labour (which is still the case). The initial source of supply was the agricultural environment, with many mining centres characterised by dual work, organised in different ways. The previous structures or customs of the area where extraction took place had a different but important influence on the new forms of labour organisation, the use of child or female labour. The degree of women's participation in mining has been shown to be closely related to this earlier substratum and to the conditions under which mining evolved in its early stages.

The demand for employment in the mines, which in some areas generated important migratory movements, altered the working conditions in the areas where it was introduced, leading to conflicts with the previous economic activity. In some parts of Europe, it was even proposed in the 19th century to temporarily stop working in the mines during periods of peak agricultural activity. The strategies of the mining companies were to ensure the supply of workers, so they developed strategies to fix and indoctrinate the workforce. Depending on the circumstances in which extraction

took place, they could take advantage of the joint work of mines and agriculture or they could try to develop a specific working environment, adapted to the numerical and qualification needs of the exploitations. This is what happened in some basins where the dual worker was initially praised and later attempts were made to professionalise mine workers, separating them from the rural environment or from the lack of definition in which they could be found at times. The industrial paternalism of the mining companies was also at work here, in this effort to control, fix and train their employees.

Not only were factors related to the labour market and the supply of labour the only elements of labour interference. The new activity and the population centres that developed in the heat of the exploitation of the subsoil influenced and/or collided with the pre-existing population, altering their situation to some extent. New demands for work, complementary employment possibilities, economic changes, interference with basic resources (mainly water and land), pollution (of people, animals or flora), cultural elements, violence (a characteristic of the past and present of these districts), etc. were factors that influenced the living conditions of the environment. Finally, the decline and closure of the mines is another element of influence that can translocate the economy of the districts where this activity was established.

The relationship between agriculture and mining has been analysed in numerous works, both by agricultural and mining history researchers. However, despite its importance, it has not been placed as the central focus of research or, at least, as the core of the debate on its historical evolution. This session aims to fill in some of this gap by exploring the influence of this relationship on the development of labour markets and labour organisation.

Deadline for submissions: 15th September 2023.

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