

Chapter 5. A Casual Exploitation.



Vale

Nicolás Rodríguez

*'If his work is painful, his rest seems so too,
for his bed is a blanket, and his dwelling, a narrow cave or a hovel,
where several miners gather to sleep,
accompanied by all the miseries and plagues of poverty.'*

J Pie y Allué 1883.

The labour terms and conditions of those working in the early days of the mines were well documented by Bayo and Madoz, and then, over the years, by acting engineers and visiting interested parties. Rural, agricultural labour norms, such as working from sunrise to sunset, and only receiving remuneration when the crop had been sold, were transferred to the mining sector. Paying the workers when the ore had been sold was of great benefit to the mine owners, in that it reduced their operating costs. This was particularly true when a mine was being first developed. It also secured their workforce for several months since it effectively prevented the men from leaving. Delamarre neatly summed up the situation like this,

"The advantages for the operator are to maintain its workers for the entire duration of a varada, so making a lucrative trade at his expense and, finally, that of being able to operate with a more limited volume of capital since part of the production of the mine can be sold and collected even before the workers who have extracted it have been paid".

Working from sunrise to sunset was a different matter, seasonal variations in the relative lengths of night and day, gave rise to corresponding variations in the length of the day and night shifts. As Madoz commented no one, not even a Spaniard, could work effectively and efficiently underground for up to a 16 hour period. This fact was lost on the mine owners as the 'sol á sol' system was still operating until at least the turn of the century, and the men continued to find ways of resting when they were thought to be working.

With much of the workforce travelling long distances and the exemption of mining from the Sunday working laws, the miners worked continuously for blocks of between 7 and 9 weeks before returning home. The blocks were known as varadas and corresponded to the main events of the religious calendar and local patron saint's days and festivals, in much the same way that school terms and half terms still regulate the academic year today.

New Year to Shrove Tuesday.
Shrove Tuesday to Easter.
Easter to Corpus Christi.
Corpus Christi to Virgin of Carmen.
Virgin of Carmen to Cuevas Festival.
Cuevas Festival to Christmas.

Longer breaks were at Christmas, Easter and the feast of Assumption in August, which corresponded to the Cuevas Festival, with the shorter breaks in between. When the breaks between the varadas were for just a few days, those unable to return home in that a short time, made their way to the coast in order to wash themselves and their clothes.

Unusually, miners in the Sierra Almagrera in the early days did not have to provide their own tools, possibly because, at the start of the mining boom, the majority of the workforce had no mining experience. At the end of a shift, the men left their tools where they were, ready for the incoming shift to use. This was in order to prevent theft, but as Bayo pointed out, the men wore little more than a shirt and pants, and sometimes simply a loin cloth, so could hardly smuggle a borer and a hammer past the watchful eye of the foreman at the pithead. Tools were far more likely to become buried under rubble or to lie unused for several days as the foremen were largely incapable of properly ordering the work.

Unlike nearly everywhere else, the miners' tools in the Sierra Almagrera were provided by the mine owners.

Un mineur de Heulgoat (Pitre-Chevalier)



The men worked semi-naked.

mileneo.com

Wages didn't vary greatly since prices were stable until the turn of the century, when there was a moderate rise. Rampant inflation only came when so much of Europe was engaged in the First World War. Souviron lists the wages in 1898 as 0.80 pesetas for boys, 1.12 pesetas for adult labourers and 1.65 for picadors, as well as lipmiadores and other positions which required some skill or knowledge. Whilst he described these rates as not been excessively low, he commented on how the owners found ways of clawing some of the money back.

All the while that the men were at work their needs were met by the mine owners, not just their food but also any clothes and personal items, with payment being deducted from their salaries. This benefited the mine owners as they could charge above the odds for the goods which they provided, although the deduction for food was equitable. Since the owner was the only person who would give them credit, the men had little choice but to accept the situation. This credit system became increasingly more disadvantageous for the miners as the years went by. I don't know whether it was foreign companies or local companies which promulgated the iniquitous 'truck system' of payment in this area, but by the end of the century it had become widespread.

The payment of all, or part, of a miner's wages in the form of tokens was outlawed in England in 1831 but did continue in some parts until 1887. It was widespread in Europe and America, where there was a shortage of paper money, and everywhere, it benefited the employer and disadvantaged the worker. Under the truck system, workers were given vales, (tokens) or coupons which had to be exchanged for goods at designated outlets. Employers usually either had interests in such establishments, or received a percentage of the transaction amount. The worker suffered because there was no price competition, nor redress or refund if the goods amount was less than the coupon amount. There was one such 'company store' in Las Herrerías, but I don't know if one existed in Los Lobos.

The 'company store' in Las Herrerías where coupons or vales could be exchanged for goods.

Author's photo.



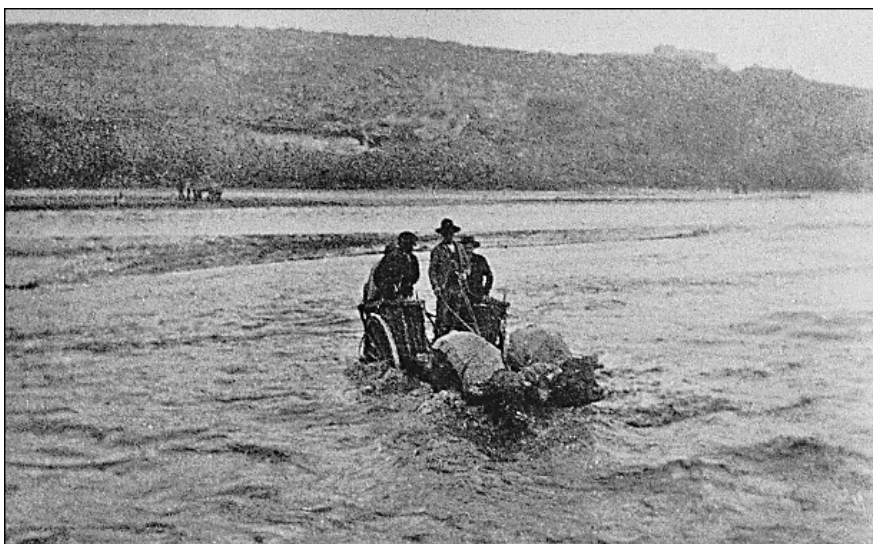
Come the end of a varada the cash sale of the ore was so great that an ox-cart was needed to transport it to the Cuevas houses of the owners of the Jaroso Rich Mines, while the men were given what was left of their wages with the inevitable consequences, as described by Delamarre:

"Payday presents the immense inconvenience of putting in their hand suddenly and precisely in times of distraction quite a large sum. They don't take long in wasting it, and after an absence of a few eight days they return to work, as poor as before. They start their regular three-month period of work again, during which they will have no rest day, not even on Sundays."



It required an ox-cart to transport the owners' money. todocoleccion

In 1884, the year of the great rains, the Almanzora was running so high at Cuevas that it was impassable and 2,000 men returning home from the mines, probably having patronized some of the ventas on the way, were stranded on its banks in the Portilla area. With no food available, some of them took to helping themselves from the surrounding homes and gardens, while others attempted the crossing, cheered on by their compatriots. Some were successful, some were not, and for the bystanders, some wagers were won, and some were lost. Unfortunately, when many of the men returned at the start of the following varada, they found themselves out of work as the excessive rainfall had flooded many of the mine workings.



Oxen proved to be invaluable when the Almanzora was in flood.

From "Water and Life" by Enrique Fdez. Bolea / Col. Juan Grima]

Mine kitchens were superseded quite early on by food supplied by catering contractors. Provided that the caterer's pack animals arrived on time, everyone ate breakfast before starting work, but if not then they went to work on an empty stomach. When the food arrived, a foreman repeatedly struck the winch supports with a bar and shouted at the top of his voice ¡Cadena!. The cry was taken up by the on-setters at the bottom of the shaft, where it was happily taken up by others voices and passed on until it reached the furthest corners of the mine. Then, everyone started the arduous climb up the interminable ladders to breathe the fresh air. The same process was repeated at midday when all of the workers, surface and underground, came together to eat, with the boys standing a little way apart from the men. In addition to the hour's break at midday, there were five or six short breaks of 15 minutes or so, which were at the discretion of the foreman. These were signalled by the cry ¡tabaco! and were terminated by the call ¡á otro!



Miners taking a short break.

nuestro tiempo

Bayo surmised that the shout of ¡Cadena!, (chain,!) stemmed from the time when mines in Spain, particularly mercury ones, were worked by convicts. Up until 1799 men held in the gaol at Almadén worked in the mines there, later, Franco used the gaol and its inmates to the same ends until 1944. Others have postulated that the call comes from the Roman times when mines were worked by slaves. Though neither slaves nor convicts, these men's lives were little better.



Inmates of the gaol at Almadén worked in the mercury mines until 1944.

Foto Centro de Estudios de Castilla La Mancha Almadén



Slaves operating a water extraction system in a mine.

proyectoarrayanes

For the majority of the workers, the food provided by the caterers was part of their salary since they were paid ‘con rancho’. The remainder, who possibly lived quite locally, or, worked as a team on different shifts and so able to source food, fended for themselves. Bayo described what was provided in detail and, like so many things in the Sierra Almagrera, the meals were given colloquial names, specific to the area. Breakfast was known as ‘café’, despite being a concoction of oil, fried garlic and boiled salted water, into which the men dunked their ration of bread. Lunch was called ‘bazófia’, an unlovely way of describing food since it means everything from leftovers to excrement. It was actually a stew made from vegetables, pulses, typically dried beans or chick peas, and carbohydrates in the form of rice, pasta or potatoes, and the inevitable oil and paprika. Again, this was mopped up with a ration of bread. Supper went by the name of ‘gandinga’, a word of Puerto Rican origin for a soup made of, amongst other ingredients, pigs offal. This sobriquet was possibly a wry comment on the fact that there was little hope of there being anything other than vegetables in the stew that was presented. The menu remained pretty much unchanged for two decades, when gradually, some mine owners stipulated the addition of small amounts of dried fish, bacon or fresh meat to the pot. This was in recognition of the fact that much of the workforce was malnourished.



Food was brought in by catering contractors.

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Workers slaking their thirst.

Anon



Over the years many people, mainly foreign mine engineers and other interested parties, have commented disparagingly on the food provided. They were firmly of the opinion that the lack of animal proteins was scandalous. Bayo, however, made no comment apart from saying, 'Of course, it is possible to presume that all these meals, as a matter of contract, are not always the most exquisite, despite the efforts made by the owners of the mines to oblige the contractors to comply with the stipulations'.

In other words, he only had an issue with the overall taste of the food, and was satisfied with what was provided. Unlike later in-comers, Bayo understood the world in which rural people lived. He knew that what was provided for the men in the mines was far superior to what they had at home. When you look at the meals, apart from being monotonous, they are actually a balanced vegetarian diet, with all of the complementary proteins. Malnutrition was mainly due to the prevalence of tapeworms and to the quality and insufficient quantity of the bread which, at times, was absolutely inedible so that too few calories were being consumed for the work performed.

Bread and water were the two major overheads for the contractors who, over the years, were both commended for doing a good job and castigated for not. I suspect that there were good people and bad people, with a shortage of supplies, weevils in the flour, blight of the potatoes, and a host of other circumstances affecting the feeding of the five thousand, it was a thankless task at the best of times. However, fraud existed at every level in the Sierra Almagrera. Bayo dedicated a whole chapter to the subject and Souviron half a century later commented

“Food, consisting of a broth in the morning, a stew in the middle day and another broth at night, bread and sometimes fruits when they are almost given away in the countryside, all of which is supposed to be worth 0.75 pesetas, to me it seems useless to go into details, since everyone can imagine that the food goes hand in hand with everything else related to mines and workers.”

Following widespread protests the practice was largely abandoned in 1902. However, despite it becoming illegal in 1907 the loss of profit to the company was so great that the Basques re-introduced the system. The threat of strike action in 1911 seems to have brought an end to the long-running dispute.

In the 1950s El Arteal had a canteen and an economato, a discount store, both subsidized by MASA. As part of the Franco's state, political and social paternalism the economato operated in the opposite way to the truck system in that the workers benefited from it, but the company still had the whip hand.



The ruins of an economato.

twimg.com.