

Zimbabwe graphite miners strike at former German-owned mine

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More than 200 workers at the Lynx graphite mine near Karoi in northern Zimbabwe have been on strike since the end of December to protest the fact they have not received their wages for more than a year.

Workers have reportedly vowed to continue their strike and have blockaded six trucks that sought to remove graphite from the mine until they get paid and see an improvement in working conditions.

Until September 2017, the mine in Karoi was a joint venture between the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC) and the German firm Graphit Kropfmühl GmbH. The mine has operated since 1965 and employs a total of 260 workers.

Four months ago, after more than 50 years of production in Zimbabwe, Graphit Kropfmühl ceded its 50 percent share to ZMDC for the symbolic price of one US dollar. “Fruitful cooperation is no longer possible,” explained Graphit Kropfmühl Managing Director Thomas Junker at the time to the *Passauer Neue Presse*.

A worker who wished to remain anonymous told the Zimbabwean *News Day* that workers had not received their wages for 13 months. “We live in the dark because there is no electricity in the mine. It was shut down because the company did not settle its debts of several hundred thousand [dollars] with Zesa”, Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) the state electricity supplier. The worker reported that he and his colleagues were now forced to drink untreated water from the mine’s reservoir due to the lack of electricity.

“Some suppliers came and seized property from the mine because their debts were not paid,” the worker continued. “In December, 14 containers were suddenly loaded with graphite, but there are no wages for us.”

Money was being used to pay people who “manage the mine at the expense of the suffering miners,” the

worker suspected. “We do not know what they are using the proceeds for, since they claim the company is in the red.”

An unnamed representative of Lynx Mine, who had no official approval to speak to the media, said the current situation was due to falling world market prices for graphite. “We used to get \$600 a ton, but right now it’s only \$340.”

Production had been discontinued in September due to a lack of capital. On October 1, the Zimbabwe-based *Sunday Mail* reported that Lynx Mine was negotiating with investors for a \$5 million investment to secure long-term production. Lynx Mine CEO Cris Chitambira told the newspaper that this meant the mine could produce 500 tonnes a month.

Graphite is mainly needed to produce batteries, fuel cells and plastics, but also in other products of the chemical industry. Together with lithium, graphite is one of the future “strategic minerals” of the world economy, mainly due to the switch to electromobility in the automotive industry. The worldwide graphite market is currently estimated at an annual volume of one million tonnes. The Lynx mine in Karoi has reserves for the next 12 to 18 years.

Graphit Kropfmühl is a Bavarian-based company with over 140 years history. Since 2008, the company has been part of the global AMG Group which is headquartered in the Netherlands, probably for tax purposes, but is run out of the US.

AMG group employs around 3,000 people worldwide in the precious metals and rare earths business. In addition to sales offices in Russia and Japan, a 2015 corporate brochure lists locations in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the USA, the Czech Republic, China, Mexico, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Congo, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

While workers in Zimbabwe are struggling under inhumane conditions, deprived of wages, five weeks ago Graphit Kropfmühl celebrated “a new record turnover, a comprehensive concept for the future and secure jobs,” according to the regional press. The managing director of the graphite group at AMG, Thomas Junker, is quoted as saying: “The year 2017 continued the company’s success story.”

According to the *Passauer Neue Presse* the annual “St Barbara’s festival of the large Kropfmühler graphite family” was a “sign of the close links between the workforce and the management.” Of course the African workers who mine the graphite do not count as part of the family; they are left to fend for themselves.

Far from seeking to mobilize the working class to defend the Lynx miners the general secretary of the Zimbabwe Diamond Workers’ Union, Justice Chinhema, has made an empty appeal to management to quickly resolve the workers’ complaints. “We hope that management will address the issues raised by the workers, such as paying wages and improving working conditions,” he pleaded. He himself had addressed these questions several times with the responsible ministers and the ZMDC, but to no avail, he said.

When Zimbabwe’s former President Robert Mugabe was overthrown and replaced by Emmerson Mnangagwa just over a month ago, the mass of the Zimbabwean population had responded with joyful celebrations. Many hoped that the social decline and the suppression of democratic rights would now come to an end.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that those who believed Mugabe’s downfall would bring an improvement in their lives will be cruelly disappointed. “The military and the faction of the ruling ZANU-PF led by Emmerson Mnangagwa have used Mugabe’s 37 years as head of state to channel social discontent against him and his wife Grace and the nouveau riche.” Mnangagwa’s reign will do nothing to change the miserable social conditions workers confront. The current struggle of the Lynx miners confirms this.

The working class must maintain its political independence from all representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers. This applies to all the current political parties and their supporting trade union federations. Zimbabwean workers will find their real allies in the workers of Africa, Asia,

Australia, Europe and the Americas.



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