

Chinese Investments in Zambia: The Role of Government in Protecting Workers

AGNES LESLIE

My current research focuses on Chinese investments and their impact on Zambian workers. This is part of my book project which examines China's relationship with Zambia since the latter's independence in 1964. Part of the research investigates Chinese investments located in Lusaka with the objective of portraying the working environment and conditions of service of the workers. The investigations focused on benefits for the workers, including salary, allowances, sick leave, safety, and compliance to environmental standards.

I toured and investigated small, medium, and large-sized companies. Four of the companies were located in the Lusaka's industrial area, a few miles from the town center. The fifth company was located in a non-industrial area, a few miles off the Great North Road. One company was involved in brickmaking, another one in making roofing tiles, two were engaged in plastic bag production, and the fifth and largest dealt in steel production.

The companies had similar characteristics, including location, set-up, conditions of employment, and style of management. They all employed a majority of their workers on a non-permanent basis. Some were on contract, but the majority

was employed as casual workers even those working at the company for a long time. The workers in all the five companies were concerned about the conditions of service and benefits. They had few or no benefits and no sick leave or housing allowance. Two of the companies offered their employees transport allowance if they left work after six in the evening, but their employers avoided paying that by keeping the workers locked in the factory and working until six the next morning.

There are several laws enacted by the Zambian parliament intended to protect the Zambia workers. There are at least seven laws which relate to labor, employee relations, benefits and their working environment. However, most of the Chinese employers said they were not aware of the laws. In most cases the foreign investors are made aware of the laws as soon as they start operating in Zambia. The labor department also holds workshops to educate employers about workers' rights.

Despite having the laws and the Ministry of Labor and Social Services (LSS) there have been several incidents in which workers' rights and environmental protection have not been observed. The LSS has at times had to close factories due to non-compliance of the safety and environmental



laws and the poor labor conditions. In 2013, the Zambian government revoked licenses of Chinese officials who managed the Collum Coal mine, 200 miles south of the capital of Lusaka due to poor safety, health and environmental conditions. This is the company where the Chinese employers shot and injured 11 workers, two seriously.

I conducted surveys with various groups including LSS officials, members of parliament, the media, university faculty and graduate students. Most of them felt that the government was not doing enough to protect the workers. Officials from the LSS admitted that they were understaffed and would be more effective if they had more staff and transportation to conduct the inspections. The MPs suggested the need for more laws to protect the workers and stronger laws to guide the investors and keep them accountable. They also suggested that foreign investors should partner with indigenous companies in order to create positive environments and to empower Zambians.

Agnes Ngoma Leslie is senior lecturer and outreach director in the Center for African Studies. This research is funded in part by the Center for African Studies and the Office of Research.

