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SILICOSIS: Dying for Gold: New documentary lays bare the stark debt SA owes its miners

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6-8 minutes

Five mining companies have agreed on a R5-billion settlement to compensate miners who contracted lung disease in the course of their work. But the process of paying the money out is likely to be long and complex – and as a new documentary argues, can any settlement make up for the devastation on human bodies and communities wrought by more than a century of mining?

“Genocide”.

That is the word that Namibia-born filmmaker Richard Pakleppa uses to describe the system which saw generations of black men sent down South African mines to work in conditions that mine bosses and medical experts knew from early on would cause many of them to contract debilitating lung disease.

There are other analogies that Pakleppa uses in grappling with the South African mining industry. One is slavery; another is the cold, bureaucratic horror of Nazism.

Pakleppa, together with Catherine Meyburgh, is the co-director of the new documentary *Dying for Gold,* a powerful and haunting chronicle of South African mining seen from the particular prism of its health impact on the men who have toiled underground.

Following a massive class-action suit brought by silicosis-affected miners and their dependents, a R5-billion settlement with mining companies has been reached to pay out compensation. (Image supplied)

The filmmakers spent many months researching in state archives to find film footage and documents which make plain how well aware the mining establishment was that the work undertaken by miners was potentially life-threatening.

Early in the documentary, the viewer is shown footage from a 1921 movie whose title says it all: *"Dust Kills"*.

The dangers of silica dust, explains a voice-over, have been known "since the early days of deep-level gold mining".

The historical footage in the documentary provides a chilling counterpoint to the interviews the filmmakers carry out with miners – some of whom struggle to talk due to their advanced silicosis and TB – and the relatives of dead miners.

Particularly sinister are the clips of old propaganda films used to recruit young men to the mines. There, the mines are presented as something akin to jolly holiday camps: miners are shown drinking free beer, with weekly movie screenings. Recruits will be accommodated "with their own tribal groups", the film promises, and expenses are so minimal that every penny earned is available to be spent as the miners please.

Amelia Mbombe, Mozambique. (Image supplied)

And indeed, work on the mines did – briefly – bring lives of relative affluence to some of the individuals interviewed by the filmmakers. Amelia Mbombe, a miner's widow from Mozambique, reminisces about the tractor her now-dead husband surprised her with to ease the strain of small-scale farming back home.

"As a working man, you had to have something to show for it. We were show-offs. I bought this car after seeing a white man driving it," remembers former miner Bangumzi Balakisi, in reference to a faded photo of Balakisi and his family proudly posing next to an old Valiant.

But the money didn't last long – partly because mining companies were wary about continuing to employ "natives" who had already spent long periods underground, as officials knew their health would likely already be compromised.

While mine bosses and doctors employed by the mines knew all about silicosis, the lung disease contracted from extended exposure to silica dust, the same level of information was never extended to the miners.

"By the time you're aware of it, you already have silicosis," Balakisi tells the camera. "Only science can see this fine dust, not us."

Pakleppa says what shocked him most in working on the documentary was "the scale of it".

By "it", he means the vast industry set up to staff the mines with cheap labour: the duplicitous recruitment campaigns in poverty-stricken areas of South Africa and neighbouring countries, the deeply dysfunctional migrant labour system, the prison-like conditions of the mining hostels, and the complicity of the medical establishment in ensuring a plentiful stock of healthy bodies to go down the mines.

“The whole South African medical system is deeply connected to the mining industry – I mean, the Medical Board was established by the Chamber of Mines,” Pakleppa says.

He compares the historical records that he and Meyburgh unearthed in the course of their research to the archives brought to the Nazi trials at Nuremberg: “The planning, the tone, the talking about people as a wastage of labour…”

One striking feature of the documentary is the interviews it shows with young men whose fathers have contracted lung disease from the mines – and yet who still encourage their sons to follow the same path.

“In the absence of other opportunities, the mine remains the place where you get the job,” says Pakleppa.

“This is still very deeply entrenched in many communities. The son sees their father die and says: ‘I’ll wear a [protective] mask [while working underground] and be very careful.’ But we’ve been down there [in the mines] with them; it gets hot, people take the masks off…”

Following a massive class-action suit brought by silicosis-affected miners and their dependents, a R5-billion settlement with mining companies has been reached to pay out compensation, and is waiting to be stamped and sealed by the Gauteng High Court. Payouts of between R70,000 and R500,000 will be made, and mineworkers and their dependents have 12 years to submit claims.

But Pakleppa is not hugely optimistic about this development, pointing out that the bureaucratic hurdles to getting claimants diagnosed, certified and paid out remain extremely onerous.

“Previous examples of [these kinds of settlements] show you that people don’t get paid, they don’t get found, they just die,” he says.

The filmmakers hope their documentary will contribute to what Pakleppa calls a “coherent movement” to bring justice and equitable compensation to sick former miners and their families.

One of the points made by the documentary is that South African mining has been at the very heart of creating the vastly unequal society the country experiences to this day.

At the documentary's end, the voice-over carries a warning: "It would be too easy to only point at the mining companies and the state because all of us who benefit from this economy are complicit." **DM**

For more information on the Dying for Gold documentary, visit www.dyingforgold.com