

DEEP-LEVEL GOLD MINING

When gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in 1886, it was very different from earlier diamond mining.

Gold on the Rand lay deep underground, far below the surface.

This type of mining became known as deep-level mining, and it completely changed South Africa's economy, labour systems, and society.



Underground locomotive. Image by Raymond Neilson

What Is Deep-Level Gold Mining?

Deep-level mining means **digging very deep shafts into the earth to reach gold reefs.**

Gold on the Witwatersrand was found in thin layers of rock, not scattered nuggets.

Some mines went down 2–3 km deep.

This required special machinery, skilled workers, and huge amounts of capital (money).

The Randlords and the formation of the Chamber of Mines

During the Mineral Revolution, gold mining on the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) grew into a huge industry.

With this growth came a powerful group of businessmen known as the Randlords and an organisation called the Chamber of Mines.

Both played a major role in shaping South Africa's mining industry and labour system.

Who Were the Randlords?

The Randlords were wealthy mine owners and businessmen who controlled most of the gold and diamond mines in South Africa during the late 1800s.

- They were mostly British and European businessmen.
- They invested huge amounts of money in mining.
- They owned the largest mining companies.
- They became extremely wealthy and influential.
- They controlled the mining industry, labour, and even politics

Famous Randlords



Cecil John Rhodes – founder of De Beers (diamonds)



Alfred Beit – major investor in gold mining



Barney Barnato – diamond and gold magnate



Herman Eckstein – established big gold mines on the Rand

Why Did Randlords Become Powerful?

- Randlords gained power because gold mining required:
- Very large amounts of capital (money)
- Advanced machinery
- Skilled engineers
- Large labour forces
- Only wealthy businessmen could afford to run such mines.
- As they bought smaller diggers out, they created big mining companies that controlled most of the gold production.
- Their goal was simple: maximum profit, often at the expense of African workers.

The Formation of the Chamber of Mines (1889)

What is the Chamber of Mines?

The Chamber of Mines was an association formed to represent mine owners and coordinate mining activities.

Reasons It Was Formed

- To influence government
- They pushed for laws like: Pass laws Recruitment rules
- Taxes that forced Africans to work in mines
- To recruit workers
- They established systems to bring workers from rural South Africa, Mozambique, Lesotho, and other regions.
- To control African labour
- Mine owners wanted a steady supply of cheap labour.
- They agreed on low wages so workers couldn't move to better-paying mines.
- To coordinate safety and mining rules
- Mines needed shared rules for blasting, ventilation, and engineering.
- To fight trade unions
- They worked together against strikes and worker demands

How the Chamber of Mines Changed the Mining Industry

Standardised (set the same) wages for African workers

- This kept wages low, making mining profits high.

Controlled the migrant labour system

- They helped develop:
- closed compounds

- pass laws
- fixed contracts
- recruitment networks

This ensured African men could not easily leave or find better jobs.

Became very politically powerful

The Chamber influenced government decisions about labour, land, and taxation.

- Improved some mining technology
- Mine owners shared information about:
 - Drilling
 - Ventilation
 - pumping systems
 - blasting techniques
- This made deep-level mining more efficient (and profitable).

Impact on African Workers

The Randlords and the Chamber of Mines played a major role in creating harsh labour systems:

- Workers were paid very low wages
- Families were separated because of migrant labour
- Workers lived in closed compounds
- Pass laws restricted their movement
- Job colour bar prevented Africans from getting skilled jobs

Impact of migrant labour on families

Migrant labour caused:

- Family separation
- Increased work for women
- Emotional stress
- Fathers absent from children's lives
- Reduced farming and more poverty
- Spread of disease
- Weakening of traditional family structures

Skilled White Workers

Skilled white workers were people who had special training, technical knowledge, or experience.

They were mostly from Europe, especially Britain, because South Africa did not yet have enough skilled workers.

Examples of skilled white workers:

- Engineers
- Machine operators
- Blasting experts
- Mechanics
- Surveyors
- Supervisors (shift bosses)

Reasons they were considered skilled:

They could operate the new machinery used in deep-level mines.

They understood engineering, explosives, and safety procedures.

They were trained in mining methods not yet known in South Africa.

Treatment and Conditions:

- Earned much higher wages than African workers.
- Received better housing and food.
- Held supervisory positions over black workers.
- Were protected by the colour bar (a system that reserved skilled jobs for whites only).

Unskilled White Workers

Not all white workers were skilled.

Some were unskilled (or semi-skilled), meaning they did not have special training.

Many of them came from poor backgrounds in Europe or struggled to find work in the growing cities.

Examples of unskilled white workers:

- Labourers on the surface
- Policemen on mines
- Guards in compounds
- Administrators' assistants
- Foremen in training

Why they were hired:

- Mine owners wanted to protect white workers from poverty.
- The government encouraged jobs for poor whites (later known as the “poor white problem”).
- White workers were seen as more “reliable” for supervisory roles because of racial attitudes of the time

Treatment and Conditions:

- Earned more than African workers, even when doing similar work.
- Did lighter, safer jobs compared to African miners.
- Were given opportunities to train for skilled jobs.

The Colour Bar

Key feature of mining was the colour bar, a rule that reserved skilled and higher-paid jobs for whites only.

Impact of the colour bar:

- Africans could not become engineers, machine operators, or supervisors.
- White workers kept their high wages.
- The labour system remained unequal.

Why Anti-Indian Legislation Was Passed

White settlers in South Africa felt threatened by the growing success of Indian traders and businesspeople.

- They believed Indians were “competition” and used racist ideas to justify limiting their rights.
- The government passed laws that aimed to:
 - Reduce Indian economic power
 - Prevent Indians from owning land in white areas
 - Control their movement
 - Stop them from becoming politically equal to whites

Examples of Anti-Indian Legislation

Immigration Law of 1897 (Natal).

Indians who were not indentured labourers were required to pass a literacy test in a European language

This made it almost impossible for new Indian immigrants to enter Natal.

Law 3 of 1885 (Transvaal)

It stated that:

Indians could only live in designated locations (special areas).

They were not allowed to own land outside these areas.

Trading licenses were difficult to get or renew.

Impact of Anti-Indian Legislation

Limited Movement

Indians had to carry passes or registration papers.

They were restricted to certain residential areas.

Economic Hardship

Many could not trade freely or get business licenses.

They were pushed into overcrowded areas with poor facilities.

Loss of Rights

Indians could not vote in most provinces.

Their political voice was greatly weakened.

Rise of Resistance

Mahatma Gandhi started Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) in South Africa.

The Indian community organised protests, petitions, and campaigns

Forms of Labour Resistance

African mineworkers resisted harsh conditions through:

- Strikes – refusing to work
- Desertion – running away
- Slow work – deliberately working slowly
- Sabotage – damaging tools
- Disobeying orders
- Protests in compounds
- Cultural resistance – songs, unity, secret meetings