



THE CONGOLESE FIGHT FOR THEIR OWN WEALTH



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This dossier was collaboratively produced by the Centre Culturel Andrée Blouin, the Centre for Research on the Congo-Kinshasa (CERECK), Likambo Ya Mabele (Land Sovereignty Movement), and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

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This dossier is dedicated to the millions of Congolese who have lost their lives over the years to meet market demands; to the freedom fighters of the Telema uprisings, whose perseverance influenced the 2018 presidential elections; and to Cédric Nianza, Armand Tungulu, Floribert Chebeya, Thérèse Déchade Kapangala Mwanza, Rossy Tshimanga, and Luc Nkulula, who sacrificed their lives for the vision of a renewed Congo.

The artwork in this dossier seeks to uplift the centuries-long struggle of the Congolese people against colonialism and for national sovereignty. With the exception of two contributions from the renowned Congolese artists Barly Baruti and M Kadima, the artwork featured was created for this publication through a collaboration between the art department of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and the artists' collective of the Centre Culturel Andrée Blouin in Kinshasa. The dedicated and talented artists spent weeks in the studio discussing the content of the dossier and creating this artwork, including some that could not be included here. Drawing from historical and contemporary photographs that were collectively researched, these images centre the Congolese people as protagonists, rather than victims, of history.

COVER IMAGE

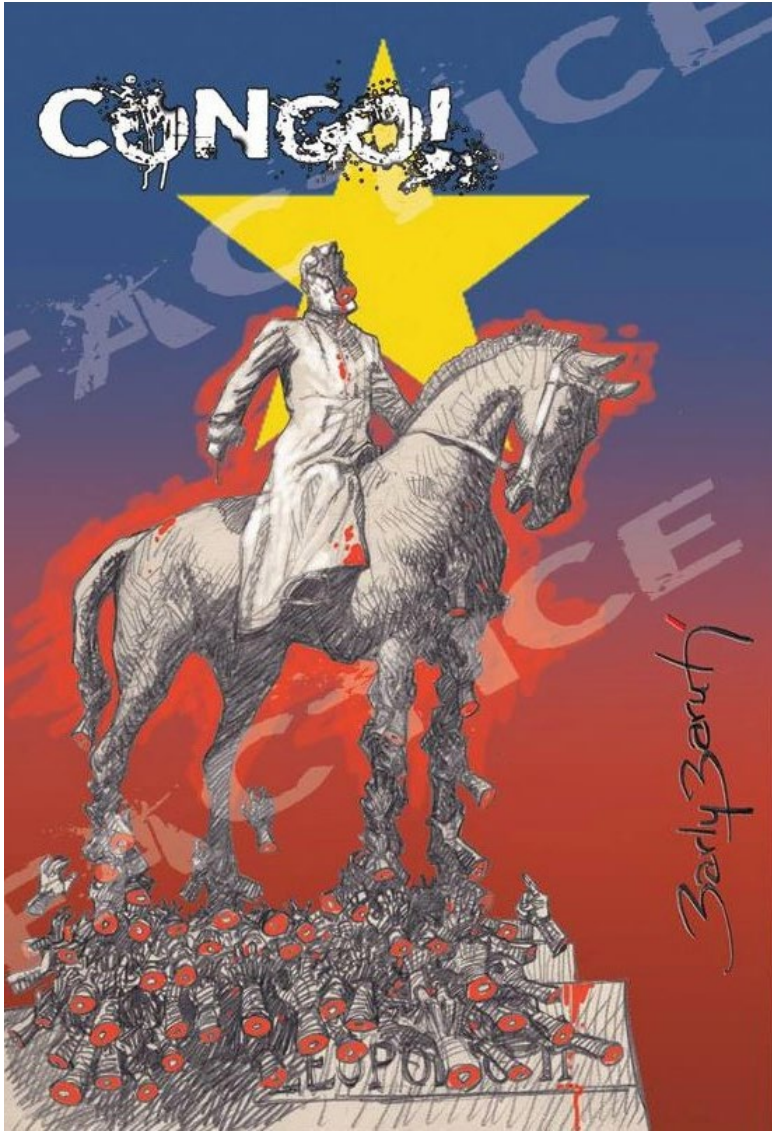
Monsembula Nzaaba Richard or 'Monzari' (DRC), *L'Aube de la résistance Congolaise* ('Dawn of the Congolese Resistance'), 2024.



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Barly Baruti (DRC), *Congo!*, 2024.

Cobalt, lithium, and coltan: these are the minerals needed to advance the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) accounts for around 71% of the total production of cobalt in the world and 35% of its coltan.¹ As long as these minerals exist in the Congo, there will be forces seeking to destabilise the country. But the minerals are not the source of the problem: capitalism is. What is the difference between Norway, for instance – a resource-rich country with lucrative oil reserves – and the DRC? The DRC has been placed low down on the capitalist chain of production, its resources exploited while violence is allowed to continue unfettered.

While the DRC is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of its resources, it has one of the poorest populations. The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) estimates that the DRC has untapped mineral reserves worth US\$24 trillion as well as half of Africa's water resources, half of Africa's forest cover, and 80 million hectares of arable land that have the capacity to feed the entire continent.² In 2022, two metals – copper and cobalt – were exported for a combined total of US\$25 billion, equal to over a third of the Congo's GDP that year.³ Despite this enormous natural resource wealth, the people of the DRC struggle to survive. In the same year, the World Bank found that around 74.6% of the DRC's population lives on less than US\$2.15 a day, and about one in six Congolese live in extreme poverty.⁴ The gap between the country's national wealth and the extreme poverty experienced by the majority is stunning.

The DRC ranks 180 out of 193 countries on the 2022 Human Development Index.⁵ This means that the people of the Congo also

face hunger and inadequate access to decent basic infrastructure, conditions that are linked to a long history of exploitation and a lack of effective governance. Congolese women in particular face more adversity due to rampant sexism, the use of gender-based violence in armed conflicts, and poor social services. For instance, they suffer from steep maternal mortality rates that are nearly three times the global average.⁶ Though women fully participated in public life in pre-colonial times, they have become utterly excluded and oppressed in the post-colonial period.

This situation cannot be blamed solely on the ongoing conflicts in the country, which have been responsible for the death of over six million people since 1996.⁷ These conflicts, which involve a range of actors, are a consequence of significant wealth inequality. But beneath the violence and institutional attrition of the state apparatus lurks a more malign force, one that has been active in the region for almost two centuries and which we will describe in this dossier. This force has led to the pillaging of the land and its resources for profit at any cost. The DRC of today is haunted by the transatlantic trade of humans (from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century) and by King Leopold II's colonisation (1884–1908) and its continuation by the Belgian state (1908–1960). It is haunted by the sabotage of the country's sovereignty through the assassination of its first democratically elected leader, Patrice Lumumba (1925–1961), and by the subordination of its elites to the agendas of major multinational mining companies. The wealth gap, in other words, is easily explained, but equally easily buried in the morass of centuries of racist propaganda and decades of resource mismanagement.

This dossier argues that the Congolese people have been fighting against the theft of their wealth not only since the 1958 formation of the *Mouvement National Congolais* ('Congolese National Movement or MNC') – which sought freedom from Belgium and control over the Congo's extensive natural resources – but even earlier, through working-class resistance between the 1930s and 1950s. That fight has not been easy, nor has it succeeded. The DRC continues to be dominated by exploitation and oppression at the hands of a powerful Congolese oligarchy and multinational corporations that operate with the permission of the former. Furthermore, the country suffers, on one hand, from wars of aggression by its neighbours Rwanda and Uganda, aided by proxy militia groups, and, on the other, from multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IMF that enforce neoliberal policies as a requirement for receiving loans.⁸

Several of the most important components of modern global infrastructure rely on minerals and metals mined in the DRC, such as coltan, cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, tungsten, and uranium. For instance, the building blocks of the digitised global economy are extracted from places like the DRC at very low costs. Militia groups secure labour power through force, resulting in no or low wages for miners and other workers in industrial mining areas. Due to these working conditions, the rate of exploitation of workers who produce the iPhone – a ubiquitous symbol of the end product of mineral ore – is twenty-five times higher than the rate of exploitation of textile workers in nineteenth century England.⁹

The price of digital commodities is further cheapened by the low revenues earned by the Congolese state. To take the example of one

multinational corporation that is key to the extraction of resources from the DRC, Glencore posted market-adjusted earnings of US\$3.5 billion for 2023 (before interest and taxes).¹⁰ It is the ‘subsidy’ of suppressed wages (partly facilitated by coerced and forced labour) and lowered state revenue that provide this company with such high earnings. Without the blood, sweat, and misery of the Congolese portion of the ‘bottom billion’ and the raw materials they produce, companies in the Global North would not be able to extract such high profits.



The Miseries of the Present Are Rooted in Colonialism

In September 1876, King Leopold II of Belgium held the Brussels Geographical Conference, ostensibly to discuss the wretched transatlantic trade of human beings from the African continent. The real motive of the conference, however, was to chart what would become the financial syndicate *Comité d'études du Haut-Congo* ('Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo') in 1878 and then the *Association internationale du Congo* ('International Association of the Congo' or AIC) in 1879. AIC hired the US journalist Henry Morton Stanley to go to the Congo and secure 'a slice of this magnificent African cake' for Leopold II, as the king put it.¹¹ Then, at the Berlin Conference to divide up Africa amongst the colonial powers (1884–1885), Leopold II established the *État indépendant du Congo* ('Congo Free State' or CFS). Centuries of the Congo's pre-history vanished as the CFS treated the vast arable land, eighty times the size of Leopold's Belgium, as *terra nullius* ('territory without a master') and built a brutal plantation economy.

Millions of Africans in the Congo across a broad spectrum of ethnic groups endured a sustained attack on their previous way of life alongside a state of violence animated by the CFS's demands for rubber and other commodities needed to fuel the Industrial Revolution. Many had their hands and feet severed (with 1,308 severed hands brought to the colonial commissioner in one day alone), were killed by more advanced weaponry (such as the Maxim gun), and suffered systematic raids and village burnings.¹² Under Leopold's rule from

1865 to 1909, the king's mercenary *Force Publique* ('Public Force') created a whirlwind of money, murder, and mayhem that moved from the Great Bakongo or Boko region in the west to Katanga in the southeast. The four major social groupings in this whirlwind's path were the Kongo and Kuba peasants and related peoples of the Lower Congo and the Luba and Lunda pastoralists and subsistence-based peasants of the eastern Congo.¹³ From 1876 to 1889, the Belgians attempted to create a colony in the Lower Congo based on groundnut and palm oil extraction. From 1891 to 1895, ivory and rubber competed for pride of place. From 1896 to 1908, rubber extraction turned the Lower Congo and portions of the colony north and east of Stanley Pool (now Malebo Pool) into a charnel house.¹⁴ From 1906 to the 1930s, a mining colony was imposed on the Kasai, Katanga, and Ituri regions. In October 1903, at the height of Leopold's violent rule, Bellamy Storer (the US ambassador to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and an admirer of the Belgian king) asked US President Theodore Roosevelt: 'When did mankind "spread the civilising sway of a superior race" without ruthlessness?'.¹⁵

Though the Congolese people were ultimately suppressed, they nonetheless met colonial incursions with widespread collective resistance. From 1900 to 1905, local groups launched attacks on colonial stations and plantations and seized Luebo, the rubber-rich capital of the Kasai region, from the colonising forces.¹⁶ In 1915, a grassroots spiritual movement led by Maria N'koi combined traditional medicine and armed upheaval to oppose colonial taxation and refuse forced labour in the southern Congo.¹⁷ For her rebellion, N'koi was captured and exiled by the Belgian authorities. Africans in the eastern Congo were forced into the mountains and dense forests

or across Lake Albert and Lake Edward (today known locally as Mwitanzige and Rutanzige) into Uganda and Rwanda.¹⁸

The stupendous effort to set up mining companies and force African workers to extract coveted underground resources such as coal, cobalt, diamonds, gold, iron, opals, manganese, platinum, tin, and uranium became central to exploitation in the Congo. Of such efforts, those of the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* ('Mining Union of Upper Katanga', known today as Umicore) were the largest and most lucrative.¹⁹ The mining company shaped the workforce from a large reserve of potential African recruits, but it greatly feared the prospect of these recruits becoming a working class with demands for decent wages and decision-making power in the workplace. Despite this fear and the use of near-genocidal levels of violence to prevent recruits from becoming a political force, the company failed to stem the growth of an African working class.²⁰

Violence was also employed by different arms of the state – such as the parastatal recruitment agency *Bourse du Travail du Katanga* ('Katanga Labour Exchange' or BTK) and the colonial army *Force Publique* – as well as private recruitment agencies. These colonial institutions worked with local chiefs to exert their power, and if the chiefs resisted, they were usurped, although that was not always an easy task.²¹ This coercive machinery was further buttressed by an ideology of racial superiority, which the Belgians used to justify the use of force and prevent Africans from accessing state institutions or actual state power. At the outset of Belgian rule, almost all Europeans genuinely believed in the myth of African savagery and ruthlessly imposed their version of political order on the indigenous

people. Colonial racism was the genesis of an illusion, yet one that powerfully influenced the pace of colonial occupation.

The Congolese People's Fight for Sovereignty and Dignity

The German occupation of Belgium (1940–1945) shattered the notion that the Belgian colonial state (popularly referred to as *Bula Matadi*, or ‘Stone Breaker’) was invincible. In 1941, African workers at the tin mines of Kikole (Kantanga province) went on strike and talked of commandeering Jeeps and joining with Africans from other parts of the continent in their struggle. ‘The whites have been defeated in Europe by blacks from Kenya and America. Why can’t we defeat them here as well?’, one strike leader said. ‘We have the right to eat eggs and own automobiles just like the whites. Let us break into the store and divide up the stock. It belongs to us anyway, since the *Union Minière* has bought these goods with our labour’.²² The strike spread across Katanga (Haut-Katanga today), where mining was most concentrated, enabled by the workers’ proximity to and full support from their peasant families. This strike wave spread to the soldiers, who mutinied against the *Force Publique* in 1944, drawing upon their roots in working-class and peasant struggles from the factories of Elisabethville and Jadotville (today, Lubumbashi and Likasi) in the south to the tin mines in the north.²³



Jardy Ndombasi (DRC), *Soulèvement populaire et souveraineté* ('Popular Uprising and Sovereignty'), 70x100cm, mixed media, 2024.

The colonial government sped up this wave of resistance by imposing increased productivity goals upon the peasantry to meet wartime demands that were simply unattainable under the circumstances. Government reports told of rice shoots rotting on inundated land and abandoned fields with the soil already tilled for planting.²⁴ Shortfalls in the production of cash crops were further exacerbated by the fact that labour power in rural areas fell by at least 20% as the generation of the 1930s and 1940s migrated in search of work, moved more by economic necessity and sheer survival than the desire to become self-sufficient cultivators.²⁵ All this put an end to independent peasant agriculture, its demise celebrated by large industrial firms who were confident that they could at last shoulder the cost of reproducing the industrial workforce.

With the destruction of the Luba, Lunda, and Chokwe peasant communities, thousands were forced off communal lands and steered in the direction of the mining company's western worksites. Greedy Lunda aristocrats and well-to-do Luba and Chokwe peasants, to whom the government had conferred chiefly titles, gobbled up the abandoned lands by claiming links with the Lundaness, Chokweness, or other ethnicities of the labourers who toiled for them.²⁶ The future Congolese politicians who collaborated with the imperialists – such as Moïse Tshombe (leader of the secessionist State of Katanga) and Godefroid Munongo (who participated in the plot to assassinate and supplant Lumumba) – were descendants of those who drove peasants to grow the cash crops, such as cotton and sesame, that became the harbinger of dispossession and starvation.

Even faced with this grim reality, the agricultural and industrial proletariats were not deterred by the crackdown of the strike wave and mutiny. Instead, frustration with their unrealised demands fed into a stream of discontent that washed over the entire Congolese population during the closing years of World War II. The Belgian colonial state lost control of the countryside by 1957, and the mass urban uprisings on 4 January 1959 underscored Belgium's waning grip on power over the urban working class.²⁷

In December 1958, Ghana's Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah hosted the All-African People's Conference in Accra, bringing together leaders and key activists of anti-colonial nationalist movements from across the continent to discuss strategies to eject the colonial powers and unify Africa. Among them were Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Gamal Nasser, Sékou Touré, and, representing the Congo, Gaston Diomi, Patrice Lumumba, and Joseph Ngalula. The Congolese representatives were leaders of the Congolese National Movement (MNC), which was founded that same year to fight for independence from Belgian rule and for a state-led system of economic development rooted in a commitment to all the peoples of the Congo (not just one ethnic group). For the Congo, this conference marked the beginning of the internationalisation of the struggle that had been developing in villages, factories, and mining towns. As Lumumba said at the conference:

The fundamental aim of our movement is to free the Congolese people from the colonialist regime and earn them their independence. ... [W]e have the same awareness, the same soul plunged day and night in anguish, the

same anxious desire to make this continent a free and happy continent that has rid itself of unrest and of fear and of any sort of colonialist domination.²⁸

These Pan-African networks became an important source of solidarity and collaboration. For instance, it was because of these connections that, in 1960, African Solidarity Party (PSA) leader Antoine Gizenga (the first deputy prime minister under Lumumba) had a chance meeting with Central African Republic-born Andrée Blouin, a Pan-African leader who, alongside Sékou Touré, worked with the Democratic Party of Guinea and was key in organising women in Guinea. Gizenga and Lumumba sent Blouin on the campaign trail to mobilise women, and, within a month, she had signed 45,000 members up for the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity from the western and central regions of the Congo. As a result of these efforts, Congolese women, who had already begun to self-organise in urban social and economic associations during the 1930s, came to play an even greater role in the decolonisation movement in the region and the MNC.²⁹

Lumumba and the MNC articulated the aspirations of the peasants of the Pende who rose up in 1931, the miners of Katanga who went on strike in 1941, and the dockworkers who struck in 1945, as well as the petty bourgeoisie's frustration with the colonial state. The MNC's *évolué* ('advanced') leadership radicalised their own politics with talk of *émancipation* ('freedom') and *indépendance immédiate* ('immediate independence'), echoing other decolonisation movements across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The Re-Conquest of the Congo

On 30 June 1960, the Belgian government was compelled to concede independence to the Congo. The mineral-rich province of Katanga was the exception that proved the rule, insofar as Belgian power expressed itself through secessionist Moïse Tshombe and his more sinister Minister of the Interior Godefroid Munongo. In Katanga, real economic and civil power continued to reside in the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* and its security forces, with the latter doubling as the officer corps for the military forces of the independent State of Katanga.³⁰ Lumumba sought to put an end to this charade during his first speech as prime minister, which he began by cataloguing the eighty years of abuse that the Congolese people had endured under Belgian colonial rule. The closing portions of Lumumba's speech, made in the presence of Belgian King Baudouin I, sent chills through the crowd as well as the throngs of Congolese who were listening on the radio. 'We have seen our lands seized in the name of ostensibly just laws, which gave recognition only to the right of might. ... Together, we [the Congolese people] shall establish social justice and ensure for every man just remuneration for his labour', Lumumba declared. 'We are no longer your monkeys'.³¹

The governments of Gaston Eyskens (Belgium) and Dwight D. Eisenhower (United States) were joined in their determination to eliminate Lumumba before he could consolidate a viable process for pursuing dignity and sovereignty for the Congo.³² Notably, both countries relied on the Congo's raw materials, such as uranium from the Congo's Shinkolobwe mines, which the US used in the atomic

bombs it dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and treated as a strategic asset.³³

On 17 January 1961, less than six months after becoming prime minister of the DRC, Lumumba was murdered in Katanga and the political process he led was demobilised. The Western powers, especially the US, saw the hundred thousand or so Congolese lives that were lost in the ensuing conflicts from 1961 to 1967 and the blood-soaked dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko's puppet government from 1965 to 1997 as a small price to pay in the Cold War, in which the Congo's strategic raw materials gave the NATO powers a decided edge over the Soviet Union.³⁴

Nonetheless, the people paying this 'price' put up widespread resistance, which was in turn met with more bloodshed. For example, during the uprisings against the Mobutu dictatorship in the 1960s led by Pierre Mulele, the rebels seized industrial towns like Kolwezi and then invited workers to form tribunals and identify managers and foremen who had brutalised them. At times, summary executions followed the tribunals.³⁵ When Mobutu's forces retook industrial towns, often with the assistance of white mercenaries from Europe and the US, locals and industrial workers who had sided with the rebels were slaughtered in droves, along with their families.³⁶ Only those who had fled before the arrival of Mobutu's hordes escaped the carnage.

During the last decade of Mobutu's reign, a period in which the global industrial working class was increasing, the military intervention and political expansion by neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda

plunged the Great Lakes region into war. This climate increased the pillaging of resources by transnational companies, which was further exacerbated by the level of state decay under Mobutu, the migration prompted by the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and, in turn, the rampant looting of the Congo's wealth-fuelled violent conflicts.³⁷

The Congolese attempt to establish the sovereignty of their new state and fight for their dignity by transforming the colonial society that shaped their lives was thwarted by the West's re-conquest. This neocolonial structure remained in place through the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko (1965–1997) and then the post-dictatorship governments – despite their different political orientations – of Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1997–2001), Joseph Kabila (2001–2019), and Félix Tshisekedi (2018–present). The names of the political parties of the last three Congolese presidents notwithstanding – Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo/Zaire, People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy, and Union of Democracy and Social Progress – the DRC has seen little genuine democracy, reconstruction, or social progress.

A Living Hell

By 2018, the DRC produced 71% of the cobalt used in cell phones, computers, and electric cars across the globe.³⁸ There are approximately 6.5 grammes of cobalt in every cell phone, three pounds in every computer, and thirty pounds in every electric car battery. As more mechanical devices are powered by electric batteries, from

kitchen blenders to snow blowers, the world will become more dependent on Congolese cobalt and labour. Since electric batteries that contain more cobalt than lithium are less inclined to explode or catch fire, and since electric battery-powered vehicles are being marketed as a ‘green’ alternative, multinationals in the industry are increasingly narrowing in on cobalt as a strategic resource for increasing future profits.

However, this mineral – and the ‘green’ alternative it is often alleged to represent – is tinged with the sweat and blood of the nearly half a million Congolese men, women, and children who mine it. Whether direct employees of corporations or ‘artisanal’ miners, they work in open-face mines and dangerous pits that run at least sixty-five feet deep and are highly subject to *éboulements* (cave-ins), *glissements de terrain* (landslides), and the sudden loss of oxygen caused by the fire that workers use to heat up ore. Most direct employees are equipped with some – though insufficient – safety gear and machinery, while most of the artisanal miners are left with nothing but the strength of their hands to dig out this precious metal.³⁹

Though the labour of artisanal miners is integral to the output of the multinationals, these companies barely compensate miners for contributing to their revenue. To take one example of many, over the past decade Glencore has encouraged artisanal miners to work on its leased concessions in order to increase its cobalt production. During this period, the price paid to miners collapsed from \$40 a pound to \$13.50 a pound.⁴⁰ The real wage for all cobalt miners, whether they work independently or are on a company’s payroll, is not much more than the bottom billion wage of US\$1 or US\$2 a day.



Monsembula Nzaaba Richard or 'Monzari' (DRC), *Aurore Africaine* ('African Aurora'), 2024.

According to UNICEF's 2014 estimates, forty thousand of these artisanal miners are children as young as eight years old, though figures from the Congolese government and mining companies suggest that this dramatically underrepresents reality.⁴¹ These children have little choice but to work since their parents have no formal employment and often cannot afford to buy food or pay school fees.⁴² Alongside women miners, they are the most vulnerable segment of the workforce and face a greater chance of being maimed or killed. Furthermore, many children who work in the mines drink and smoke heavily and are paid in nothing more than food and a place to sleep. As Yanick Kalumbu Tshiwengu, who began to work in the mines at age eleven, said, 'It was a living hell. We saw things that no child should see. There was a culture of rape and violence. Girls often fell victim to rape, which, as children, we were powerless to prevent. Sometimes lives were lost for a few francs'.⁴³

Once artisanal miners bring the cobalt to the surface, the mined ore must be washed, crushed, sorted, and bagged in twenty-five or fifty-kilogram sacks, a process known as *droumage* that is usually carried out by women and children. More often than not, they work while standing in the dirty, waist-high water of Lake Malo near Kolwezi. Pregnant women who carry out *droumage* often absorb toxins that cause their children to be born with disabilities or deformities.⁴⁴ Furthermore, continuous exposure to cobalt dust can result in the potentially fatal hard metal lung disease, and inhaling cobalt particles for more than several hours daily can cause shortness of breath, decreased pulmonary function, asthma, and chronic dermatitis.

Between Multinational Plunder and Chinese Investments

Less than a decade after the Congolese government nationalised all mining and mineral rights (in 1966) and then Union Minière (in 1967), countries across the Global South came under pressure from international finance to privatise their nationalised mining sectors as neoliberalism spread across the globe during the 1970s. In the DRC, pressure from the IMF and World Bank led to the beginnings of privatisation in the 1980s, though it was not until later, with the mining code of 2002, that this trend began to devastate the economy, largely because of the political turmoil and period of war that defined the country from 1996 to 2003. The weakness of the state due to this war, the callousness of the new political leadership in Kinshasa, and the advice of the World Bank pushed the DRC to offer deals that were advantageous to multinational mining companies at the expense of their population.

In 2002, a new mining code in the DRC provided foreign companies – all from the US and Europe – with favourable taxation, incentives for exploration, an open door to expatriate profits, and the right to circumvent labour and environmental regulations. The code forbade amendments for ten years and contained a clause that any changes to the fiscal regime could not come into effect until 2022. The Lutundula Commission of 2005 later revealed that then President Joseph Kabila and other officials secretly colluded with corporations to receive small personal gains, which paled in comparison to the massive advantages given to foreign companies.⁴⁵

At an African Development Bank meeting in December 2008, then President of Botswana Festus Mogae said that tax and royalty exemptions given to multinational mining companies prevented African states from retaining a fair share of profits from the extraction of resources, which is why, he continued, ‘it is necessary to renegotiate some of them’.⁴⁶ In 2011, the DRC tried to revise the mining code, but that attempt only provided more benefits for foreign firms.

The entry of the Chinese state and private Chinese companies into Africa over the past two decades has provided competition against the Global North countries and their mining companies. This was the first time that these multinational corporations faced direct competition, a shift that provided the space for the Congolese government to amend the mining code in 2018 on more beneficial terms. This new code stripped the ‘stability clause’ that guaranteed mining companies ten-year protection, and it increased the Congolese state’s royalty rates for non-ferrous and base metals (such as cobalt and copper) from 2% to 3.5% and allowed royalty rates to be raised to 10% for ‘strategic substances’ such as coltan and lithium.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Chinese state entered the African market with a development agenda that was very different from the pressure campaigns waged by Global North governments, as we shall see.

Chinese companies, helped by lines of credit from Chinese banks, began to buy major cobalt operations, eventually taking control of fifteen of the DRC’s seventeen mining complexes. In the extractivism debate, the Global North, its eyes set on furthering its own agenda, has fixated on China’s role in the region as the world’s leading consumer of cobalt, nearly 80% of which it uses in its

rechargeable battery industry.⁴⁸ What is often left out of the discussion, however, is that, as the largest manufacturing country in the world, China uses Congolese minerals and metals to produce goods that are consumed across the globe, including in the DRC and the Global North.

Chinese interests therefore lie in keeping mineral and metal processing within the DRC and building an industrial base for the country. This is a policy that diverges from the IMF-driven agenda for the DRC. Angered by the deepening ties between the DRC and China, the United States government used its influence over the IMF to sabotage the DRC's attempt to renegotiate a deal with Sicominex, which is a joint venture between the China Railway Group and Power Construction Corporation of China, (PowerChina) as the principal shareholders as well as Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt (with a 1% stake) and the DRC's state mining company Gécamines (with a 32% stake).⁴⁹

Shortly after the DRC's President Félix Tshisekedi took office in January 2019, he indicated the need to renegotiate an agreement between the DRC and China in 2008 that designated \$6 billion from Sicominex to fund local infrastructure projects. Why would Tshisekedi attempt to jeopardise \$6 billion in infrastructure funding? Because Western donors and the US government were using it as a reason to deepen their sabotage of the DRC's economy in order to punish the country for its growing proximity to China. Right after the 2008 agreement was signed, Western donors, who held the lion's share of the DRC's external debt, withheld \$11 billion in debt relief for the DRC.⁵⁰ The Chinese ambassador to the DRC at the

time, Wu Zexian, criticised this call for renegotiation as ‘blackmail’.⁵¹ When the DRC refused to accept the donors’ demand, the IMF – backing the donors – said that the agreement with Sicomines had to be renegotiated before there could be a discussion about further debt relief. The US Secretary of State at the time, Hillary Clinton, travelled to Kinshasa to discuss the situation with the government of President Joseph Kabila, and soon thereafter, the deal was amended to accept only half of the Sicomines funding.⁵² China’s Exim Bank, the primary financier of the deal, withdrew over disagreements with the IMF conditionalities, which left Sicomines with no stable financing arrangement at a stage when no mining operations had commenced and, therefore, no revenue was being generated. This is partly why the projects stalled. Since the amendment, less than a third of the revised \$3 billion allocation for infrastructure, influenced by the 2009 IMF agreement, has been disbursed.

Knowing that the deal remained on the table, President Tshisekedi reopened the conversation with China in 2019. On 20 January 2024, the DRC finalised the renegotiation of their minerals-for-infrastructure contract with China, which provided \$7 billion in financing. The agreement is rooted in a joint venture for copper and cobalt mining between Gécamines (the DRC’s state mining company) and Sicomines. According to *Bloomberg*, as part of the deal, Gécamines will receive a 1.2% royalty on Sicomines’ proceeds and the right to market 32% of its production.⁵³ In addition, the 2024 renegotiated agreement updated the financing to focus primarily on the construction of national roads. This is key not only for the mining sector to function, but also for the well-being of the Congolese people, as the DRC has fewer all-weather paved roads than any

other country of its size in Africa (for comparison, Saudi Arabia, whose land area is roughly the same size but is inhabited by less than half the DRC's population, has twenty times more paved roads). The agreement also secured the DRC a 40% stake in the Busanga hydropower plant, a joint project between the two countries that was built by Chinese companies.⁵⁴

Threatened by the renegotiations, the United States government intervened to undermine them. According to *Africa Intelligence*, the US initiated a programme that allegedly aimed to bolster anti-corruption efforts and reform mining law in the DRC by deploying a team of experts to the office of the DRC's president and relevant ministries in early 2020.⁵⁵ In addition, as part of a wider endeavour to secure access to debt relief from Western donors by 'enhancing' governance, the Tshisekedi administration contracted the US law firm Baker McKenzie in late 2019 and made plans to hire US legal experts to perform anti-corruption audits, which would be financially supported by the US State and US Treasury departments (this was not transparently declared, with the only public statement being that these audits would be funded by 'third parties').⁵⁶ The consultants focused on Sicominex and ignored the wider problems in the mining industry.

When the completion of the DRC's renegotiation was announced in 2024, the US – displeased with the outcome – hastened the discussions around the Lobito Corridor project, an infrastructure initiative driven by the US and the European Union that spans the DRC, Angola, and Zambia and aims to facilitate the transportation of minerals from the region to global trade markets through Angola's

Lobito Port.⁵⁷ This project, too, is designed not to benefit the people of the DRC but to contest the role of Chinese capital in the DRC and to ensure the longevity of the Global North's corporations in the country's mining sector. None of the Global North's recent 'concerns' about the well-being of the Congolese people have addressed its own role in fuelling violence over resources in the African Great Lakes region. As Amos Hochstein, Biden's senior adviser for energy and investment, put it, 'An electric vehicle is essentially a battery, and what's in the battery is Africa'. 'There is no time to waste', Hochstein added; 'We have been absent from the scene for far too long'.⁵⁸ In other words, the corridor, along with other projects such as the US-initiated Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (an attempt to challenge the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative), are part of the US geopolitical strategy to counter China. With the push away from fossil fuels towards wind, solar, and electric energy, the Congo will continue to be at the centre of the discussion.

Interestingly, it was just as Chinese firms began to supplant Global North mining firms and just as Chinese investment began to build new infrastructure that a wave of interest grew in the Global North about the exploitation of the DRC's workers – an interest that both ignores the grave violations committed by Global North companies and feigns concern for the well-being of the Congolese people in order to further geopolitical interests. When the private Chinese company CMOC (China Molybdenum Company Limited), which produces minerals key to green technology, bought the Tenke Fungurume mine from the US mining company Freeport-McMoRan in 2016, fear grew within the US state apparatus that the Chinese would control all the key elements of 'green technology'.⁵⁹



Monsembula Nzaaba Richard or 'Monzari' (DRC), *Le peuple a gagné* ('The People Have Won'), 2024.

Reference photograph (back): Patrice Lumumba receives a vote of confidence from the Congolese House of Representatives on 24 June 1960, becoming the country's first prime minister.

Source: Congopresse via Wikimedia.

Given its powerlessness to contest China's purchase, the US moved in two directions: to delegitimise China's interventions in Africa through complaints about Chinese exploitation of child labour and to put political pressure on African governments to break links with China.⁶⁰ This demonstrates the focus of the US and its allies on securing their economic and geopolitical interests by reviving Cold War tactics.

US intervention on the African continent to advance its own project and maintain hegemony is further illustrated by the tenor of the US-Africa leaders' summit in December 2022, where the governments of the DRC and Zambia signed an agreement with the US to develop an electric vehicle value chain in their countries, from mining to the assembly line.⁶¹ However, it is worth noting that the two African countries had already signed an agreement with each other to establish a value chain to manufacture electric batteries in April 2022.⁶² So the new deal, announced with great fanfare, was less about coordination between the DRC and Zambia or the needs of the African people and more about the attempt to block China from the African continent and to guarantee the flow of resources under the control of the Global North firms.

The Congo Is Not for Sale

In June 2005, the Lutundula Commission, led by DRC parliamentarian Christophe Lutundula, reported on its investigation into mining and business contracts signed in the DRC between 1996

and 2003, a period marked by intense conflict stemming from the Second Congo War (1998–2003).⁶³ The commission found that many contracts were illegal or did not advance the country’s development and urged the termination or renegotiation of sixteen contracts as well as further investigations into twenty-eight companies and seventeen individuals for legal violations. Both senior political figures and corporate executives were implicated in the findings. Despite the report’s proposal for an immediate moratorium on new contracts and call for extended investigation powers, the state signed new mining deals with minimal oversight.

In 2017, the DRC set up the Regulatory Authority for Subcontracting in the Private Sector (ARSP) to fulfil the terms of the 2002 mining code. The emergence of the ARSP is a sign of the DRC’s attempt to take control of the minerals and metals in the country and put a halt to the longstanding pillaging of its wealth. In 2023, the ARSP – now following the 2018 mining code – sanctioned several companies, including Bolloré, Deloitte, G4S, Havas, and Huawei, and opened investigations into Eurasian Resources Group, Glencore, Ivanhoe, Kibali (Barrick Gold), and Primera for violating subcontracting laws.⁶⁴ On 22 February 2024, the ARSP cited three Chinese subcontractors (CRSN, Synohydro, and Bangde Construction) for remitting payments abroad, making them ineligible to operate in the DRC (though they will continue to work until local companies can take over from them).⁶⁵

ARSP Director-General Miguel Kashal Katemb, a seasoned businessman who has worked in various African countries, argued that these sanctioned companies did not meet the eligibility criteria and

failed to contribute adequately to the country's tax revenue.⁶⁶ These firms, he said, should be replaced with Congolese-owned firms, which would retain profits locally, create new employment opportunities, and could even begin a process of establishing national resource sovereignty. These policies would be a step forward, even though the DRC's elites would be the biggest beneficiaries given the social hierarchies in the country.⁶⁷

This kind of class politics, where certain actions seem beneficial for the country but mainly enrich a sophisticated network of relatives and friends of the president, are widespread in the DRC. For instance, though the country signed a deal in 2022 with sanctioned Israeli billionaire and former mining magnate Dan Gertler to recover Congolese mining and oil assets worth more than \$2 billion that were owned by his company the Ventura Group, the lack of transparency about the details of the deal raised concern about a possible new cycle of corruption.⁶⁸ Family networks of the DRC's political elite continue to act as compradors to multinational companies, pursuing transactional activities that favour them instead of enhancing the country's productive capacities for modernisation.⁶⁹ A notable instance of this dynamic is unfolding at Sicominex, where the president's son, Anthony Tshisekedi, has been appointed to the company's board of directors, even though he lacks mining experience.⁷⁰

What the Congolese People Want

The struggle of the Congolese people today has centred on establishing sovereignty over their territory and ensuring human dignity. This struggle for liberation cannot be waged solely on a national level, given that the forces keeping the Congolese in bondage operate globally. In an era of renewed Pan-Africanism that is transforming West Africa, Frantz Fanon's reminder in *Toward an African Revolution* that 'the fate of all of us is at stake in the Congo' resonates deeply.⁷¹ In that spirit, our dossier closes with the words of young Congolese activists who have identified eight categories that are key to building their path to freedom.

Land. Congolese land must be protected and used with the best interests of the Congolese people in mind. Securing Congolese livelihoods, food sovereignty, and human security must be a greater priority than extractivism. Demilitarising the land is key to ending both widespread violence and human displacement. For this to happen, the capitalist view of the land as a commodity for sale must first be deconstructed and replaced with an emphasis on the ancestral value of land that centres the well-being of all its inhabitants.

Developing economic autonomy. Congolese resources must be controlled by the Congolese people with the aim of strengthening society and resisting the pressure of international financial institutions. Profits from the country's natural wealth must be reinvested to develop local manufacturing industries and encourage national autonomy and self-sufficiency in areas such as agro-industry and technology. We must plan boldly for longer-term and larger

economic projects that can drive widescale transformation to benefit the country.

Society. Let us begin to reinvent social relations by proposing solutions to rebuild the social contract that binds us together. We must reintroduce a culture of respect for human rights by upholding traditional *ubuntu* principles of equality.

State justice. Just governance must be promoted within national institutions such as the presidency, the national assembly, and the courts. Leaders must apply the law fairly, in accordance with the constitution and the legitimate expectations of the people.

Dignity. We must reclaim and heal our hearts and minds, organise ourselves responsibly, and embrace self-sacrifice to further community aims. Our movement must improve our confidence in our ability, as the Congolese people – in particular the Congolese youth – to change the DRC for better.

Critical thinking. It is important to build our collective intelligence in order to respond to the challenges that face us with clear ideas. Our education system must teach comprehensive knowledge systems based on scientific thinking that includes valuable contributions from African societies, past and present.

The production and dissemination of Congolese patriotic culture. We must illustrate the vision of the Congo and the world we want to live in through the arts, culture, sports, and all the activities in which we engage, which must be made available in our local

languages. Through collective leadership, we must develop common values based on inclusive decision-making to reform our culture.

Organising citizenship collectives. The code of conduct we create must be implemented within the Congo and in diaspora communities through citizens' collectives. Wherever we are, we must create places to meet, debate, and collaborate.





M. Kadima (DRC), *Congo Is Not for Sale*, 2024.

Reference photograph by John Behets.

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