

Women miners dig deep

On the next page and on the cover of this *Labour Bulletin* we give you a taste of some fascinating photos of South African women working deep underground in the mines.

The photographer, Eva-Lotta Jansson, opened a large photo exhibition on 'Women Miners in South Africa,' on Women's Day, 9 August, in Johannesburg. When the exhibition at the Bensusan Museum of Photography, Museum Africa, finished in October, Jansson packed the large canvas prints into her car to travel with the exhibition to mining communities.

Interested mining houses are supporting the project by sponsoring a week's display of the work directly at a mine. Sasol Mining was the first company to host the entire exhibition for two weeks in November, at two of its workplaces in Secunda.

From the beginning, Jansson wanted to make sure that mine workers could see the exhibit, so she was excited to begin her first workplace exhibition in Secunda. Below she explains her project about women miners.

"When I came to South Africa to photograph women in mining, I wanted to portray how the elections that officially ended apartheid in 1994 had also paved the way for equal employment rights for women.

Through this project I came to see how the changes in the

workplace and, indeed in society as a whole, could be illustrated very visually in the underground mining environment. Women were excluded by law from working underground until 1996 and although they are still very much in the minority in this challenging industry, their numbers are increasing.

It has been exciting to travel underground, photographing some of the results of this country's historic transformation, capturing how the almost iconic image of the male miner has, here and there, assumed a woman's face.

The primary focus of my work has been those who are officially called 'miners'. These are women with "blasting tickets" who are qualified to supervise the blasting as I feel they provide a true measure of change. Under apartheid no black people, let alone women, were allowed to handle explosives.

Some of the women featured in this exhibition qualified as miners years ago and have since climbed the ladder to become shift bosses and mine overseers. They are in supervisory positions on career paths which could well see them one day becoming mine managers, a position historically held only by white males.

However, the exhibition also features women working in some of the other important mining jobs, such as cage drivers and ventilation officers, and it touches on the first

signs of entrepreneurial mine ownership among women.

South Africa's mining charter originally said that by late 2007 the mining workforce should comprise at least 10% women. Although many mining houses haven't reached this target yet, they are making strides towards it, with several companies expecting to meet the goal by 2009.

That's not to say that women have been completely accepted underground.

"The underground is no place for a woman," is a comment I heard several times while working on this project. I heard it more than once from male managers who had been assigned to take me down various mines to photograph the women.

Their comments were not always prompted by a belief that women weren't capable of working in mining, but out of an apparent concern for them. "I wouldn't want my daughter working here," some said.

Nevertheless, perhaps these women pioneers, through this documentation, can serve as an inspiration to others. They are a powerful manifestation of positive change."

Jansson encourages mining houses to contact her to arrange an exhibition that their workforce can see.

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Sophie Moganetsi prepares to wash the dirt off her face after a shift down Koorfontein Mines, near Witbank.



The photo on the front cover of this *Labour Bulletin*, by Eva-Lotta Jansson is of Neo Kgengwe, a 24-year old mining student at the University of Johannesburg. She peers out from the dark in the Total Coal mine near Witbank, where she does practical training during the holidays. Neo already has qualified for her “blasting ticket”, which theoretically gives her the

authority to handle explosives, or in this case supervise mining machinery which is common in modern coal mining.

While most other workers at Total Coal are contractors, the company has sponsored Neo’s education for the past few years. When she graduates at the end of 2007, she will be employed at Total as a miner, managing a coal production team. **LB**