

CRISTINA ROMERA TÉBAR

Universidad de Alicante

Child labour in sulphur mining in Las Minas (Albacete province, Spain)

Child labour is a striking episode in the history of Spain's mining industry since mining activity (together with agriculture) became the biggest employer of minors in the 1920s (MARTÍNEZ, 2006, p. 244). Child labour was extensive in Spain, as in other countries, except that it lasted for much longer (BORRÁS, 2013). Although employment rates show that in 1920, one in five workers was under the age of 18, these figures vary according to the mining basin to which they refer. Percentages of minor employment fluctuated between 14% and 17% of the total number of workers until the end of the First World War (PÉREZ DE PERCEVAL et al., 2013, p. 157), and they did not begin to decrease until well into the twentieth century.

Although the type of mineral is a major factor of differentiation regarding child labour, there is a caveat in the case of sulphur. Over the 1868-1938 period, while the average percentage of employed minors fluctuated between 8% and 13% (for minerals such as coal, iron, copper, mercury, lead or zinc), sulphur accounted for as much as 22.9%. That is why "this mineral deserves a specific analysis" (PÉREZ DE PERCEVAL et al., 2013, p. 162). We will focus here on the district of Las Minas (Hellín, in Albacete province), one of the areas that exploited the mineral. This site, regarded as unique in Spain for its great mineral wealth (BELLÓN, 2003, P. 63), presented many drawbacks such as isolation, economic problems, low wages and seasonality, which contributed to an increase in the rates of child labour. It is precisely the site's isolation, due to the area's orography, that generated big communication problems and hindered

the arrival of workers. With it came a new industry that, from its beginnings in 1562, until its closure in 1960, was supported by the labour generated from the locality itself. It was with the appearance of the mining town and the settlement of the workers' families, that sulphur mining began to develop and grow.

The high child employment rates found in the mining industries were initially due to particularly lax regulations. The first regulations originated in the *Benot Law* of 24 July 1873, which prohibited children under 10 years of age from working, and also established an eight hours-working day maximum for boys aged between 13 to 15 years old, and for girls between 14 to 17. Despite this, minors worked up to ten hours a day until the beginning of the twentieth century (MARTÍNEZ, 2006, p. 247). Poor compliance with this law gave way to a legislative vacuum until 13 March 1900, when the *Law on the work of women and minors* (the *Dato Law*) came into force. It had greater repercussions than the previous law, and although it prohibited children under 16 years from entering the mining galleries, it did not succeed in regulating these types of activities. Indeed, there were control difficulties and labour strategies often continued to be based on precarious employment, not only of men but also of minors.

Although the information is lacking in Spain's Mining Statistics, it was possible to establish the first period of study between 1868 and 1901, which reveals the number of mining "*muchachos*" (boys) who worked for the entity. Unlike the neighbouring industries of Murcia and Almería, the Hellín sulphur factory maintained an

open-pit mining working system until 1870. These types of holdings did not require such specialised workers, nor did they have a transportation system through the galleries, the main activity for which child labour was hired. With the shift to underground mining, extraction processes became cheaper and the industry started to grow. The figures that have reached us regarding these employed “muchachos” were not high, but they reflect the fact that work was structured around child labour, given the percentage they represent of the total number of employees.

The 1901 to 1939 Mining Statistics reveal the number of workers per sex and age group. It was during this period that the industry of Las Minas began to stand out, not only for its production and manufacturing of sulphur but also for its levels of child labour. Strikingly, it was the mining branch that kept up these higher levels of employment. In 1918 for example, it employed 279 minors, while the *processing* branch hired 20 in that year. These notable differences between different work branches illustrate how it was mining that marked the future of mining in these extraction industries. The first group of minors aged 10 to 16, who were prohibited by law from entering the underground area, performed the work that was carried out outside. These little miners became tougher, performing chores such as mineral cleaning, later working in the galleries in which they were considered “indispensable” due to their height and ease of movement. Mining Statistics did not always reflect the realities of the industry, and although there is no indication that in the case of Las Minas, minors under 16 years of age worked inside the mine, they may well have.

The 16-18 age group accounted for the highest child labour figures, especially regarding the activities inside the mine for which they were regarded as indispensable. Not only did they receive lower wages, but with their early entry into the activity, they ensured generational change, solving the problem of lack of workforce. Despite the hard work and long 8-hour days, six days a week, the mine offered a secure income and some free time, which was usually spent on other complementary jobs in agriculture (CARMONA, 2007).

A notable fact is that as of 1917, the Las Minas industry employed underage women in exterior activities, while the employment of female minors was very scarce in the rest of the provinces. In that same year, 59 women aged between 16 and 18 years were hired, while in sulphur mines such as that of Murcia and Almería, they did not exceed seventeen employees. Although this high figure in the case of Hellín followed a downward trend, it was

maintained until 1934. The figure may be an indication of the labour needs of Las Minas during production peaks. These peaks were addressed by employing, not only the sons of the miners but also their daughters as the main source of labour supply. These sorts of employer strategies raised the capacity to adapt to the flow changes of the minerals market and solve the labour problem. (PÉREZ DE PERCEVAL et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, these types of studies are highly biased, since both the official statistics and the private companies that were in charge of these industries did not always provide information on the number of working minors, and on many other occasions, the data they provided was not consistent with the realities. The manipulation began with the wish to conceal the precariousness and the hiring practices, that not only bordered on illegality but involved abuse by employers, seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of the health, childhood and youth of these workers. Furthermore, in the case of Las Minas, other documents, such as the *Abastecimiento de Hellín* maps, collected the figures of child workers as young as 7, while the Mining statistics only start from 10 years of age. Because the law prohibited children under 10 years to work, Statistics only began to count workers from this age onwards. Therefore, this under-10 group was not reflected, to avoid falling into the realm of illegality. While not recorded on paper, such illegal practices were committed in these entities daily.

Given the manipulation underlying these figures, it is interesting to resort to other sources, such as the testimonies of former workers, to understand their experiences and conditions of work. Hidden stories lie behind their childhood memories and the first steps in the mines. They are of inestimable value as they allow us to comprehend how they experienced their tough mining past, in a context of lax norms that failed to regulate child labour. Indeed, despite a downward trend that began in 1935, in some cases, such as Las Minas, the figures remained very high almost until the activity came to an end. This, added to the data provided by the accounts of former engineers who visited the mining basins, suggests the need to find out more about this obscure labour past.

An example of the important role that minors played in these industries is the entire nomenclature that was developed to refer to their work, such as the term of *gavia*, widely used in the mining basins of the southeast, or the *zafra por hacienda*, specific to the extractive industry of Almadén, both terms meaning “child miners”. These names were given to a broad and representative group of minors, the pillar that supported a large number of

mining operations. Despite this, their work was never acknowledged at all, it was often concealed, given the controversies surrounding the employment of these “*muchachos*”, as they were called in the first years of the Mining Statistics when the information was even more diffuse. Many mining companies emerged at the expense of these minors’ childhood and youth, seeking financial profits that prevailed over the rights of these “*muchachos*”, generating conditions in which child labour was regarded as part of “normal” mine site labour.

Although many companies did not comply with child labour regulations, Juan, the miner interviewed, showed a work permit in conformity with the regulations. The signing of these documents represented rather an administrative procedure that had to be complied with, camouflaging the immorality of employing this collective. The words used by Juan conveyed the harsh

living and working conditions in Las Minas, though his eyes sparkled when recalling how the town was full of people. These testimonials, centring on the actors that have been hitherto “overlooked”, help us to put the different pieces of the child labour puzzle together.

The informal nature of the labour or its family structure are some of the variables that make it difficult to collect data on the minors. Many boys, for example, combined employment with school, regarding their chores as “help”, not work. Nevertheless, this labour was the foundation of Spain’s extractive mining development, since their work became essential for activities such as the passage between galleries, due to their height, agility and dexterity, which made them suitable for the task, regardless of the dangers entailed. While the latter may have procured the boys some future employment, their childhoods were truncated.