

---

## NOTES

---

### *Austrian Labour Relations and the Grossensass Miners' Strike of 1493*

Gerhard Benecke  
University of Kent

In the fifteenth century Alpine mining industries reached an all-time economic high point in technology, success and profit. The Tirol was at the heart of this industrial activity, which centred on the production of silver, copper, iron, lead, zinc and salt. Mining complexes were regionally grouped under *Bergerichte*, copying the local jurisdictions of town and country and preserving local autonomy directly under supervision of the territorial ruler's courts. Mining was treated as a prerogative of the ruler, who took high profits from the finished product without shouldering any of the risks of production.

In 1491 King Maximilian I, as effective ruler of the Tirol, replaced Hans Vechlin and his Memmingen Company with Ulrich Fugger and his Augsburg Company in the financial exploitation of the silver mines around Schwaz in the Lower Inn Valley.<sup>1</sup> Fugger agreed to pay the standard eight gulden for the silver mark at sixty kreuzers to the gulden. Of these eight gulden, the smelters would receive five, and Maximilian's exchange would pocket the rest. Maximilian was advanced 120,000 fl in two instalments at April and Christmas 1491, which enabled him to meet the spring and winter quarter-days when creditors might otherwise have forced an exchequer-stop. For saving Maximilian from a bankruptcy at Innsbruck Fugger naturally exacted a price.

For a start he monopolised Lower Inn Valley silver, although the copper industry was as yet still largely in the hands of the Baumgartners and others like the Herwarts.<sup>2</sup> After February 1492 Fugger promised to pay into Maxi-

---

<sup>1</sup> Landesarchiv Innsbruck, Kopialbuch 14, ältere Reihe, 1491, fols. 9-13, Innsbruck, 27 February.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, fols. 2, 29.

milian's Innsbruck treasury a regular 10,000 fl a month without fail. This would be set against actual silver production to be accounted for once a year at Christmas. By the end of 1491 Fugger had probably guaranteed to purchase as much as 320,000 fl worth of raw silver. If production actually came up to these high expectations then Fugger would pay Maximilian's exchange a new rate of five gulden to the silver mark.<sup>3</sup> Yet the cost of the silver mark remained unchanged at 8 fl. In effect Maximilian and Fugger agreed to increase production and lower wages in the mines, since their agreement meant that smelters were reduced to receiving three instead of the former five gulden for the silver mark. This represented an enforced cut of one-quarter in production costs, which was presumably to be cushioned by massively increased production, whereby the silver price held up but the miners and smelters received less for each ingot although they had the chance of earning more overall as the number of ingots was greatly increased. After 1495 production did in fact go up markedly but it hardly rose by more than fifteen to twenty per cent, leaving a sensitive gap in production costs of five to ten per cent (see below). The problem was that this also entailed a massive increase in hours and shifts worked, higher productivity and stricter quality control over the mined ore. In the 1490s there was no marked technological advance (as there had been in the 1470s when many new shafts were opened in the Tirol) to cover this rise in work norms for Maximilian's miners and smelters. Ulrich Fugger's new mining company was to transfer one-quarter of the existing production costs into Maximilian's pockets, and from there pay it to itself as interest on money advanced to Maximilian. The deal was justified by increased and cheaper productivity. Who thus paid for the new contract? It was the industry as a whole and the miner in particular. Unions, meetings and strikes could thus be expected to arise.

What was Fugger's reward from Maximilian? He was allowed two hundred silver marks a week free of all charges. The original advance to Maximilian was 120,000 fl. Hence, at the old exchange rate of three gulden to the silver mark, Fugger was receiving 2,400 fl a month or twenty-four per cent interest per annum. No wonder Maximilian wished to reduce this or at least pass it on as a burden to the producers when it came to financing the regular 10,000 fl a month in his treasury as from February, 1492. Fugger seems to have refused to cheapen his rates since the deal eventually squeezed the industry itself to lessen costs by one-quarter, which just covered the Fugger interest rate. This may explain why Maximilian allowed Ulrich Fugger to start monopolising the Tirol silver industry since it cost the ruler nothing, and instead increased his gross royalties considerably. We must stop believing that the Fuggers exploited Maximilian because he knew nothing about finance. Maximilian was a ruthless businessman, quite prepared to sour labour relations with his miners in order to increase his revenues.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 11.

How did deals like this actually affect labour relations in the mines? We must first set the scene and then see how an actual strike was handled by Maximilian's officials in the early summer of 1493 at the Brenner Pass near Sterzing.

In the 1490s six mining districts in all operated in north Tirol, at Hall, Imst, Schwaz, Zillertal, Rattenberg and Kitzbühl. A further seven districts were productive in south Tirol, namely Eisack (Klausen), Persen, Sterzing-Grossensass, Windisch-Matrei (Salzburg run), Etsch, Primör and Taufers. Translated into our terms at just under three and a half silver marks to the kilogramme ingot, Maximilian's accountants reckoned that silver production alone averaged over 9,000 kilogrammes a year between 1470-94, rising to record levels at well over 11,000 kilogrammes a year between 1495-1519.<sup>4</sup> Leading smelters or *Silberbrenner* at Schwaz were as follows:

Cristan Taenntzl and heirs, between 1470-1535, producing 356,100 silver marks;

Hans Fieger and heirs, 1470-1530, 209,000;

Antoni von Rost, 1470-1513, 189,700;

Steffan Taenntzl, Hans Hartmann, Claus Schlosser, 1470-1512, 70,500;

Andre Jaufner, 1470-1511, 58,900;

Jorg Perl, 1470-5101, 117,400;

Virgili Hofer and heirs, 1475-1526, 305,300 silver marks.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to accomodate the grievances of smaller smelters on 2 February, 1479, Archduke Sigismund decreed that a *Silberbrenner* should receive a guaranteed two hundred gulden per annum but not more.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the miners were to receive five more paid holidays added to the eleven already allowed. The favoured saints' days were George, Ulrich, Margreth, Mary Magdalene and Nicholas.<sup>7</sup>

The 1470s were an important time for establishing codes of conduct in the silver mining industry of Tirol as the ruler's exchange was moved over the mountains into north Tirol at Hall in 1477. There were basically four groups involved in the industry; the ruler and his officials who exercised supreme police and supervisory powers and also granted out mining concessions as overlord and landlord who received extensive royalties; the financiers and Ge-

---

<sup>4</sup> From Landesarchiv Innsbruck, Pestarchiv Suppl. Nr. 897, cited in MAX VON WOLFSTRIGL-WOLFSKRON: *Die Tiroler Erzbergbaue, 1301-1665*, Innsbruck, 1903, p. 35. Wolfskron lists 593 mines worked in the late-medieval and early modern period.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-6. One of the Perl heiresses, Dorothea, married Maximilian's protonotar and later chancellor, Cyprian von Serntein. Her letters to her husband from the summer of 1512 have been published. E. RENSING: "Briefe einer deutschen Edelfrau des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 25, 1935, pp. 321-6.

<sup>6</sup> S. WORMS, *Schwazer Bergbau*, Vienna, 1904, document 17, pp. 162-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, and WOLFSKRON, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

*werken* who bought the concessions often on a feudal-contractual basis, and put up the money to exploit the ore; their managers, foremen and bailiffs who supervised the work-force as *Häuer* or *Hutleute*; and finally the hired miners (*Knappen*) and smelters who worked the actual shifts at piece-rates in the mountains and foundries.

Conflicts between work-force and management, *Knappen* and *Hutleute*, were frequent. Official arbitrator between them was the judicial officer or *Bergrichter* appointed by the territorial ruler, and each of the Tirolean mining districts had such an officer. It was his task to balance between excessive demands of pay by the *Knappen* and excessive profits made by the investors or *Gewerken*, in such a way that the ruler obtained royalties of a consistent value from the industry. Thus it was not a foregone conclusion that the government would always support the bosses against the workers. Apart from the more favourable conditions granted to the latter in Archduke Sigismund's agreement of 1479, the *Knappen* could record the following improvements. From 1474 management (*Hutmänner*) were ordered to pay workers' wages within eight days of the work done. The weekly wage had arrived. Deductions made without prior knowledge of the worker were declared illegal. From 1477 payment had to be made at the mine-head. No one was permitted to hire unskilled workers, and managers were forbidden to sell food and necessities, which had to be provided by accredited merchants from the mining town. From 1485 all hirings were to be reported to the *Bergmeister*, and thereby recruitment of the labour force was taken over effectively by the territorial authorities.

In the late spring of 1485 the Schwaz miners went on strike against too many restrictive practices. *Knappen* marched to Innsbruck, four kilometres away, to complain directly to Archduke Sigismund, whose officials soon forbade them to congregate in groups of more than two or three in public. The miners demanded half-shifts before all holidays and rest-days. This was granted in Sigismund's agreement of 25 June, 1485, and the underground shift was limited to eight hours in each twenty-four hour day.<sup>8</sup> In return, the miners had to agree that anyone who complained of inadequate pay could be sacked forthwith. Yet miners were now expressly allowed to work old seams that the *Bergmeister*, on the advice of the *Gewerken*, had previously closed to them. This accommodated a major grievance of the *Knappen*, namely that the bosses and authorities had prevented them from private prospecting whereby they hoped to become entrepreneurs themselves. Mining in Tirol became a career open to talent under the rules of self-help for all and sundry in the industry by order of the rules in June 1485.<sup>9</sup>

The *Knappen* also demanded more effective exercise of cheap law and order

---

<sup>8</sup> WORMS, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-6, 167-171. Sigismund's earlier attempt on 26 March, 1485, to find in favour of the bosses was thereby reversed. See pp. 164-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

by the Bergrichter. Crimes against property and persons were to entail prison and the trip to the high court at Innsbruck was to be undertaken in the company of regular warders at just under two kreuzers a time. Yet workers, already called *arbaiter* in the records, had to swear an oath of obedience to their bosses (*Hutleute*) or be dismissed. Above all, miners were to receive job security even if there was no shift work for them.<sup>10</sup> All strikers were pardoned but no further assembly (*besaumlung*) was permitted on pain of life, limb and property. Yet where miners had grievances, the *Bergmeister* was to act as trouble-shooter and organise meetings to settle the matter on the spot.

After Maximilian took over the government of Tirol from Archduke Sigismund in 1490 a harsher attitude towards the miners as well as to the industry as a whole appeared. As explained above, February 1491 saw Maximilian increasing his royalties by a quarter, selling out to the Fuggers at twenty-four per cent interest on silver revenues anticipated a year in advance. Something was bound to give. In the first half of 1493 the work-force at the south Tirolean mine of Gossensass withdrew their labour and barricaded mine and foundry. This working lay in the Brenner district, strategically across the main route between Schwaz, Hall, Innsbruck, Sterzing, Brixen, (Meran), Bozen, Trent and Italy. That is presumably why Maximilian instructed his counsellors to act so harshly, out of keeping with previous government behaviour to miners' strikes in the 1470s and '80s.

The records of this strike come exclusively from the government side. We do not know the names of the strikers nor their precise demands, although twenty-seven were captured and put on trial in Bozen after 13 July, 1493.<sup>11</sup> This was after they were tricked into a meeting with Maximilian's counsellors, run by the chief military officer of the County, Dägen Fuchs, and the chief treasury official and salt-master, Lienhard Vels. Fuchs and Vels had appeared at the meeting with seven hundred armed men levied from the surrounding towns and villages. The troops had not been told for which express purpose they were being summoned, and they were stiffened by one hundred loyal salt-pan workers from Hall under command of Vels.<sup>12</sup>

Gossensass was a large silver mine since it already had about three hundred *Gewerken* or investors in 1485, and from 1491 Maximilian's effective first minister, Bishop Melchior of Brixen, was beginning to invest in nearly a third of the mine's output, bringing him a handsome five hundred silver marks annually.<sup>13</sup> When the miners downed tools and demanded better conditions

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170, "khain *arbaiter* soll auch von khains khlagens wegen abgelegt werden, der anderst seiner schicht treulich ausswarth, man bedarf sein dann stunt nit. Wer huetleut aber derselben ainen ablegten, die sollen gestrafft werdn."

<sup>11</sup> Landesarchiv Innsbruck, Kopialbuch 16, ältere Reihe, 1493, fols. 122-3.

<sup>12</sup> The three crucial documents are in *ibid.*, fols. 106-8 (undated), fols. 112-3 (undated), fols. 122-3 (13 July).

<sup>13</sup> WOLFSKRON, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-4, listing the smaller investors who included neigh-

of "shift-work, pay and holidays,"<sup>14</sup> the investors and their hired managers turned the issue over to Maximilian and his military advisers. As it happened Maximilian was at the same time planning to raise troops in Tirol to campaign against the Turks who had once again raided neighbouring Inner Austria. He seems to have first used eight hundred of these levies to put down the strike, and then switched them to hunting down the Turkish slave raiders.<sup>15</sup> In punishing his own miners he was successful but he failed to find any Turks in the ensuing campaign. Due process of law was ordered against the miners since it was a sole prerogative of the ruler to authorise meetings and unions, on pain of life, limb and property.<sup>16</sup>

Anyone accused of joining the union (*pündtnus*) and going on strike (*ungehorsam*) was barred from further employment in any Tirolean mine. Black-legs were especially praised and kept on the payroll.<sup>17</sup> All through the strike Maximilian and his officials played a double role. The miners were told to keep calm and present their grievances. The same was demanded from investors and management. Then, expressly in secret, eight hundred troops were hired from Tirol and the neighbouring tributary Bishopric of Trent, whereby Maximilian promised to pay for their upkeep and any damages. The documents record this bad faith and harsh behaviour of Maximilian's officials towards the striking miners at several points.<sup>18</sup>

It remained for Maximilian to set up the court that punished the ring-leaders as expressed in the officials' words,

"in order to have sound reason for applying the law and not be blamed oneself, and what the law decrees, to carry it out forthwith".<sup>19</sup>

---

bouring burghers, mining-managers, parish priests, Maximilian's own courtiers and servants, local knights and nobles, customs and law officers.

<sup>14</sup> Landesarchiv Innsbruck, Kopialbuch, ältere Reihe, 1493, fol. 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, fols. 123-4, order of Maximilian, setting up the array of battle, 15 July.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 122, "sonnder ausserhalb der obrigkeit besamlung vnd pündtnuss, die doch bey leib vnd gut zu straffen, verboten sein."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 108, "Itm, welhe der noch vil sind nicht in der puntnuss wern, vnd den ausgannn geschefen lebn woltn, die behielt man."

<sup>18</sup> *Viz., ibid.*, fol. 108, "auch den hauptleuten des Lannds vnd zu Triennndt beuolhn in geheim auf 800 knecht zubesteln wann man Sy wissn lass. das man die eylenntz hab souver der kn. Mt. vnd Ew. vnns. Ratsleg gefielen dem furderlichn nachzukomen;"

fol. 112, "mit 800 geruster vnd guter knecht, so Jr haubtman 700 derselben allenthalben auf die stett vnd gericht slagen, vnd derselben stett vnd gericht sagen solt das man derzu noidurft der kn. Mt. auch Jrer Land vnd Leut bedurff in derselben stett vnd gericht sold vnd der kn. Mt. Liferung... zupringn;"

fol. 113, "Ob nun die gesellschaft oder puntnuss zu gross wurd, ist not daz Jr Hr Hauptman etlich weiter verordnet oder bestellet."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 123, "damit man grundt an Rechten hab vnd nicht zu schimph kum, was auch das Recht gibt, dem furderlichen volziehung beschehe."

We may doubt whether Maximilian escaped blame (*schimpf*) in view of the earlier more harmonious labour relations of the previous government. Maximilian's counsellors did not even list the miners' grievances here. They were only casually mentioned in passing, whilst they made their preparations to smash the strike on the five following principles of action: preserve calm at the mine; secretly recruit troops who would be kept in the dark about their task; imprison all ring-leaders and make examples of a number of the rank and file; encourage blacklegs and ensure that no striker obtained another job; accept the assurances of investors and management that they could recruit plenty of alternative labour to restart the mine.

How many more strikes ended so unhappily as a result of the brutal and cynical behaviour of the authorities? Did the period around 1490 show a general hardening of attitudes towards labour by territorial governments which had not been in evidence in quite the same way in the previous generation? Was this due to a combination of increasingly productivity-orientated business methods, rulers' need for higher incomes for war, diplomacy, court and bureaucracy, and finally a rising surplus of labour as the population increased? Certainly the bad faith shown by the authorities in 1493 cannot have helped them subsequently to retain loyalty in the face of Inner Austrian peasant uprisings in 1515, and the great upheavals under the charismatic leadership of a renegade Bishop's official, Michael Gaismair, in the Tirol during 1525-6. How many more strikes can be found in the fiscal archives of the period? From events like those at Gossensass in 1493 we can begin to piece together the labour relations that may well provide the clue to the great peasant war of 1525 in Germany and Austria.

