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WORK IN PROGRESS

## Livelihood strategies of dock workers in Durban in the 1950s

Dock workers<sup>1</sup>, not only in South Africa, but around the world have a reputation of being radicals.<sup>2</sup>

That dockers around the world have regularly been able to sustain industrial action despite usually working as casual labourers, has been explained through their social and physical isolation from mainstream society and the more 'respectable' working class, the insecurity of irregular job opportunities, the often savage working conditions, the indifference of ship-owners and foremen, and their strategic position in trade networks.<sup>3</sup>

However, when we are talking about dock workers in Durban in the 1950s, we are talking about African workers under apartheid. Surely, we cannot just assume that the radicalism that is so often associated with dockers, was necessarily also a characteristic of these workers. Durban's stevedores and quayside workers were migrant workers, whose lives differed substantially from those of the labourers in London, Liverpool, New York or Marseille.

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<sup>1</sup> Dock work is subdivided in two types of work. Stevedores are those labourers who work in the hold of the ship, stacking cargo, unloading, etc. Dock worker can refer to both those who worked on the shore or to the two groups together. To refer to the latter group specifically one can also use shore or dockside workers. Shore work generally requires less skills, is less dangerous and thus less well paid. Eric Taplin, *The Dockers' Union: A study of the National Union of Dock Labourers, 1889-1922* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985), 12-17. Here dock worker is used to refer to both groups, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> For some discussion of radicalism amongst dock workers, see: Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Frank Broeze, "Militancy and Pragmatism: An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870-1914," *International Review of Social History* XXXVI (1991), 2: 165-200; Colin J. Davis, *Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dockworkers, 1946-61* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Stephen Hill, *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976); Herb Mills, "The San Francisco Waterfront: The Social Consequences of Industrial Modernization. Part One," *Urban Life* V(1976), 2: 221-250; Winifred Mitchell, "Home life and the hungry mile: Sydney wharf labourers and their families, 1900-1914," *Labour history* XXXIII (1976): 86-97; David Wellman, *The union makes us strong: Radical unionism on the San Francisco waterfront* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Taplin, op. cit., 24-25 and Broeze, op. cit., 169-170.

Many have asserted that the system of oscillating labour migration made the development of a working-class consciousness difficult, if not impossible.<sup>4</sup> The migrant labourer, of course, does not fit nicely in the traditional conceptions of class, derived from western experience. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to extensively review the debates between liberals, radicals and social historians about migrant labour and the nature of the working class in Africa, it is useful to reiterate some of the main arguments.<sup>5</sup> Not only are migrant workers no full-fledged proletarians, but due to the rural supplement to their wages, they can be paid below the cost of reproduction of labour.<sup>6</sup> Their role as undercutters of wages did of course not do much good to foster unity among workers. Jack and Ray Simons consider this system:<sup>7</sup>

*“rational only as a device to fortify the white minority’s defences against the emerging African proletariat. The perpetual rotation of Africans under intensive police surveillance has a crippling affect on African labour and political organizations. The fear of being ‘endorsed out’ of towns has been a major deterrent to mass action against apartheid.”*

Rather than an economic or political explanation, Philip and Iona Mayer stressed the cultural choices of workers who are not urbanised and actively resist urbanisation. They describe how rurally oriented ‘Red’ migrants in East London, the majority, were ‘incapsulated’ in networks of other Red migrants who actively maintain the ties with the rural home and avoid unnecessary engagement with the urban environment or ‘School’ migrants. Class in this approach is a matter of cultural choice and preference, and labour migration is perpetuated by resistance to urbanisation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Crush gives an overview of some of the main arguments for this. Jonathan Crush, “Migrancy and Militance: The Case of the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa,” *African Affairs* LVVXIII (1989), 350, 5-23.

<sup>5</sup> A necessarily somewhat dated, but still very useful historiographical review of these debates can be found in Bill Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> A theory most famously expressed in Harold Wolpe, “Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid,” *Economy and Society* I (1972), 425-456.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Simons and Ray Simons, *Class & Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969) chapter 26.

<http://www.anc.org.za/books/ccsa26.html>

<sup>8</sup> Whether they were in town for six months or twenty-five years did not alter these cultural choices. Philip and Iona Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1971).

More specifically for dock workers, Jeremy Baskin described the difficulties for union organisers. He points to the prison-like conditions in the hostels<sup>9</sup> and the demoralisation amongst their inhabitants, and to the strong Zulu-consciousness that trumps class-consciousness, with many workers still having access to land though communal tenure.<sup>10</sup> Later, companies also actively tried to foster Zulu identity by forcing labourers to take unpaid leave regularly and by recognising the Inkatha-aligned United Workers Union of South Africa over the ANC-aligned Transport and General Workers Union.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that migrant workers cannot constitute a real working-class or come to organised working-class action, either because of their cultural background or because of the absence of permanent urban residence, has come in for substantial criticism. The picture of port workers in Durban painted in David Hemson's masterful PhD dissertation, while not uncomplicated, comes closer to the idea of docker radicalism than to that of migrant conservatism.<sup>12</sup> He identifies "periods of activity and strong militancy, followed by periods of quiescence but no acquiescence [...]."<sup>13</sup> Mostly, however, he stresses the that Africans *too* can be workers, develop a class consciousness and be union leaders: "with his [Zulu Phungula's] emergence in 1939 came the first evidence that the dockers could, from their ranks, throw up individuals capable of representing their interest independently from external agencies."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Other have, however, pointed out the possibilities of organising resistance within the compound and even use the social structures of the compound for that. Cf. T. Durban Moodie, "The Moral Economy of the Black Miners' Strike of 1946," *Journal of Southern African Studies* XIII (1986), 1: 1-35. This is substantiated by the statements of a number of stevedoring *izinduna* to the Department of Labour in 1961, mentioning that strikes – before the changes in the labour regime on the docks – used to be organised from the Bell Street Togh Barracks. SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 2, statements by Frans Goba, Sihlehle Mbando and Sergeant Ngcobo, 5-6 October 1961.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Baskin, "GWU and the Durban Dockworkers," *South African Labour Bulletin* VIII (1982), 3: 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union (Part I)," *South African Labour Bulletin* XI (1986), 2: 101-102.

<sup>12</sup> David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock Workers of Durban" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> David Hemson, "In the Eye of the Storm: Dock-Workers in Durban," in *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*, ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996), 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Idid.*, 155.

Many radical scholars shared this keenness to assert the working-class status and organisation of African labourers. This approach too has been criticised extensively.<sup>15</sup> Traditions that either stressed the impossibility of African working-class formation or presented a quest to prove the existence of that class, led to a change of focus.<sup>16</sup> Later historians have focused more extensively on culture and identity politics of African workers and non-workers, something they found lacking in much of the radical literature. While this different approach has generated a very rich body of interesting work, agency for the workers in this literature has been located largely in culture and identity politics, while other sources of agency have not received similar attention.

## I

*“What officials called casualism was, for workers, part of a complex web of social relations and culture connecting workplace, urban residence, and farms.” – Frederick Cooper<sup>17</sup>*

Were Durban’s dockers radicals, like many dock workers around the world and the continent? Or, did they fail to come to a working-class consciousness and organisation, due to the limitations that the oscillating labour migration system brought with it? Hemson’s dissertation contains a very rich body of evidence that these workers did in fact have a relatively advanced consciousness and did organise, despite the levels of repression under white rule. That industrial action has regularly taken place in the port, is beyond doubt. However, some of the evidence of a working-class consciousness, I will argue, might not be unambiguous.

This paper will try to overcome this apparent paradox between supposed migrant-conservatism and docker radicalism by looking at the reproduction of this labour force on an individual basis. Dockers in Durban were much more than just labourers, their wage labour

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Saunders gives a concise overview of some of the criticisms of these radical historians in the final chapter of *The making of the South African past* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Cooper, “Work, class and empire: an African historian’s retrospective on E.P. Thompson,” *Social History* XX (1995), 2: 235-241; and Robin Cohen, “Resistance and Hidden Forms of Consciousness Amongst African Workers,” *Review of African Political Economy* 19 (1980): 8-22.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombassa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 248.

represented only one part of their livelihoods, as the above quote from Frederick Cooper reminds us. Here, I will look at how workers used urban wages and other economic resources at their disposal in livelihood strategies that straddle both the rural and the urban. This can give us an insight in the question what role wages played in the workers' lives; wage labour can acquire different meanings for workers when the position of it in their livelihood strategy changes.

Not only does this approach offer us a new way of examining the class position of workers, it also directs our attention to the creative responses from the periphery to economic domination and the migrant labour system. Labour migration is not *just* something into which Africans are forced because of the penetration of market forces, the degeneration of the environment or simply by political or physical coercion. It is also a strategic decision people make and think about, albeit in a context of severely restricted options.

In the next two sections of this paper, I will discuss the livelihood strategies of dock workers in Durban on the basis of forty-eight interviews with workers who started on the docks between 1939 and 1959. This latter date was chosen as the cut-off for this research, as after the strikes in February and March of that year monopoly hiring was introduced and the labour regime in the port thus changed drastically. The picture that emerges is one that does not fit comfortably in common conceptions of either rurally oriented, conservative migrant workers or of radical dock workers.

These interviews were conducted by Sibongo Dlamini in 2009 all around KwaZulu-Natal and parts of the Eastern Cape. He worked on the docks himself between 1972 and 2003, was a union activist and had previous experience in conducting interviews. Without his help in tracking down ex-dock workers and in conducting the actual interviews, this research project would have been an inevitable failure.

These interviews had their limitations, which I wish to acknowledge here. After discussing how we could conduct these interviews best, Sibongo and I decided that he would do them without

me being present. There are two main reasons for this, apart from a number of minor considerations. Firstly, the way in which he found contacts and the geographical spread of the interviews – not one took place in Durban – would have made it extremely difficult to coordinate schedules in such a way that we could both be present at the interviews. Secondly, being ex-colleagues, even if they might not have worked on the docks at the same time, they had a certain intimacy that could possibly be broken by introducing a third person. However, I am confident that this ‘outsourcing’ has not compromised the usefulness of these interviews. His previous experience and unquestionable intelligence resulted in very interesting interviews, and through a number of discussions about the results, we were able to fine-tune the set of questions from which he worked.

Also, the lack of detailed social statistics of this group in this period makes it hard to judge how representative the sample is.<sup>18</sup> Potential interviewees have been tracked down through Sibongo’s network of contacts and through the ‘snowball’ system where one interviewee referred him to colleagues. One potential problem with this is that this method probably overrepresented permanent workers who worked on the docks for a long time and thus identify firmly as former dock workers, and underrepresented people who only worked on the docks for a limited time on a casual basis and might not identify as ex-dockers. However, after analysing these interviews, I am confident that if casual, short-term dock workers – or *togt* workers as they were known – were underrepresented, this would only have underplayed the main tendencies observed, and there is thus little reason to doubt these.

Another problem is that none of the interviewees were ever engaged in strikes, while we know from newspapers, archives and Hemson’s work that many strikes have taken place in the 1950s. Not only did these informants deny striking themselves, they also did not think it was a very common occurrence. A number did mention that there had been talks, and two mentioned that there was a strike while they were at home. Did they project a later situation backwards (there were

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper’s observation that the Kenyan railway administration knew ‘virtually nothing’ about its labourers would probably not have been too far off the mark for the employers in the Durban harbour either. Cooper, *On the African Waterfront*, xi.

very few, if any, dock strikes between 1959 and 1972) and could it be possible that these strikes did not leave more of an impression that they do not remember them anymore? We are currently working on a number of follow-up interviews to find out more about this seemingly unrepresentative result.

Some hypotheses can however be considered. Firstly, could the way of finding interviewees have distorted the result? Sibongo Dlamini found them through his connections among dock workers, maybe this could have led to an overrepresentation of one in-group that perhaps was less engaged in industrial action. However, Sibongo himself was a union activist and it would be unlikely that his connections would have been entirely conservative. Moreover, at first he was unsure whether he would find more than maybe four or five people to interview, the interviewees are thus not only or even mainly from his inner-circle, but rather found through a 'snowball' method. Many levels of referrals on the basis of different associations, such as geographic closeness, kinship, having lived together in the compound, etc., make it unlikely that the sample would have come from one in-group. Secondly, it is quite possible that workers and authorities had different conceptions of what a strike was. Government archives show at least two instances where workers denied being on strike while they had stopped work – and as casual workers, one could say that they were technically correct. In their eyes, they were just having talks with the government and the employers.<sup>19</sup>

Thirdly, after a number of strikes, employers decided to dismiss the strikers and engage new labourers. However, those who re-applied were usually re-employed, except – in theory – after the overtime ban of March 1959. We do know, however, that people did try to be re-hired, and it seems unlikely that there would not have been a substantial number who managed to be re-hired.<sup>20</sup> If indeed the whole *togt* stevedoring workforce was replaced after March 1959, there could in theory be no casual stevedores who started before the overtime-ban but retired after it. There are however

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<sup>19</sup> SAB, ARB, vol. 1240, file 1042/1239, Divisional Inspector of Labour for Natal to Secretary for Labour, "Stoppage of Work," 6 November 1956; SAB, NTS, vol. 2222, file 416/280, part 1, "Notes of Meeting Held at Bell Street Barracks on 29th July 1942," 30 July 1942.

<sup>20</sup> SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 2, statements by Frans Goba, Sihlehle Mbando and Sergeant Ngcobo, 5-6 October 1961.

a number of interviews where this was the case. On the other hand, the replacement of a large number of striking *togt* labourers could be another part of the explanation why there is an apparent overrepresentation of permanent workers in the sample. Again, however, it seems like this underrepresentation of *togt* workers would only lead to the main tendencies in this paper being more pronounced in reality.

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The first observation to make is that all of the informants were from rural areas in present-day KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern sections of the Eastern Cape, none of them were from Durban. Almost all of them were very clear about one thing: none of them settled in Durban or ever seriously considered the possibility. Doda Nxele expressed his feelings about the city as follows: “it was only money that made me be there,” adding that “the city is for educated people and tsotsis.”<sup>22</sup> There is evidence that that there was disdain for those few who did consider a future in the city, at least three informants considered them stupid,<sup>23</sup> Sofa Nkomo thought they were confused by city women<sup>24</sup> and Vela Mtolo said that “people laugh at you when you stay permanently in the city and call you *umbhunguka*.”<sup>25</sup>

Only a few informants did not dismiss the idea of becoming a permanent urban resident completely. While Lihlo Budu was not himself interested in moving to the city, he did invest in a house in Durban for his children to use when they would come to Durban for higher education.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> There is a lot of material in the interviews that I did not use here, for example, how often they visited home, their relations with city-women, and hiring. I did this in order to keep the paper more concise and focused. It will be used in later writings on this research.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Doda Nxele, Umzinto, 11 July 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Libho Qoza, Upper Umkomaas, 15 June 2009; Bongeka Faku, Magusheni, 27 June 2009; and Xhegu Ntozakhe, Lusikisiki, 3 August 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sofa Nkomo, Dumisa, 12 July 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Vela Mtolo, Bulwer, 28 May 2009. *Umbhunguka* can be translated as ‘absconder’, and can be read as the isiZulu equivalent of *itshipha*. For a discussion of the concept of *itshipha*, see Mayer and Mayer, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Lihlo Budu, Izingolweni, 29 June 2009. A house in Durban could be an important asset, which could earn you rent, allow others in your family to stay in Durban or serve as the basis for a small business. This theme also came up in the interviews with Lungani Xulu, Mkhunya, 13 July 2009; and Mtukatschelwa Phewa, Izingolweni, 29 May 2009.



Dumile Ndlovu on the other hand kept the possibility open for a while, as faction fights were tearing his home area apart, but when he found a new home near Port Shepstone, he lost interest in an urban future.<sup>27</sup> Lalani Dumakude lost interest when he experienced how expensive life in the city is, a feeling echoed by M. Ndlovu in 1979: he did not want to pay rent when retired.<sup>28</sup>

This strong rural orientation was made possible by the fact that all of the informants, except one, had access to some amount of land, sometimes very small, usually in one of the reserves. This, unsurprisingly, was something that was considered important, because “you can’t establish an *umuzi* without land,”<sup>29</sup> and it is “where you make your home and raise your children.”<sup>30</sup> Legendary dock leader Zulu Phungula asserted in 1942 that “our homes are here in Durban”, responding to the ultimatum of Controller of Industrial Manpower, Ivan Walker, that they would have to go back to work or go back home.<sup>31</sup> Hemson argues that in this discussion Zulu Phungula affirmed the full proletarian status of the African workers, something that would undermine the wage structure in Durban.<sup>32</sup> It is however questionable whether his colleagues would have agreed that their homes were in Durban. His words could also be read in the context of the meeting and as the response of a sharp debater to the government’s bluff; in that sense this assertion of proletarian status was a rhetorical strategy by a man who saw right through the system of differential pay.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dumile Ndlovu, Port Shepstone, 20 May 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Lalani Dumakude, Impendle, 7 June 2009; interview with M. Ndlovu and J. Ngubese by A. Manson and D. Collins for the Oral History Programme of the University of Natal, 20 June 1979, tape and transcripts held at the Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Velile Goba, Riverside, 17 June 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Bongela Faku.

<sup>31</sup> SAB, ARB, vol. 174, file COM 1/9/1, “Meeting held at Native Commissioner’s Office, Durban,” 11 March 1942. Hemson focuses a lot on Zulu Phungula, “Class Consciousness,” chapter 5; “Dock Workers, Labour Circulation, and Class Struggles in Durban, 1940-59,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* IV (1977), 1: 88-124. The dock workers interviewed by Tine Sideris in the early 1980s still carried his memory, Tina Sideris, *Sifuna Imali Yethu: The life and struggles of Durban Dockworkers, 1940-1981* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relation, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> David Hemson, “Dock Workers, Labour Circulation, and Class Struggles” 96.

<sup>33</sup> In the transcripts, Zulu Phungula comes over as a very smart man, who understands the differential wage structure very well and that their cheap labour is what keeps the harbour running: “What increases the number of ships is because we get so little money,” and “winches are now being driven by Natives and the white man drives the cranes. Later the cranes will be driven by Natives without any increase in wages.” He was also strategic in debating, planting the seed for claiming full proletarian status earlier by stressing that African workers want to live the same lifestyle as Europeans, but cannot on their wages. This claim is about wages and a challenge of inequality of pay and should be interpreted as such. It may well be that he understood that there was a link between labour migration and differential pay, but it is questionable that many dock workers

The early life-trajectories of most workers were remarkably similar. They all came to Durban at a fairly young age, in their late teens or early twenties, only Amos Sibaya and Velile Goba were 27 and 29 respectively.<sup>34</sup> Three main reasons were given for coming to Durban: a bad situation at home; it is just part of becoming a man; or having goals to fulfil. Setbacks that brought young men out to Durban included the passing away of a parent, drought, faction fights, *umuthi* or just generally an unsustainable paternal *umuzi*. Dumile Ndlovu, Zithulele Chemane, and Doda Nxele were chased away from their homes by faction fights and the need to rebuild their *imizi*.<sup>35</sup> Godidi Msomi replaced his sick father on the docks, and Thoko Mlaba<sup>36</sup> replaced her husband who died on the job and started cleaning for the same company at his old wage.<sup>37</sup> For at least seven people, their decision to come to the city was directly or indirectly related to the loss of one or both parents.<sup>38</sup> The homesteads of Xolani Ngema and Zandile Mbile were stricken by witchcraft, while Hlalomzi Ngcwangule was simply from a poor home.<sup>39</sup>

It did not have to be bad luck that brought the young men to Durban, however. It was what people came to expect from a young man when he turned eighteen, or shortly after that.<sup>40</sup> It was part of the process of becoming a man, and a step most had to take before marrying, even if their fathers paid *ilobolo*. If they were already married before coming to Durban, they still had to work to establish their own *umuzi*.<sup>41</sup> Going to the city to work was part of becoming independent: "I had to proceed my own way."<sup>42</sup>

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would have agreed that their homes were in Durban.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews with Amos Sibiya, Empangeni, 10 June 2009; and Velile Goba.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Zithulele Chemane, Siphofu, 9 July 2009; Dumile Ndlovu; and Doda Nxele.

<sup>36</sup> The only woman among the interviewees.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with Godidi Msomi, Umkomaas, 21 May 2009; and Thoko Mlaba, New Hanover, 8 June 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Zolile Khumalo, Newcastle, 16 May 2009; Thembinkosi Miya, Ixopo, 26 May 2009; Mdu Jama, Izingolweni, 30 May 2009; Lunguza Mbelu, Umbumbulu, 14 June 2009; Nelson Ndaba, Nkwezela, 17 July 2009; Mtukatshelwa Phewa; and Bongela Faku.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews with Xolani Ngema, Kranskop, 9 June 2009; Zandile Mbile, Highflats, 7 July 2009; and Hlalomzi Ngcwangula, Lusikisiki, 29 July 2009.

<sup>40</sup> As Velile Goba put it: "It is a culture where, when a boy turns eighteen, he must go to work. When I was eighteen, I decided to do so."

<sup>41</sup> Of forty interviews where I have this information, twenty-six married after starting work on the docks and only fourteen before. Of those fourteen, eleven still needed to establish their *umuzi* when they started dock work.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Sonke Zizi, Lusikisiki, 13 July 2009.

A third group of motivations for taking up wage labour in the city, centres around the need to fulfil a set of aims. In that sense, they could be considered target workers. Many of the dock workers interviewed noted that they came to the city to earn money for cattle, for establishing their *umuzi*, for wiring their land, etc. The central goal they expressed was to make their rural homes into viable economic units, to establish themselves. However, while they explained their decisions in terms of certain targets they want to reach, most of their life trajectories do not fit the picture of target workers very well, as we shall see.

The reason for becoming a dock worker specifically was mostly based on having the right contacts for it. Only six did not end up on the dock through having contacts there. No more than three were recruited at home.<sup>43</sup> Lunguza Mbelu just took the advice of people he met in the beer hall on his first day in Durban and presented himself to be hired that same evening at 9pm for the night shift. He was hired and could start as a permanent labourer the next day.<sup>44</sup> Zithulele Chemane slept under the verandas in the Point area when he arrived and met other dockers there who told him where and when he could be hired. Amos Sibiyi was sent by his father to ask for a job at one of the stevedoring companies, but contrary to most, his father had not made any arrangements with an *induna* or supervisor and Amos did thus not know that he would be hired. All others were referred to one of the stevedoring companies or the South African Railways and Harbours (S.A.R. & H.) by uncles, brothers-in-law, cousins or other people they knew, who usually had already made arrangements for the new worker to be hired. For most of them it was also their first urban job, only one had worked as a domestic for two years before the kitchen maid's boyfriend got him a job on the docks, where he earned a lot more.<sup>45</sup>

Once they got a job on the docks, their job stability was remarkable. The average length that African workers in Durban stayed on one job in 1950 was eleven months and slightly more for

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Khethekwakhe Zondo, KwaMbonambi, 6 May 2009; Gugulethu Pityana, Mt. Frere, 25 July 2009; and Makhehle Gxokwana, Lusikisiki, 7 August 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Lunguza Mbelu, Umbumbulu, 14 June 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Gobile Mbhele, Springs, 14 July 2009.

industrial workers.<sup>46</sup> For most of the workers interviewed for this project, however, dock work was their first and only job in the city, with no-one doing this job for less than six years. The reason for this unusual job-loyalty could be that, when shipping was good and there was plenty of opportunity to work overtime and do double shifts, one could earn as much as £6 per week in the late 1950s.<sup>47</sup> Average monthly wages for *togt* stevedores were estimated by African Associated Agency and Stevedoring at £15 in 1954.<sup>48</sup> Very few unschooled workers in Durban could ever hope for such earning. A survey of employers in 1950 indicated that less than five per cent of the African workers in Durban earned more than £15 per month, and that sixty per cent earned £10 or less. H.R. Burrows even thought that this might be an overestimation of actual wages, as more 'enlightened' employers would have been less reluctant to give out this information. Moreover, this survey did not include domestic service, usually among the lowest paid jobs.<sup>49</sup> Later in this paper, I will offer another reason why dockers might have been content enough in their job not to look for other jobs.<sup>50</sup> Whether this *relative* contentment could also partly explain that none of these workers claim to have been engaged in strikes, will hopefully become more clear from the follow-up interviews.

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<sup>46</sup> R. H. Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1950), 66; University of Natal, Department of Economics, *The African Factory Worker: A Sample Study of the Life and Labour of the Urban African Worker* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1950), 71.

<sup>47</sup> The figures given for wages in these interviews are somewhat problematic. Most informants stated their wages at the start of their careers in Rands, which was not yet the official currency. It would thus seem that they projected a later situation backwards. For such detailed questions, it is also likely that their memories might not be completely reliable; however, most figures for basic weekly wages, without overtime, are within an acceptable range to assume they are credible. Another problem is that the difference between basic wage without overtime and potential earnings can be very large. The figure of R12 or £6 was offered by Dumile Ndlovu and might be somewhat exaggerated, but Khethekwakhe Zondo also mentioned potential earnings of R9 (£4.10s) and more per week. Figures from the Department of Labour for *togt* rates starting on 30 July 1956 do indicate that one could earn 19s. 6d. working from 7.20 a.m. to 9 p.m. With special cargo allowance that would have made 20s. 6d. Earning £6 per week was thus not impossible, but only at a working pace that would be hard to sustain for a long time. After the April 1958 overtime-ban, these potential earning became even higher, according to the *Natal Witness*, with 14s. for a regular dayshift and 2s. per hour for overtime, bringing the potential earnings for a day to 22s., even without extra allowances. SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 1, "Notes on Meeting with Employers in the Stevedoring Industry Held," 15 August 1956; "Durban Stevedores Back To Work: Dispute Is Settled," *Natal Witness*, 22 April 1958, 1.

<sup>48</sup> SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 1, untitled document, June 1954.

<sup>49</sup> H.R. Burrows, "Native Incomes, Housing and the Cost of Living," *South African Journal of Economics* XIX (1951), 4: 350.

<sup>50</sup> This stability is of course a finding that could be distorted by the potential lack of representativity of the sample. However, the difference with 4% of Dunlop workers on their first job, 28% of domestics and 21% of African workers in farming just seems too big to falsify this finding. Moreover, while the casual workers in the sample often has shorted wage labour careers, for them too it was their only urban job.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that they had no grievances. Twenty-eight were the first and the last dock worker in their family and only sixteen had a father, brother, uncle or cousin who also worked on the docks at some point. Only one had a son who ended up working on the docks, and even that was only for a short time.<sup>51</sup> While dockers mostly ended up in their job thanks to somebody arranging for them to be hired, they did not arrange for their sons to do the same work. It was too dangerous and heavy.<sup>52</sup> Lihlo Budu notes that this work was acceptable to them, because they were uneducated, but Cacile Khozane thought that “no one in my family could work such a hard job after having been at school.” Others shared this conviction.<sup>53</sup> Most stressed the importance of sending their children to school. There seems to have been a strong belief in the potential of education to make their children more socially mobile. Their job might have suited them nicely, but they did not want their children to do it.

A last element in these livelihood strategies that they seemed to have had in common, is the attitude to land. All of them had access to some land<sup>54</sup> and attached great importance to that, all of them invested in cattle and other livestock. Their wives planted some crops, but the yields were not always very good. Some sold some of the produce, others only bartered and a number did not grow enough for either. Despite sometimes poor returns of their wives', children's and mothers' labour, the importance of this produce should not be underestimated. As Dumile Ndlovu mentioned: “it was important because my wife was not a lazy woman, by committing herself to a garden we could save a lot on spendings and she sold a little bit of vegetables from that garden.” By refusing to give up on the poor reserve soils, these women kept fighting total proletarianisation.<sup>55</sup> Even if it were only a

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<sup>51</sup> Amos Sibiya.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with Cacile Khozana, Lusikisiki, 8 August 2009; Velile Goba; Lihlo Bubu; Nelson Ndaba; and Xhegu Ntozakhe.

<sup>53</sup> Xhegu Ntozakhe sent his children to school to save them from such a heavy and dangerous job and Velile Goba's sons could work on the docks because they were educated.

<sup>54</sup> Except for Xolani Ngema who only gained access to land when he retired in 1996.

<sup>55</sup> Only Phumla Nyathikazi did not attribute the returns from the land to his wife, he said his wife was lazy and the land only started yielding good returns when he returned to his home. Interview with Phumla Nyathikazi, Lusikisiki, 1 August 2009.

little bit, all the food that they could grow themselves, would not have to be bought. How much of their consumption needs it covered varied, but many insisted that it at least helped.

While most of these men left the decisions regarding the use of land to their wives or mothers – though some insisted that they took all decisions – when it came to investment in land, the men stressed their own role. The division of authority as described by Sofa Nkomo seems pretty standard: “We took decisions together, but my wife was more confident in land usage and I was in land investment.” By far the most common form of developing the land was by surrounding it by wire, so that the livestock could not damage the crops. It was only Zitha Xaba who gave his wife the credit for coming up with the idea to wire their land.<sup>56</sup> The second most popular method of investing in the land was by investing in a generator and pipes to water it. Some of those generators were stolen from the wharves.<sup>57</sup> Other ways of investing in the land were by buying manure and seeds or by getting veteran farmers to teach them. That the men stressed their own role in investment, might have to do with the fact that this required money and they were usually the ones bringing in the cash and deciding how it was spent.

### III

Durban’s dock workers showed a strong commitment to their land and to returning to it. How and when they would retire from the city differed. This is where two clearly discernable strategies emerge. Some chose to maximise their earnings by working as much overtime and weekend shifts as possible, often combined with a strategy of minimising their expenditures on consumption, in order to be able to send as much money home as possible. Others, however, chose a more commercial-entrepreneurial route towards maximising their returns from dock labour. In fact, most dock workers seem to have had some little commercial enterprise in combination with their dock labour. The returns from this were often only a little bit of money on the side, a strategy to maximise what

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Zitha Xaba, Lusikisiki, 2 August 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with Zifo Mzizi, Underberg, 16 June 2009; and Libho Qoza.

they earn while in Durban, but could also become the main source of income. These dock workers exhibited a very keen commercial sense.

The first strategy relied on the fact that when shipping was good and when you were willing – and physically able – to double up shifts, comparatively good money could be made on the docks. In 1958, the Assistant-Secretary of the Natal Employers' Association even called stevedoring labour in Durban "incomparably the highest paid labour of its type in Durban, and for that matter some of the highest paid in the entire Union."<sup>58</sup> Representing the employers, he had of course an ulterior motive for exaggerating how well dock labourers were paid, and stevedores were at any rate better paid than shore workers.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as mentioned, pay on the docks was in fact good, as was confirmed in a number of interviews.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, a number of dock workers felt that with doubling up shifts they could earn enough, and there was no need to combine it with another form of income.<sup>61</sup> There tended to be enough opportunities to work extra shifts if you wanted to.<sup>62</sup> Not only did a number of dockers not feel that there was a need to do anything else, some were not very confident in their abilities to successfully pull off a commercial endeavour. A feeling that dock work was for the uneducated was evidenced in some of the interviews. This argument is very similar to the one they used to explain why they did not want their children to step in their father's footsteps. Bongela Faku 'just worked',

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<sup>58</sup> SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 2, R.C. Lloyd to the Minister of Labour, "Wage Board Investigation: Stevedoring Industry," 10 January 1958.

<sup>59</sup> Yet, in a Wage Board report thirteen years earlier on unskilled labour in Durban, weekly wages for dockers were already similar to other workers before overtime and weekend pay were added, and the daily wages for *togt* stevedores were only second to four lonely builders. SAB, ARB, vol. 2976, file 1069/197, part 1, "Report to the Honourable Minister of Labour by the Wage Board. Unskilled Labour – Durban," 1 June 1945.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with Sihle Zungu, Highflats, 8 July 2009; Khethekwakhe Zondo; Dumile Ndlovu; and Gobile Mbhele.

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with Xolile Jaca, Mabheleni, 10 July 2009; and Xolani Ngema.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Nhlanhla Sokhela, Greytown, 17 May 2009. From the response to a questionnaire by the Department of Labour by Brock & Co, it seems that depending on availability of work, that in October 1956 on average about half of all stevedores on any given day would work overtime. SAB, ARB, vol. 3315, file 1196/5/2, part 1, "Questionnaire to Stevedoring Employers." Of course, one could always slack during the day shift in order to still have enough energy to work overtime, interview with Gedla Lukhozi, Polela, 6 June 2009. Sideris mentions some short cuts, op. cit., 25-27.

because he was not educated and Lihlo Budu thought “business is for educated people.” A feeling that dock work is just too heavy to combine with other ventures also played a role.<sup>63</sup>

Working as many shifts as possible was usually combined with strategies of minimising expenditure. Permanent workers could typically stay in the company compound, where as a rule food was provided free. Their consumption expenditures in the city could thus be kept to an absolute minimum.<sup>64</sup> Cash requirements for the family’s consumption needs in the rural areas could be minimised by the women by trying to reap as much produce as possible from their land. Those who did not live in the compound, because they were no permanent workers or because they chose not to live there, of course had to find other ways to eat and sleep in Durban without using all of their earnings.<sup>65</sup>

A first strategy was to live in the compound despite the fact that you were not supposed to. Phumla Nyathikazi started as permanent worker and decided to work on a casual basis after six months. As he had lived in the compound, he had befriended the security guards who let him live there after he stopped working permanently. Connections like these can be crucial assets, yet he was the only one who mentioned this strategy. A much more common strategy was to live off food that they took from the docks, mentioned by ten informants. When loading and unloading, bags and tins of food regularly broke. Loose food was thus always lying around and it was not really considered stealing to take that food home,<sup>66</sup> “it was like you were cleaning the wharves.”<sup>67</sup> Of course, if there were not enough broken bags one day, one could always break some, a strategy at

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<sup>63</sup> Bongela Faku.

<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the compounds of the dock companies did not ‘incapsulate’ the migrants and shield them from the urban environment in the same way as Mayer and Mayer described for East London (*ut supra*) or as Thomas argues for the participants of *ingoma* dances in Durban. Only a few informants from KwaZulu-Natal mentioned that they mainly associated with other people from their area or avoided contact with urban influences. Those who came from the Eastern Cape, however, did limit their social contact mostly to others from their area. Cf. Harold J. Thomas, “Ingoma Dancers and Their Response to Town: A Study of Ingoma Dance Troupes Among Zulu Migrant Workers in Durban” (MA thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> Twenty-four out of forty-eight did not live in a compound for at least some time during their urban career; of those twenty-four, seventeen never lived in a compound.

<sup>66</sup> Lungani Xulu.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Sicelo Mbokazi, Nhlakuza, 16 July 2009.



least one person used regularly.<sup>68</sup> Popular and convenient food items to pick up were flour, samp, beans, sugar, tinned fish, salt and rice.<sup>69</sup> A more extreme form of saving money was by sleeping under the verandas of the warehouses on the docks, something that was done by five people.<sup>70</sup> Minimizing expenditure was not something that was only done by those who only supplemented their income by working more shifts, those who started a little business equally utilised these strategies.

Twenty-eight interviewees, or about six out of ten, had some sort of business on the side. Just as Sara Berry noted for Yorùbá cocoa farmers, the most common and lucrative sector to branch out in was the commercial sector.<sup>71</sup> Some of these labourers ended up as rather successful entrepreneurs. By far the most common activity that workers combined with the dock work was the retailing of consumption goods. Three main categories can be discerned: the selling of dagga in town and on the docks; selling cigarettes, matches, sweets and sometimes fruit on the docks; and selling pilfered goods at home or in the townships.

The most accessible and least risky of these undertakings was the selling of cigarettes, sweets, etc. Thoko Mlaba started selling these things shortly after she started working on the docks. She always heard men asking for these items, thus she decided to invest some of her wages in it and started selling them in the township where she lived, on the train to work and on the job. There were many others who realised this need and the low investment that was required made this a very popular means to supplement wages. However, it could take much time out of your day. A number of workers did indeed mention that between dock work and selling, they did not have much time to socialise.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Gcinokwakhe Sobiso, Creighton, 18 June 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Interviews with Doda Ndaweni, Gxuha, 28 June 2009; Gcinokwakhe Sobiso; and Lungani Xulu.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews with Galo Mtolo, Izingolweni, 28 May 2009; Co Pityana, Mt. Frere, 28 July 2009; Nkomozethu Cikane, Lusikisiki, 4 August 2009; Zifo Mzizi; and Zithuele Chemane.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Sara S. Berry, *Fathers Work for Their Sons: Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yorùbá Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 1-5.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with Mtukatshelwa Phewa; Velile Goba; Lungani Xulu; Sicelo Mbokazi; and Co Pityana.

Moreover, some of the best times to sell these goods are of course when people are working, and thus when the seller should also be working. Several dockers therefore entered into a commercial partnership with their girlfriend in the city, she could offer her labour and sell all day, and he could offer a client base of colleagues. The interviews provided four successful examples of such collaboration: the girlfriend of Godidi Msomi was already selling ice cream when they met, but he got her to sell sandwiches, cigarettes, tea and even beer. Eventually he took her as his second wife. Mandla Xaba's girlfriend sold phuthu, samp and curries, from which *he* made good money. Upon retiring from Durban, he did give her R400.<sup>73</sup> Slu, Dona Ndaweni's girlfriend in Merebank, sold the loose food that he pilfered. He too married her. Sihle Zungu, finally, was able to sell both sweets and cigarettes on the docks and pilfered goods in the township. He sold on the docks, while Zuleka, the girlfriend of his cousin Zandile Mbile who also worked on the docks, sold the food he brought. Mtukatshelwa Phewa did not rely on a girlfriend for selling the goods from the docks, but on his aunt. They lived together in Chesterville and his work on the docks enabled them to start a small tuck shop there

Not all dock workers had such good relationships with city women. On the contrary, most of them held urban women in contempt. Many were warned by their family members not to get involved with them, they saw those who socialised with women in town getting poor and being confused, causing them to settle permanently in the city.<sup>74</sup> A number of them disregarded the warnings, having some affairs in town, but were often put off by the assertiveness and relative sexual naughtiness these women displayed or thought that they were only after their money.<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting that the one woman among the informants did not think much about city men either.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Mandla Xaba, Bulwer, 28 May 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Zolile Khumalo; Nhlanhla Sokhela; and Sofa Nkomo.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with Siphso Zondi, Pietermaritzburg, 7 May 2009; Mzo Mzongo, Izingolweni, 30 June 2009; Makhehle Gxokwana, Lusikisiki, 7 August 2009; Gedla Lukhozi; Libho Qoza; Velile Goba; Galo Mtolo; and Xhegu Ntozakhe.

<sup>76</sup> Thoko Mlaba.

Food, cigarettes and sweets were however not the only items that were in high demand. Nhlanhla Sokhela mentioned that ship crews asked him to provide them with dagga.<sup>77</sup> That was for him the reason to start selling it, not only to crews, but also in the hostels and compounds. He was far from the only one selling it. At least ten men sold it and two of them were selling it from before they came to Durban. They often had white supervisors and *izinduna* among their customers. As such, this business provided them with contacts that enabled other businesses. Doda Nxele was in the good book with one of the foremen who was a satisfied customer and looked the other way when he looted some of the cargo to sell. Lungani Xulu used these dagga-connections to transport the food from broken bags he wanted his wife to sell. Some of the bus drivers were his customers and could be paid in kind. Dumile Ndlovu was promoted to gangway man<sup>78</sup> after a white supervisor learned that he was selling high-quality dagga.

Having the right connection and keeping the right people on your side was important in the strategies of these workers. Mtukatshelwa Phewa, who could open a tuck shop together with his aunt in Chesterville thanks to being able to stock it with free goods, avoided police harassment by befriending and bribing a number of police officers. As a *togt* labourer he also had to be in the good book with the *izinduna*, as they could decide who got a job and who did not. Therefore, he “used to buy them lots of *utshwala*<sup>79</sup> and then they became good friends of mine.” After the death of his parents, he got access to land in izingolweni through a man from whom he sometimes hired a bakkie for bringing goods to Chesterville. That man was Mdu Jama, a friend and colleague. He too was a *togt* labourer and had to try to get to the front of the hiring hierarchy. His bakkie was a major asset

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<sup>77</sup> That there must have been personal contact between dock workers and ship crews, is supported by the fact that several workers mentioned that the talks between workers and management that took place, were a result of ship crews informing them that they worked more than in other ports. Khethekwakhe Zondo explains: “some of our colleagues were able to communicate with ship crews. Therefore, we learned things like how many tons we should work on a day, when we learned those things we started to protest about them. So, our grievances were met by negotiations before big action was taken, because we had learned that we were doing more work than necessary.”

<sup>78</sup> Someone who coordinates, through signals, the work of the gangs in the hold with the crane operator.

<sup>79</sup> Sorghum beer sold under municipal monopoly in the beer-halls.

that made him into a “blue-eyed boy”<sup>80</sup>: *izinduna* were as guilty of pilferage as other dock workers and required somebody who could transport their loot.

Some of the most active pilferers were *togt* workers. Phumla Nyathikazi even quit his permanent position to become a casual after six months:

“You see Dlams! In those six months, I had started stealing the cargo and had found the way of making money. Therefore, there were no good chances if you worked permanently. If a ship with nice things is at a certain berth you can’t go and work on it, but if you’re a casual worker, you present yourself for hiring at the company that deals with that ship.”

Being a *togt* worker not only gave you the freedom to choose on which ship to work, but also when to work, giving you more flexibility in running other businesses.<sup>81</sup> That casual workers could not stay in the compounds, could also have been welcome as way of evading tighter controls, which could complicate their not-always-legal business.<sup>82</sup> The advantage of a permanent job, on the other hand, is that it offers a degree of stability in earnings in the uncertain worlds of petty entrepreneurialism and shipping.<sup>83</sup> However, all of the non-entrepreneurs interviewed worked permanently. Few workers had to remain casual involuntary: if you were willing to work permanently and were strong enough, you would be hired permanently within days.<sup>84</sup>

White supervisors too were complicit in the widespread practice of pilferage. Ten informants mentioned that it were these foremen who gave them easy access to some of the more coveted cargoes, like guns. Often the supervisors were pilfering themselves and needed someone to carry the spoils to the bakkie, who would then be rewarded by a part of the cargo in return for his silence.

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<sup>80</sup> A term used in casual dock work around the world for those men who are preferred by the foremen, here *izinduna*, and get hired more regularly than others.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews with Mtukatshelwa Phewa; Mdu Jama; Sicelo Mbokazi; Co Pityana; and Phumla Nyathikazi.

<sup>82</sup> David Hemson thus correctly describes refusal to move into the compounds as a form of hidden resistance, yet the high labour turnover he mentions as another form of covert resistance is not evidenced in these interviews. Hemson, “eye of the storm,” 147.

<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Keith Hart notes that Frafra migrants in Accra valued even a lowly paid job, while their real goal is to become a small-scale entrepreneur, as it is an “island of regularity and predictability in a sea of ephemeral opportunities.” Keith Hart, “Kinship, Contract, and Trust: The Economic Organization of Migrants in an African City Slum,” in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. Diego Gambetta, electronic edition, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, 177.

<http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/papers/hart176-193.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with Lunguza Mbelu; and Libho Qoza.

Another advantage of having whites on your side is that they were less likely to be searched.<sup>85</sup> The authority of a white man could, however, also be used to get cargo out of the port without him knowing. Sometime clearance notes issued by white supervisors were re-used for other cargoes.<sup>86</sup> A majority of dock workers were engaged in pilferage, from the almost-legal cleaning up of broken bags, to the outright theft of large amounts of guns, generators, etc.

Pilferage is a practice of informal resistance that was common among dock workers around the world, stemming from a communal sense of entitlement.<sup>87</sup> Harries mentions a similar condoning of 'pilferage' on the Rand: "What the mineowners saw as pilfering seems to have been condoned by many Europeans who, only a generation previously, had considered 'chips', 'clippings', and 'sweepings' and other by-products of the work as a legitimate part of the wage."<sup>88</sup> Jason Ditton traces this sense of entitlement back to the criminalisation of pre-capitalist user rights, an ongoing and unfinished process.<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere, Bill Freund placed tin theft in Northern Nigeria in a context of usurpation of land rights, destruction of the local tin industry, and low wages. People saw it as a "modest recompensation for the expropriation of land and difficulties faced by Birom farmers."<sup>90</sup>

Not only did the workers not consider pilferage morally wrong, it is far from certain that the employers would have wanted to stop it, except for maybe limiting excesses. In the archives, I found only one veiled complaint about theft on the docks, so it might not have been a real concern for them, despite the fact that we know it was a common occurrence.<sup>91</sup> One reason is probably that before containerisation preventing small-scale pilferage would have been nearly impossible in a

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<sup>85</sup> Interviews with Sonke Zizi, Lusikisiki, 31 July 2009; Takulu Kheswa, Lusikisiki, 1 August 2009; Amos Sibiya; and Gobile Mbhele.

<sup>86</sup> Phumla Ntozakhe.

<sup>87</sup> For example, see: Colin J. Davis, *Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dockworkers, 1946-61* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 40; Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of eastern Canada* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1982), 137.

<sup>88</sup> Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, And Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Potsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), 113.

<sup>89</sup> Jason Ditton, "Perks, Pilferage and the Fiddle: The Historical Structure of Invisible Wages," *Theory and Society* IV (1977), 1: 39-71.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Freund, "Theft and Social Protest Among Tin Miners of Northern Nigeria," *Radical History Review* 26 (1982): 79.

<sup>91</sup> DAR, 3/DBN, vol. 4/1/2/1044, Secretary of the Natal Chamber of Industries to Town Clerk, 12 April 1929.

workplace like the harbour. Allowing some occupational theft, however, can also help in keeping wages down, as access to broken bags of rice and beans lowers the labourers' cash needs. To the extent that they help themselves to the contents of broken bags, this is at no real cost to the employer. The employer, however, remains the one who can decide whether to prosecute and thus the one who, after the facts, gives meaning to the actions of the pilferer – a perk or theft.<sup>92</sup>

Helping yourself to the goods being shipped was thus never without risk. For people like Gcinokwakhe Sobiso, pilferage was the central element in his economic strategies. He was involved with a gang of thieves “who taught me to steal cargo and to identify it while it was still in the boxes.” The gang was arrested while he was not there, but the police rounded him up afterwards.<sup>93</sup> While only one of the informants was ever arrested, the fear was real. Cacile Khozane got a fright when stealing a generator and never pilfered again. Others mentioned the fear of being arrested as their main reason not to engage in commercial endeavours that were often at best semi-legal in a political climate that criminalised African independent enterprise.<sup>94</sup> Lungani Xulu retired from the city when the police was informed about the places where he usually sold dagga.

The urban areas were not the only place dockers conducted their business. Working in the port was often the source of commercial opportunities, but invariably their eventual goal was to retire in the rural areas and become independent from wage labour. Just as Keith Hart noted among the Frafra migrants in Accra, the way out of dependence on wages was seen to lie in small-scale commercial enterprise, exemplified by the success of others.<sup>95</sup> This exemplary function of the success of others was mentioned several times.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ditton, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> Because he was not caught red-handed, he was released for lack of evidence. Phumla Ntozakhe also mentioned that colleagues were arrested for fraudulently using old clearance notes.

<sup>94</sup> Lunguza Mbhelu; and Zitha Xaba.

<sup>95</sup> Keith Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* XI (1973), 1: 67.

<sup>96</sup> Dumile Ndlovu; Co Pityana; and Makhehle Gxokwana.

With the goal being to eventually return home, a number of people diversified their enterprises into the rural areas. Their urban business ventures were in the end only means to a rural goal. This had the dual advantage that they would have a source of income in their home area when they decided to leave Durban and that they could operate in a less competitive environment than in Durban.<sup>97</sup> Ten people mentioned that having a profitable rural business, enabled them to retire early from dock work: one had a chicken farm, six had a tearoom or store, two had invested in taxis and two were making money from selling produce from the land in which they had been able to invest.<sup>98</sup> The men could however not take all the credit for these rural ventures. Just like girlfriends could play an important role in their commercial success in the city, enterprising wives too were an important element in success. The role of the wife essentially took two forms: taking initiative in selling fowls or produce from the land, or selling the pilfered goods their husbands sent home.<sup>99</sup> Only Dumile Ndlovu mentioned that his wife had another business, making *shweshwe* dresses with the sewing machine he bought her.

All the dock workers interviewed wanted to go back home, their goals were in the rural areas, not in Durban. They used two different strategies for that: a strategy of keeping their heads down, doubling shifts to maximise their earning, while minimising their consumption expenditures; or one that was much more entrepreneurial than much of the literature on oscillating labour migration in Southern Africa allows for. Dock work offered something for both groups: good wages and the opportunity to work a lot of overtime and weekend work on the one hand, and many commercial opportunities through pilferage and the flexibility of *togt*, on the other. The former strategy, however, did not preclude a once-off deal. Gobile Mbhele once got a number of guns from a white supervisor to buy his silence and sold them, but he did not make a career from it. Hlalomzi

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<sup>97</sup> Sicelo Mbokazi mentioned the scarcity of stores in the rural areas; Zifo Mzizi mentioned that before he opened his shop people had to make long journeys into town. The selling of sweets and cigarettes on the docks, on the other hand, must have been very competitive, seeing the low entry barriers and the number of people doing it.

<sup>98</sup> Chicken farm: Siphon Zondi. Tearoom or store: Godidi Msomi; Mtukatshelwa Phewa; Zifo Mzizi; Galo Mtolo; Doda Nxele; and Co Pityana. Selling produce: Doda Ndaweni; and Gugulethu Pityana.

<sup>99</sup> Wife selling produce and fowls: Nhlanhla Sokhela; Galo Mtolo; and Sihle Zungu. Selling pilfered goods: Mdu Jama; Lungani Xulu; Sicelo Mbokazi; and Nkomozethu Cikane.

Ngcwangula too received the occasional share of loot from supervisors and *izinduna*, but never made a business out of it.<sup>100</sup>

Not only was the commercial route the more popular one among dock workers, it was also the one that enabled the workers to become independent from wage labour most quickly. There is a clear congruence between having some business and retiring from the city early. Only two of those without any business did not work until old age.<sup>101</sup> However, only seven of the twenty-eight who had a commercial strategy worked longer than thirty years, with some retiring from wage labour as quickly as six or seven years after starting work.

Regardless of strategy, however, almost all of them expressed that they retired after they had achieved their aims: they were married, had their own *umuzi*, improved their land and most had schooled their children. In short, they had achieved independence from wage labour. The importance of educating their children should not be underestimated, as seen in the insistence of many that they schooled their children so that they would not have to be dock workers and would be more socially and economically mobile. Siphso Gazu explains that he had accomplished his goals, as he had managed to educate his children.<sup>102</sup> They were however not target workers, while they regarded their engagement in wage labour as a phase they had to go through in order to achieve their goals, they were in fact dependent on wage labour, unless and until they managed to establish themselves as successful entrepreneurs.

#### IV

The relatively high wages on the dock, access to goods and the flexibility either to work many extra shifts or not to work did give these workers a certain agency. This did enable them to choose between different livelihood strategies, and as a result of these strategies a good number of workers

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<sup>100</sup> There is again a parallel with Hart's research in Ghana here: he too noted that many people were always 'out for a quick buck.' Hart, "Income opportunities," 72.

<sup>101</sup> Sofa Nkomo retired after twenty years and Cacile Khozana after twenty-one.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Siphso Gazu, Ixopo, 27 May 2009.



managed to withdraw their labour relatively early, to become independent from wage labour. It is, however, important not to romanticise this agency. All this took place during a period of rural impoverishment, continuously reducing the options of African migrant workers and making alternatives to wage labour more precarious. Not only the conditions in the rural areas were changing, those in the cities and on the docks were being transformed as well. Both Maynard Swanson and Keletso Atkins attributed the bargaining power of labourers in Durban largely to the *togt* system.<sup>103</sup> Swanson's PhD dissertation focuses extensively on the long struggle with very limited success to increase controls over casual labourers in the city. Only in 1959 was this goal finally achieved by the establishment of a stevedoring labour pool.

After 1959 the changing nature of work and the abolishment of casual stevedoring labour, while it certainly had advantages for the workers, closed off many of the opportunities that enabled the choice between different strategies. Monopoly hiring decreased their bargaining power; increased controls over their movements, activities and use of time limited the flexibility that the job offered to engage in other enterprises; and from the 1970s onwards, containerisation drastically reduced the opportunities for pilferage.<sup>104</sup> These changes made the vulnerability of these strategies painfully clear.

One could also argue that rather than being a source of agency, other activities in which dockers engaged just subsidised cheap labour, like it does for the contract cleaners discussed by Bezuidenhout and Fakier.<sup>105</sup> In that case, it would just be another example of shifting the burden of social reproduction onto the household in the rural areas, just like Wolpe famously argued. It is of course true that by staving off complete proletarianisation these labourers could actually be paid

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<sup>103</sup> Maynard Swanson, "The Rise of Multiracial Durban: urban history and race policy in South Africa, 1830-1930" (PhD diss.: Harvard University, 1964); Keletso Atkins, *The Moon Is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1845-1900* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

<sup>104</sup> Bernard Dubbeld discusses this period in his M.A. thesis, "*Labour Management and Technological Change: A history of stevedoring in Durban, 1959-1990*" (MA thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 2002).

<sup>105</sup> Andries Bezuidenhout and Khayaat Fakier, "Maria's Burden: Contract Cleaning and the Crisis of Social Reproduction in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Antipode* XXXVIII (2006), 3: 462-485.

less than the cost of the reproduction of labour. Yet, to the extent that these strategies also allowed people to withdraw their labour, this was clearly more than mere survivalism.

## V

*“To the extent that collective action in the pursuit of socioeconomic advance springs from the conditions of production itself, we may expect farmers’ political strategies to resemble their strategies of accumulation and social mobility.” – Sara S. Berry<sup>106</sup>*

In order to wrap their heads around the economic and social implications of urbanisation and migratory labour, both liberal ‘friends of the Natives’ and conservatives have tried to capture the lives of African labourers in household budgets. The former to show that a worker could not feed his family in the city, the latter to show that ‘tribal Natives’ did not have great cash needs and would thus probably just work less if they got a pay raise.<sup>107</sup>

These budgets, however, assume a degree of normativity in household structure and life cycle, and regularity in earnings and expenditures that cannot be taken for granted. For many, though not for all, wage labour in the docks was only a part of a wider livelihood strategy and confined to a relatively short period in their lives, rather than a lifelong career and the main source of income. A sizable minority did just work one job for the duration of their working lives, but other livelihood strategies were more complex than allowed for in budget analyses. The majority of dock workers interviewed here could best be characterised as ‘labourer-entrepreneurs’ with petty entrepreneurial ambitions, rather than simply as migrant labourers or quasi-proletarian dock workers. This entrepreneurialism awarded a certain agency to these workers and it is this agency that is insufficiently acknowledged in both Marxist and social labour history. Durban Moodie does

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<sup>106</sup> Berry, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>107</sup> See for example annexure 14 of the report of the Native Economic Commission. “Report of the Native Economic Commission,” U.G. 22-’32. Also: Ellen Hellman, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum Yard*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers, 13 (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1948), 24, 30-37; Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contacts with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*, Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 450-452; O.P.F. Horwood, “Some Aspects of Urban African Employment in the Durban Area,” *Race Relations Journal* XXV (1958), 3-4: 31-32; “Natives must earn at least £15 a month to live - W.I. lecturer,” *Natal Witness*, 20 September 1958, 3.

mention entrepreneurial activity in the compounds, but seems to have forgotten all about it on the next page and never considers whether this could have any impact on the consciousness of these workers.<sup>108</sup> Patrick Harries has a bit more attention for this small-scale entrepreneurialism, but also does very little with it. He mentions it a few times, but never really asks the question whether that could have had any impact on the livelihoods and consciousness of these miners.<sup>109</sup>

Sara Berry reminds us in her brilliant study of accumulation and class formation in a Yorùbá cocoa-farming community that we should expect the political strategies of these ‘labourer-entrepreneurs’ to show some relation to their entrepreneurial strategies.<sup>110</sup> Yet, an important part of the argument in Hemson’s seminal dissertation is that Durban’s dockers did in fact have a working class consciousness.<sup>111</sup>

*“The view that strike action by African workers is a demand for compensation for the loss of use values in the reserves (which would place an emphasis on the purely material compensation without any conception of a transformation in the consciousness of migrant workers) cannot be upheld from a study of the stevedoring workers. The wage demands were the collective response of both migrant and urban workers (DSLSC and Grindrod workers) and included many important industrial and occupational demands which go well beyond the ‘crass economism’ of wage demands alone and attempt to limit the powers of the employers.”*

His dissertation offers a wealth of evidence for this assertion, and I certainly do not disagree with it. Nevertheless, in his enthusiasm to assert the working class status of these workers, he might have glanced over elements of consciousness that were more ambiguous. Many dock workers probably had more petty bourgeois ambitions than we have realised so far. Some of their political actions also seem to indicate that. The representative of the *toqt* dock workers living in the Bell Street Barracks, Dick Mate, represented the interests of African traders in the Native Market as much as those of the

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<sup>108</sup> T. Dunbar Moodie, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>109</sup> Harries, op. cit.

<sup>110</sup> Berry, op. cit.

<sup>111</sup> Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 718.

workers.<sup>112</sup> He clearly had entrepreneurial ambitions himself: he wrote the Native Welfare Officer to request permission to establish a store in the Umlazi township as soon as it opened.<sup>113</sup>

Zulu Phungula, important in Hemson's account, has also shown elements of consciousness that could be interpreted as petty bourgeois. Shortly after the 1949 race riots, he requested, in name of Natal Zulu National Workers' Union, that the municipality would use fewer buses to replace the disrupted Indian bus service, because "it will prevent the Durban workers to purchase their own buses."<sup>114</sup> On several occasions, Zulu Phungula expressed a strong economic nationalism, speaking in favour of African cooperatives and stressing that South Africa is not the Indians' country.<sup>115</sup> This economic nationalism is very similar to the notion of 'New Africa' that Iain Edwards writes about, carried by a new class of African petty entrepreneurs for whom Indians are competition and espousing African cooperatives as a form of self-help.<sup>116</sup> In both the 1929 beer boycott and the 1949 riots the ambitions of these emerging African entrepreneurs were important, and in both dockers were on the forefront. In 1929, the Point workers took the lead through a boycott of an Indian trader across the street from the Bell Street compound who had allegedly managed to get *induna* Makati to clamp down on the making (and allegedly selling) of *Mahewe* in the compound to increase his own business.<sup>117</sup>

It is not that Hemson does not recognize this side of Zulu Phungula's discourse. He acknowledges that "Phungula was not a simple heroic figure. At times he alternated between a firm working class position and a populism which bordered on demagogic nationalist appeal [...]."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> DAR, 3/DBN, vol. 4/1/2/1054, file 269, vol. 8, Dick Mate to Town Clerk, 3 November 1931 and 6 August 1932.

<sup>113</sup> DAR, 3/DBN, vol. 4/1/2/1148, file 323A, vol. 3, Dick Mate to Native Welfare Officer, 24 December 1932.

<sup>114</sup> DAR, 3/DBN, vol. 4/1/3/1582, file 323B, vol. 4, Zulu Phungula to Town Clerk, 17 February 1949.

<sup>115</sup> SAB, NTS, vol. 2222, file 416/280, part 1, Native Commissioner to S.A.R. & H. System Manager, 2 February 1942; SAB, K193, vol. III, Evidence by Zulu Phungula to the Commission of Inquiry into Riots in Durban, 170-171.

<sup>116</sup> Iain Lulach Edwards, "Mkumbane our Home: African Shantytown Society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960" (PhD diss., University of Natal, 1989).

<sup>117</sup> SAB, NTS, vol. 7665, file 46/332, "Native Riots Commission, Minutes of Evidence," evidence by Akob Ally Mahomed, 5 July 1929; and by Mcijelo, 13 July 1929. Alfred Ngcobo, stall holder at the Bell Street Native Eating House, also mentioned that he wanted to be allowed to stay open the same hours as the Indian trader.

<sup>118</sup> Hemson, "Class Consciousness," 368.

However, he paints this too much as a substitute for repressed class action and an alternative to reformism. The argument that “[t]he strategy of a general strike having been defeated, the African workers turned towards more nationalistic forms of action,”<sup>119</sup> or that “[h]is nationalism appears to be an antidote to the reformism of the working class leadership,”<sup>120</sup> does not give enough credit to the fact that many dock workers had petty entrepreneurial ambitions and were in fact in competition with Indian entrepreneurs.

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.