

Negotiating Culture¹ during times of Decline: Organizing Stevedores in Durban 1978-1990

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The previous chapter has explored the precarious hegemony that Companies and officials of the Labour Bureau exerted over African stevedores between the early 1960s and 1978. This chapter will draw attention to the disruption of this hegemony, which was primarily caused by the remaking of stevedoring work that I analyzed in Chapter 1. It is critical to note that the technological change known as containerisation was a particular experience of these stevedores, and sets them aside from other migrant workers in South Africa, because of the substantial retrenchments that followed containerisation and the new skills needed to even have a degree of job security. This paper also considers the attempts to organize these workers within the context of the emerging union movement in South Africa, and the ethnic clashes that were a significant feature of the political landscape in Natal between 1985 and 1993.

However, as many writers following E.P. Thompson have suggested, it would be naïve to simply cast workers as *tabulae rasa*, hollowly reflecting the means of production and technological change. Instead this chapter addresses itself to the responses that workers gave to a system that placed them in a dual crisis. On the one hand, the systems of work that they had become accustomed to required new methods and no longer provided security or any kind of future. I must emphasize that this change was really fast,

¹ The difficulties of understanding “culture” have been explained by Raymond Williams. He notes that culture is one of the most complicated words in the English language. Initially I could say that I mean culture in a pluralist sense, as in many *cultures*, existing alongside one another almost as different civilizations. That is, to understand difference embodied in culture without making a value judgment. But the word culture also denotes a value judgment, as in “I am cultured and you are a barbarian”. As much as we may try to be understand *culture* in a pluralistic sense, we cannot ever entirely escape its other meaning. The complications of culture do not simply create problems in a linguistic sense, as the Comaroffs note, and are forever wrapped up in ideology and hegemony. This, they claim, make culture “a pre-eminent site of struggle”. In writing this paper, I try to acknowledge the difficulties in pinning down what exactly culture is, or means for specific groups of people at different historical moments. See Raymond Williams. *Keywords*. esp. p. 87 and Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, esp. p. 19-27, 318

within 8 years, the workforce having been cut from 2900 to 1200, almost two-thirds. On the other hand, there was a real crisis of authority. For most of the century, and streamlined for the best part of twenty years, stevedores had become accustomed to gang work and a compound system commanded by senior indunas. The system was very exploitative, but it had thus far guaranteed them fairly regular work, security and a tribal network that allowed them to maintain some links with their families and homes in rural areas. Suddenly workers were being retrenched, and receiving minimal or no compensation for years of work. Even Chief Buthelezi provided them with little material response to retrenchment. Stevedores were faced with having to make real decisions about their futures, ultimately decisions that reflected not only their responses to an industrial crisis, but also to their culture and identity.

The historiography of African culture through Industrialization draws us into some very important earlier debates, especially regarding the endurance of a number of features of a pre-industrial past in the workplace. Jeff Guy notes that in the reconstruction of Zulu society, the Shepstone system retained key elements of a pre-capitalist past, notably by the application of customary law, giving Africans access to land, and the recognition of chiefly authority. He argues that wage labour took place within the context of homestead production and authority, despite the fact of the erosion of this production and increasing reliance by chiefs on colonial appointment.² From the 1880s, labour recruiters relied on chiefs throughout South Africa for a steady supply of labour. Mine compounds were organized along pre-capitalist lines of authority with African officials controlling both recruitment and labour process. There has been evidence to suggest that workers both resented and fought this system of authority, and that workers accepted it provided that it ensured stability of conditions and wages.³ Analyzing the stevedoring

² Jeff Guy. "The destruction and reconstruction of Zulu society" in Marks, S and Rathbone, R. *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa*. Longman: London, 1965. p. 173-175, 189. The relationship between Zulu chiefs and the early Apartheid government, Buthelezi in particular, is fascinating. As early as 1952, Buthelezi commanded a respect in the Dept of Native Affairs unparalleled by chiefs in other ethnic groups. See for example *CAD SAP 494 15/2/52*, *Uitreiking van Bewysboekies aan Bantoes*, 1957-61. Acting Native Commissioner, Mahlabatini "Issuing of Reference Books to Natives".

³ The best example of the former argument is made by Charles van Onselen, in his study of Nongoloza's gang. The latter argument is supported primarily by Patrick Harries in his study of Shangaan workers, and Dunbar Moodie, in his study of culture and moral economy in the mining industry. See van Onselen. "The Regiment of the Hills: *Umkosi Wezintaba*" in *New Babylon, New Ninevah*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball,

industry in the 1960s, the evidence is certainly persuasive for the latter argument, which I develop in Chapter 2.

In the final chapters of his book, Dunbar Moodie comments on the breakdown of what he refers to as the moral economy of the mine in the 1970s and 1980s. He reflects on the growing tide of unionization and the attempts of the National Union of Mineworkers to improve conditions on the mine. He analyses the difficulties that a particular miner, Mlambi Botha faced in deciding between the older systems of alliances and authority and the new system. Botha was deeply committed to the union and the struggles for non-racism and improved conditions in the mines, but simultaneously remained loyal to his own Mpondo personal identity. Botha also remained suspicious of radical African urban dwellers.⁴ Even with the destruction of older systems of authority, Moodie shows that migrants clung to their traditional ways of life, and convincingly argues that migrants did not have a bifurcated identity, and did not simply shed their traditional roots at a moment of crisis.

In the Durban harbour, the older systems of authority and power were in crisis in the late 1970s. This chapter will reflect on the breakdown and attempt to show the agency that the workers had, not in being able to reverse the technological change occurring, but in making clear decisions about their future as stevedores. I also discuss the difficulties of organizing these workers, and demonstrate how unionists had to modify their own positions to fall in line with stevedore's culture. This was properly due to the fact that unionists were mostly university trained white Marxists who had little understanding of how deeply rural attitudes were entrenched in the stevedore's consciousness. They would have done well to learn about Sebatakgomo and the negotiations and struggles that the Communist Party engaged in organizing rural people in the countryside and fashioning a political consciousness migrant population.⁵

2001. p. 368-398; Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993. p. 226-227; Moodie, *Going for Gold*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1994. p. 12, 20-24.

⁴ Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*. p. 263-265.

⁵ Peter Delius. "Sebatakgomo and the Zoutspanberg Balemi Association: The ANC, the Communist Party and Rural Organization, 1939-1955". *Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, 1993.

The composition and organization of the Stevedoring Labour Force

Stevedores working in Durban during the late 1970s generally came from rural backgrounds and lived in a compound at the point built at the turn of the century. The vast majority were of Zulu origin (69%), with many recruited from specific areas of Northern Zululand (45%), such as Nongoma and Mhlabathini, with a minority recruited from areas in Pondoland (23%), mostly notably, Mount Ayliff. Before 1970, the composition of the workforce was considerably more balanced, with workers with Zulu origins still as a majority (60.5%), but a far more significant minority coming from Pondoland (30%).⁶ The change in the recruitment pattern has been explored elsewhere, but for the purposes of this paper it is critical to note that there were almost no permanent stevedores who stayed independently in Durban, and that a majority were Zulu speaking. Although there were changes in recruitment between the 1960s and 1970s, primarily in an effort to ensure a workforce of Zulu origin, it is important to note that recruitment was primarily controlled by a centralized labour bureau. Companies did not recruit their own workers, but drew from the pool managed by Labour Bureau arrangement called the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company.

The logic of recruiting workers primarily from Zululand extended into the control of workers in the compound and in the Labour process itself. Guy and Thabane have shown how the labour process in the mines was divided up between various ethnic groups and how workers came to assimilate these stereotypes in practice. They argued that although ethnicity was constructed and divided workers, it also was also productive; it facilitate protection for the individuals in the group and created a sense of pride in a group of Basotho miners that allowed them to move rock on a massive scale, to the extent that they became legendary. It is too easy, these authors argue, to dismiss ethnicity as “constructed” and “biased”.⁷ In the stevedoring industry it was not so much a case of

⁶ David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. Ph.D thesis, University of Warwick. p. 414-416 and p. 581. Siza Makhaya, a personnel officer at SASSCO and later SAS confirmed this in my interview with him. It is important to note that the change to not simply increase the numbers of Zulu workers, but increased the numbers of workers from the particular districts of Nongoma and Mhlabathini, centres where MG Buthelezi enjoyed his most significant influence.

⁷ Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane. “Technology, Ethnicity and Ideology: Basotho Miners and Shaft-Sinking on the South African Gold Miners” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, January 1988. p. 276-277.

dividing tasks between workers of different ethnic groups as creating hierarchies within the workplace based on so-called traditional places in Zulu society.⁸ Yet, it is true that workers gained a sense of pride in their work as stevedores, and it would be simplistic to dismiss the agency of stevedores in building the docks. This will be more fully explored in Chapter 2, however this paper is concerned partly with the breakdown of the morale of the stevedores.

Until 1978, stevedore gangs were composed of between 12 and 14 workers. This included a winchman, to control the movement of nets via a crane, and a gangwayman who steered the operation from the deck of a ship, eight stevedorehands and an induna. Each gang had an induna who hand picked the members of his gang and ensured workers' loyalty to him. Other indunas and senior indunas controlled the operation of the compound and which workers would be taken on in cases where extra workers may have been needed on any particular day.⁹

As a worker in 1980 described quite clearly, these divisions meant that workers did not communicate with one another across different grades of work.¹⁰ Indeed, the strike in 1959 had been because indunas received raises and other workers didn't. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, indunas and other advanced grades of work were given privileges and seldom supported any of the grievances of ordinary stevedores.¹¹ The division of workers in this way meant that various positions became associated with privileges, and workers stopped identifying with one another as workers. Indunas and Senior Indunas, at the top of the hierarchy, received privileges. Siza Makhaya, a personnel officer in the 1980s explains:

"...in the early years an induna was a father figure, and if I remember very well, when I joined the company there was a boy who used to cook for them and clean their rooms, and they were well looked after. When I joined the company and I took over, I questioned the practice as to why was it necessary that they should be getting preferential treatment. They got food from the canteen that was specially prepared

⁸ Interviews: Siza Makhaya, 11 June 2001 and Themba Dube, 8 March 2002.

⁹ David Hemson. . *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*.

¹⁰ Mr Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris. A collection of interviews done by Sideris of Dockworkers in the early 1980s are located in SAIRR Oral History project, AD 1722 FOSATU collection at the Wits dept of historical papers. These have proved invaluable to my work and my thanks goes to Mike Morris for informing me of their existence.

¹¹ David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The dockworkers of Durban*.

for them. I think that we had four senior indunas during my time, and I stopped this practice because I felt that it was unfair. They were spoiled, and they got away with anything they wanted....”¹²

The changes of the early 1980s: Mergers and the entry of Trade Unions

Between 1976 and 1982, the landscape of the stevedoring industry changed significantly, with stevedoring companies involved in a series of mergers in an attempt to preserve the viability of the stevedoring industry. Work was begun on the Container Terminal in Durban in 1974 and completed in 1977. Faced with the prospect of increasing percentage of cargo transported in containers, and with palletization (which was a process of unitizing cargo) begun in the early 1970s, companies realized that they were competing over a diminishing amount of work. From 13 Stevedoring Companies in 1970, there was an eventual merger into two by 1980¹³, Rennies Grindrods Cotts and South African Stevedoring Service Company (SASSCO). Rennies and Grindrods remained as separate companies as they ran other operations in addition to stevedoring, but their stevedoring operations were merged. SASSCO ended up running most of the stevedoring in Durban, approximately 6 to 1 and controlled most of the labour.¹⁴ In 1982, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrods Cotts merged into one company, South African Stevedores, effectively becoming the only stevedoring company in Durban.

In 1979, it was decided by the companies to stop recruiting any new labour to the docks. At that stage, retrenchments were inevitable, and it was pointless to recruit new labour that would face retrenchment. At this time, the remaining stevedoring companies decided that the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company no longer served any useful function, simply adding extra costs to managing a labour pool that effectively was made up of SASSCO's workers. They also felt that to remain competitive, workers would have to identify with the company, and be trained in operating machinery such as forklift trucks, an essential part of palletization.¹⁵ The breaking of the Labour Supply Company

¹² Interview Siza Makhaya. 11 June 2001.

¹³ Mike Morris. The GWU and the Stevedoring Industry. South African Labour Bulletin, vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 94.

¹⁴ Interview Captain Dudley. SASSCO/SAS Regional Manager, Durban, 1977-1983. 15 August 2001.

¹⁵ Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, Operations and General Manager SASSCO/SAS, 1976-1994. 25 June 2001.

set the stage for a new kind of industrial relations to develop on the docks during the early 1980s.

From the early 1970s in industries across South Africa, worker militancy was increasing. A strike by stevedores in 1972 over working hours and wages was not organized by any union, but was one of the first strikes by industrial workers since the 1950s. The only organization even slightly involved was the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund, established by (generally) white intellectuals, whose aim was to make workers aware of their exploitation and to establish a fund that would help sick or old workers.¹⁶ Their role in the strike was quite marginal however. Independent unions began to form in the mid 1970s, despite the fact that they were illegal and quickly became political rallying points. The government decided in 1978, with the Wiehahn Commission, to recognize trade unions as an attempt to de-politicize the union movement.¹⁷ In the docks, unionism began in the late 1970s with the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), with the latter being able to claim the most members in 1980 of 300 stevedores, of a possible 2500.¹⁸

The rise and fall of the General Workers Union

In 1981, a union based in Cape Town, which had had considerable success in organizing the Cape Town stevedores called the General Workers Union began to organize in Durban. The union was not aligned to FOSATU, and was not so workerist orientated. Yet the union was made up of a core of white left wing intellectuals, and was headed by David Lewis. For organizing in Durban, they relied primarily on ‘Rev’ Marawu, an old union organizer from Cape Town, and Mike Morris.¹⁹ There were immediate clashes between the unions. Workers distrusted the GWU, because of their base in the Cape, as

¹⁶ David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The dockworkers of Durban*. p. 561-566.

¹⁷ Dan O’Meara. *Forty Lost Years*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 273

¹⁸ Jeremy Baskin. “The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers” in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*. Vol. 8, no. 3, December 1982. p. 20.

¹⁹ Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001. Also see the film [Passing the Message](#) directed by Cliff Bestal (1984) for an illustration of the initial attempts to organize stevedores in Durban.

Xhosas meddling in their affairs.²⁰ This meant that this process of organizing took a little longer than initially anticipated, however, after 6 months of organizing, they had a base of 500 workers out of a possible 2000.²¹

However, this distrust did not last too long. By 1981, retrenchments were already a reality for stevedoring workers. As one worker noted; “When there were many ships work used to kill us, but now because of containers there is no work”.²² Word spread fast among the workers which union was successful at representing workers:

*There was a group of workers who took it upon themselves to join the union. But after that there was a dispute in the factory about another worker who was on the verge of being dismissed. GWU officials made representation and this worker was taken back. And the workers were amazed because it was the first time for them to see a union doing such a thing. The workers started believing in GWU and they joined it.*²³

The General Workers Union also succeeded in destroying old divisions of labour built up during the 1960s and 1970s in the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company;

*The union finished all those barriers. Because before the unions came, it was a tradition for winchmen, gangways and indunas not to mix with stevedores. They were even told to do this. In fact even in the compound they had their own rooms separate from the rooms of ordinary stevedores. Even in discussions it was not allowed for stevedore hands to mix with gangways, winchmen and indunas.*²⁴

Neither SAAWU nor MG Buthelezi had an answer to this. When workers had initially appealed to Buthelezi personally for help when retrenchments began, the Kwazulu government replied to workers that “the law does not stipulate how much money the employer must pay when retrenching workers”.²⁵ Similarly SAAWU promised workers large sums but failed to secure any compensation money.²⁶ In Tina Sideris’ interview

²⁰ Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection, SAIRR Oral History Project #51.

²¹ Jeremy Baskin. “The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers” in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*. p. 19.

²² Mr Ntshangase: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 19 November 1982 by Tina Sideris. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection, SAIRR Oral History Project #44. My thanks goes to Muzi Hadebe for translating this document.

²³ Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

²⁴ Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

²⁵ Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

²⁶ Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

with Mr Ndebele he describes how SAAWU encouraged retrenched workers not to take the severance packages of R600 that the GWU union had negotiated, saying that the workers were entitled to R1000. Some workers believed this and joined SAAWU, but the organizers could not secure any extra money from the employers.²⁷ Another worker agreed that the only reason that the retrenched workers got any compensation at all was due to the efforts of the General Workers Union.²⁸ It was becoming clear to workers which union to join and that traditional sources had failed. Morris was able to claim that within a year of the unions presence in Durban they were able to claim 90% of the stevedoring workers in a country and a significant majority in Durban.²⁹ By June 1982, the General Workers Union was able to claim recognition in the four major ports in South Africa.³⁰ Although the FOSATU union, Transport and General Workers Union, had organized a number of workers in the docks, they began to back away from the docks, especially after workers and management recognized the GWU and it became obvious that they did achieve a number of successes in organization. SAAWU, because of their support in Grindrods in the late 1970s, continued to fight the GWU for a period, using under-handed tactics. Besides making unrealistic promises to the workers of preventing the merger between Rennie's Grindrod and SASSCO, they also claimed that the white unionists were collaborators. The GWU, in an open letter to all independent unions, rejected these claims, and argued that SAAWU was being divisive and violating the principle of majority unionism.³¹ Within a year of the merger into SAS, SAAWU had all but disappeared from the docks.

It is significant that, unlike the solidarity that existed between stevedores between ports throughout the world, stevedores in Durban did not support the struggles of other stevedores throughout the country.³² There may be three reasons for this. Firstly, there was no real communication between the members of the different branches of the union,

²⁷ Mr. Ndebele: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection, SAIRR Oral History Project #56.

²⁸ Mr. Ntshangase: Stevedore in Durban. Interview on 19 November 1982 by Tina Sideris.

²⁹ Mike Morris. "Stevedoring Workers and the GWU" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1986.

³⁰ "Deal gives GWU 4-port standing". *Eastern Province Herald*, 22 June 1982. The ports I am referring to are Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town.

³¹ "General Workers Union" in AH 1999, C6.8, FOSATU collection, University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection.

³² "Durban Dockers unlikely to back Cape go-slow". *The Daily News*. 31 August 1982.

except at the higher levels of the union officials. Secondly, stevedores lacked job security coming out of a system where they could be fired for virtually nothing and facing technological changes that meant that retrenchment was a constant threat. Thirdly, I would suggest that the rural background of workers that I have discussed earlier, shaped workers solidarities towards others of their ethnicity, rather than workers 1000 km away of whom they knew little.

In other areas, the GWU found themselves still up against old workplace traditions. Organizing in Durban, Mike Morris found himself up against the power of indunas. He tried to call a meeting at the same time as an induna, and nobody pitched up at his meeting.³³ Eventually he conceded that there was no way to organize except through the induna structure; locating the reasons for this in South Africa's past, of the continued super-exploitation of cheap labour;

The problem with the majority of guys was that they were rural and didn't really understand the purpose of a union. There was always confusion between union structures of power and tribal structures. The SASSCO guys were never problematic in this regard, because Fatha Zulu never pulled that stunt, even though he was a Zulu. Elison Ndebele was another key guy. It was highly problematic, and there was always this interesting tension, and it taught me a lot, between dealing with tribal structures and union structures, but there was literally no way around it.³⁴

Besides organizing good retrenchment packages, the GWU also ensured introduced health and safety regulations. The major way that they were able to fight retrenchment was the introduction of a guarantee system. The guarantee system, introduced in late 1981, was designed to ensure that all workers were guaranteed a determined number of days a week. In other words, it meant that rather than having one stevedore work five days and another one day, it ensured that workers were paid for a minimum of three days a week.³⁵ It succeeded in curtailing the retrenchments that were regular from 1979-1981 and was even increased to four days guaranteed work in 1982, when the merger of stevedoring companies into South African Stevedores (SAS) increased the demand for work. The guarantee system was introduced together with compulsory unpaid leave that

³³ David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*, no. 30, 1996. p. 89.

³⁴ Interview. Mike Morris, Organizer, General Workers Union, 28 June 2001.

³⁵ Interview: Les Owen, Senior Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO and SAS 1979-1984, 5 June 2001.

also limited the number of retrenchments during the period.³⁶ In a matter of just over a year in the docks, the General Workers Union achieved spectacularly well, organizing rural and hostile stevedores into a union and ensuring stability in an industry whose present was threatened by massive technological restructuring and whose past had reflected the apartheid industrial relations system in operation.

However, it was not just the GWU that was succeeding in challenging the old industrial relations order and representing the stevedores in a very progressive way. As a company, South Africa Stevedores (and South African Stevedoring Services Company before them), certainly attempted to reform the landscape and offer their workers a good deal. They offered training schemes for workers to learn English and re-skilled their workers in the new machinery available in the docks, and attempted to reform the compound, that had been a pivotal place for the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company, the labour bureau of the stevedores in Durban.³⁷ They commissioned a study into the dwelling preferences and housing needs of migrant stevedores. The aim of this study was to investigate whether workers would prefer a housing arrangement that would allow them more flexibility in seeing their families, either by moving into flats or into the township. The results of the study were conclusive and surprised the management of SAS; workers preferred to live in the hostel, provided it was cleaned up a little.³⁸ This reflects an important point, that stevedores were unwilling to dispense with their rural base during this period, despite the offer of alternative and subsidized accommodation.

SAS didn't simply try to fall in line with union demands or make life more comfortable for workers. Indeed, they understood their position as wanting to ensure the long-term profitability of the stevedoring industry in South Africa, and believed vehemently in the reality that this could only happen when practices of the past were dispensed with.³⁹ Many in the company, especially middle managers, thought that their

³⁶ Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, middle management, SASSCO 1974-1982, SAS 1982-, 6 September 2001.

³⁷ Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

³⁸ Lawrence Schlemmer (et al) *Future Dwelling Preferences of Hostel Dwelling Migrants: A study of the housing needs of stevedores in the Durban metropolitan area*. (executive summary). Also Les Owen, senior industrial relations manager of South Africa Stevedores, interview with the author, 6 June 2001. I must thank Les Owen for providing me with this document.

³⁹ Interviews: Les Owen, 6 June 2001 and Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

policies were too progressive and even mad.⁴⁰ The commitment of the company to these principles even extended to criticism of government policy towards unions, sharply highlighted by Les Owen's public criticism of government "backwardness" in clashing with the GWU over recognition of railway and harbour workers in Port Elizabeth in 1983.⁴¹ The company also intervened on behalf of a widow of a stevedore who had been killed as a result of cargo falling on him due to defective machinery belonging to South African Railways and Harbours. The SARH was ordered to pay compensation to the widow.⁴² Almost naturally, it seems, the relationship between SAS and the GWU was described by both sides as a good one.⁴³ Of course, this came in the context of a company trying to maintain profitability in an industry that they saw as having too many workers. Nevertheless, with union pressure, they were able to offer their workers wages better than ever.⁴⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, it could be suggested that the close relationship between the General Workers Union and South African Stevedores may not have been such a good thing. In the final analysis, the interest of the company was to ensure that an industry facing severe decline maintained long-term financial viability and profitability whereas the interests of the union were with the job security of the stevedoring labour force. There can be little doubt that the lack of industrial action during the early and mid 1980s in the docks was due to the close relationship between the company and the union. Hemson has suggested that while retrenchment was inevitable to some extent, the scale of the retrenchment was too large, bringing the workforce down from over 2500 workers in 1978 to 1200 in 1986, and that a significant portion of the work began to be done by casual labour, particularly in the 1990s.⁴⁵ The company argued that their financial statements were open to the union, and that they could see the figures and the inevitability of the retrenchments. They also argued that the emergence of competition at the end of 1983 made their of maintaining the wage level impossible.⁴⁶ I would also

⁴⁰ Interview Siza Makhaya, 17 June 2001. Makhaya told me in our interview that middle managers couldn't believe what the senior management were asking them to do.

⁴¹ Les Owen. Interview. 5 June 2001.

⁴² SARH vs SASSCO, *South Africa Law Reports*, 1983, part 1. p. 1066-1089.

⁴³ Interviews: Stockley, Owen, Makhaya, Dudley, Morris.

⁴⁴ "Wage increases for Stevedores". *The Daily News*. 23 December 1982.

⁴⁵ David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*. 1996. p. 94

⁴⁶ Interview with Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

suggest that, operating within the Apartheid system, the antagonism between capital and labour was obscured by the historically racist labour relations of the Apartheid State. During the 1980s, especially in the docks, the failures of that system to ensure a workable and profitable system meant that, unlike the 1960s, capital and unions brokered a truce to ensure a more humane system of work. However, the truce worked in the long term interests of the stevedoring company against the workers, as the problems of the stevedores in the 1990s emerged, as I will explore later in the paper.

What destroyed the relatively good wage levels was the arrival of a competing company, Keeleys, in the docks. Keeleys stevedoring operation grew out of ISCOR wanting to transport steel cheaply and efficiently. During 1984, Keeleys became serious competition for SAS, by employing workers, often those who had been retrenched, at casual rates. The GWU tried to organize Keeleys and although they were able to gain some support among their workers, they failed to establish a uniform wage across the industry.⁴⁷ Inevitably this meant that SAS dropped its rates, and much of the good work done by the GWU was thus undermined.⁴⁸

Another factor that destroyed the morale of organizers in the GWU was the constant retrenchment. After securing many benefits in 1981 and 1982, 1983 and 1984 saw the union fighting retrenchments tooth and nail. The battle with Keeleys exacerbated the problem. The retrenchment of 600 Durban Stevedores in February 1985 was perhaps the last straw.⁴⁹ For organizers like Morris, the combination of Keeleys and constant retrenchment really led them to give up hope.⁵⁰ Hemson has also suggested that the close relationship between the GWU and SAS fuelled speculation by the workers of corporatism, and particularly in the face of so many retrenchments, workers believed that the union could have done more.⁵¹ By May 1985, the GWU left the docks, officially having merged nationally with TGWU under the new union federation COSATU. Effectively though, the driving force of the union officials in the early 1980s was gone from the docks.

⁴⁷ Mike Morris. Interview, 28 June 2001. Morris suggested that because the union maintained unregistered status, it became impossible to form an industrial council, which he believed was the only way to safeguard wage levels across the industry. See also Morris, M. "The Stevedoring Industry and the GWU, part 2".

⁴⁸ "Wage determinations: Payment Problems" in *Financial Mail*, 3 August 1983.

⁴⁹ "600 Durban dock workers to lose their jobs" in *Natal Mercury*, February 18, 1985.

⁵⁰ Mike Morris. Interview.

⁵¹ David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*. p. 91

UWUSA in the docks 1986-1990

In December 1985, COSATU was launched out of FOSATU and some of the non FOSATU aligned unions, such as the GWU. One of the major principles of FOSATU was a workerist position, in other words, they firmly believed in worker controlled workplaces. The irony is that many of the upper ranks of FOSATU were controlled by leftist white intellectuals and there was always a distance between the leadership and the membership of the organization. Yet they did succeed in organizing many migrant workers, and did not present a direct challenge to traditional leadership that workers may have supported at home. In Natal, for instance, it was possible to be a member of both FOSATU and Inkatha.⁵² FOSATU also had no clear alliance with the United Democratic Front. The General Workers Union actually had an interview published with the Secretary General explaining why they refused to specifically align under the UDF.⁵³

COSATU, on the other hand, certainly wasn't dominated by white intellectuals. There was a constant debate in COSATU about the workerist versus the charterist position. COSATU was far closer to being a voice of the ANC within the country, and was strongly aligned to the UDF. The patterns of organization began to focus primarily on urban African workers, as opposed to migrant labourers.⁵⁴

Within a year, Inkatha responded to the launch of COSATU with the launch of the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA) in May 1986. The launch of UWUSA was openly antagonistic towards COSATU, with the burning of a coffin with the name of the COSATU president on the side. Maré has suggested that the reason for launching the union was for Inkatha to be able to extend its influence into what was becoming a critical area in South African politics.⁵⁵ UWUSA advocated free market principles and opposed sanctions, claiming that COSATU's policies would destroy the

⁵² Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. Cape Town: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 253-255.

⁵³ "General Workers Union and the UDF: Interview with David Lewis" in *Work in Progress*, no. 9, October 1983. Lewis argued that the union was only accountable to its members, and while its officials were sympathetic with the objectives of the UDF, the functions of the organizations were entirely different.

⁵⁴ Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. P. 255-257.

⁵⁵ Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton. *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi's Inkatha and the Politics of 'Loyal Resistance'*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987. p. 133 & p. 220.

economy and any possibility for peaceful reform in South Africa. The stage was set for a new kind of workplace conflict in the docks.

Even with the influx controls laws relaxed in the early 1980s and scrapped in 1986, most of the dockworkers opted to stay in the company hostel and not move into town with their families, often because this proved a much cheaper option.⁵⁶ Although the TGWU now organized the stevedores, without nearly as much vigor as the GWU, they still had a strong following and company recognition. As early as 1983, SAS perceived that unions were increasingly politicized and predicted that the political demands of Inkatha would put pressure on stevedores.⁵⁷ Even before the launch of UWUSA, Inkatha members had tried to persuade the manager of the company not to allow unions to organize for workers;

I got quite irritated with the Inkatha union, they came to see us, one of the members of the royal family and his entourage, and I think it was this Prince Gideon. And we had this meeting and they said how distressed they were with what was going on, that they believed that communism was coming into the ports, this was sort of in the early 1980s. And Gatscha Buthelezi didn't like this, and he was for the government, and somehow we had to make it so the GWU couldn't get into the port. We had allowed them access to the compound, and allowed anybody to have a meeting as long as they informed us first and went about it the right way. I just said, nice talking to you and all of that, but these are the rules of the game, and you can't have any preferential treatment. And I can always remember one guy pulling me aside at the end of the meeting and saying that if I ever have any trouble down there, one or two guys that you find causing trouble, just let me know, and we will get rid of them for you. I realized that when we did investigations, and we realized that all the younger guys were all GWU and all the older guys UWUSA. The break up of the tribal structure was taking place.⁵⁸

Captain Gordon Stockley: Manager SASSCO 1979-1982 SAS 1982-1994

Stockley's last sentence is over-simplified, of course. Instead the period 1986-1990 was characterized by a battle over ethnicity, and the endurance of Apartheid constructed tribalism. The struggle that emerged in the docks in this period was not one of urban

⁵⁶ Interviews. Themba Dube, Les Owen, Gordon Stockley, Mike Morris.

⁵⁷ South African Stevedores. *SAS Corporate Plan 1984-1987*. November 1983, p. 45.

⁵⁸ Interview Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

workers against migrant rural ones⁵⁹, but of migrant workers having to decide between a union that attempted to negotiate better conditions for them at work, and another that claimed to secure their tribal way of life. The latter option was additionally attractive because it offered security amidst the industrial environment of constant retrenchment.

UWUSA's operation was not simply one of contesting for the support of stevedores by emphasizing different concerns. Underneath their promises was also a great amount of intimidation. Much of the intimidation was politics that didn't happen at work and workers that I approached still refuse to speak about it today. The official story of this intimidation followed the lines of UWUSA members speaking to workers in the compound and using expressions such as "Buthelezi won't be happy with your involvement in communism, and remember where you live; don't bother coming North of the Tugela if you continue to involve yourself in this union".⁶⁰ Siza Makhaya, a personnel officer who had been instrumental in abolishing the privileges of senior indunas in the compounds in the early 1980s, claims to have left his job because of threats from UWUSA in late 1986.⁶¹ His replacement, Themba Dube, says that he did not suffer from the same threats but recounted the story of a brave TGWU shop steward named Mtshali who refused to hear UWUSA's position and be intimidated. He had been in the docks since the 1970s and was keenly aware of the battles that the union had actually won. Dube recalls what happened to Mtshali in 1987:

*In fact, I saw him die. There were tensions at the hostel. I think it was a Friday, and it was myself and Jerry Mbatha, who was then hostel manager. We were phoned by the booking clerks that Mtshali had just been stabbed. We rushed from home to find that it was his last gasps. He was a prominent shopsteward.*⁶²

Despite this, Dube would not directly implicate UWUSA in the killing.⁶³ Perhaps this was because the company itself wanted to distance itself from the politics of the time.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ This pattern in the union organization and workplace conflict may be correct in general, but it obscures the fact of other conflicts, for instance generational ones, and also appears to deny the agency of migrant workers in choosing which unions would serve them better.

⁶⁰ Christopher Gcebu, TGWU shopsteward cited in Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 97.

⁶¹ Siza Makhaya, interview, 12 June 2001.

⁶² Interview: Themba Dube, 8 March 2002

⁶³ Interview: Themba Dube, 8 March 2002.

Another shop-steward, Christopher Gceba, also received death threats in 1987 for remaining faithful to TGWU.⁶⁵

Members of SAS that I interviewed from top management to personnel officers all argued that UWUSA did not function as a real union, used no membership cards and never were able to successfully negotiate any benefits for workers.⁶⁶ However, the company did cancel the recognition agreement with TGWU, and from mid 1987 there was a void in union recognition and the two unions both organized in the docks, both going to meetings with management, but without real power. This certainly didn't help the cause of fighting retrenchments since major retrenchments followed in May and November 1987.⁶⁷

In 1991, TGWU convinced SAS to have a referendum among workers about which union they supported and TGWU was once again recognized as the official union in the docks. By this time, UWUSA had all but disappeared from the docks. The period of UWUSA in the docks threw up conflicts across generation, and around the changing sources of income and security for stevedores. Many of the gains that had been established in the early 1980s were undone, and created a situation where stevedores were left embittered and disillusioned about the effectiveness of trade unions, an attitude that would characterize the 1990s. The 1980s had offered the possibilities for workers to choose the unions that they wished, and for a period, it had seemed that the tribal alliances that the Apartheid system had constructed so carefully in the 1950s and 1960s, had not becoming a distinguishing feature of the consciousness of the stevedores. Yet the politics of ethnic violence and intimidation dampened this conclusion, and workers were left on their own again, facing a declining industry where their knowledge of the work meant less and less.

⁶⁴ Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, 6 September 2001.

⁶⁵ David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 98

⁶⁶ Interviews: Themba Dube, Gordon Stockley, Siza Makhaya. There is also secondary source support for this position in David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*.

⁶⁷ David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 97-99.

Epilogue: Struggles of the early 1990s

Retrenchments continued in the 1990s. The company cut its workforce right down and used large numbers of casual labourers every day to make up for the shortage of work. The container terminal handled even larger quantities of cargo, and stevedore morale plunged.

The destruction of the gang as the centre of the labour process was critical to the drop in worker morale. In a series of interviews with stevedores conducted by David Hemson in the early 1990s, he found that workers no longer had any pride in their work, and felt that the mechanization of the port made them “weak”.⁶⁸ The majority of remaining stevedoring workers were over 40 years old, a consequence of the Last-In, First Out, (LIFO) policy of retrenchment negotiated by both the GWU and TGWU, and felt that the rural areas were the only alternative for them after forced retirement or retrenchment.⁶⁹ Part of the reason for this is surely the legacy of the migrant labour system, and also the disillusionment that the workers felt in trade unions, particularly after the fiascos of the late 1980s.

If permanent workers believed that their situation was difficult, casual workers had it even tougher. Whereas before 1990, casual labour was fairly arbitrarily selected, casual labour began to be managed by labour brokers.⁷⁰ On the face of it, this seemed like a very viable answer for casual workers, since they were organized and were able to work at least a fair number of days. However, the outsourcing of labour meant that casuals enjoyed even less security than before. They were not even directly employed by stevedoring companies, and the negotiation of any benefits whatsoever involved going through their labour brokers, who had little real concern for the safety or remuneration of their workers. The limited amount of training that still occurred in SAS was not available for them either. Throughout the 1990s they fell victim to promises of security and better wages by a number of fly-by-night unions and notorious individuals, notably Willie Cirrah.

⁶⁸ David Hemson. “The Global Imperative? Containerization and Durban Docks”, Unpublished Paper, University of Durban-Westville, 1996. p 10-12. For a more complete account of the interviews see David Hemson. *Migrants and Machines: Labour and New Technology in the port of Durban*. HSRC report, 1995.

⁶⁹ David Hemson. “The Global Imperative? Containerization and Durban Docks” p. 8-14.

⁷⁰ I must thank Joe Guy for much of the information about the current struggles of casual workers.

The TGWU was not very successful in its attempts to organize casuals. The best that it could muster was an agreement for a National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) in which employers would be forced to draw from a single pool of casual workers managed by a single labour broker.⁷¹ In theory, this scheme was supposed to ensure basic benefits to casual workers and provide a degree of job security. However, partly due to the mismanagement of the pool and partly due to employers believing that the pool was too expensive to maintain, the NDLS only lasted a year and a half. Again TGWU was impotent in ensuring the rights of these workers. By the end of the 1990s, casual stevedores still believed that a union could help them, but that organizers had to be realistic and to understand both the industry and their own conditions.⁷²

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the process of organizing stevedores in the Durban Harbour between 1978 and 1990. It has shown that has offered the possibility of both success and failure, and displayed the difficulties that trade unions faced in late Apartheid South Africa. I have also not denied the agency that workers have had in deciding their own fate, within the context of two prevailing hegemonic features, one of technological change and resulting degradation of work and the second of prevailing ethnicity and the politics of divide and rule.

From a cursory glance at the events of the period, and in particular the renewed faith that the stevedores showed in a return to the land as the solution to their problems, it is tempting to construct a structural narrative that argues that ethnically defined politics is a totalizing feature of the stevedores' consciousness. In contrast, I have shown that what existed instead was a negotiation of this ethnicity, and argued that within a limited context, workers did make choices according to what really benefited them. Despite the fact that workers originally distrusted the General Workers Union, workers did make clear choices about which unions would help them, and ultimately joined this union

⁷¹ Besides TGWU, the State was also involved in drafting the NDLS. It was based on the White Paper on Transport Policy (1996) that "aimed to stabilize industrial relations in the port". For more on this see, Simon Stratton. "The implementation of the dock labour scheme in the port of Durban", unpublished paper, University of Adelaide.

⁷² Interviews done by the author: Mr Ndumo Dlamini and Jabulani Mchunu, 22 December 2000.

because it clearly was the most effective. Under tremendous pressure, workers later joined the United Workers Union of South Africa, not because they were helpless constructs of their past, but because of very real danger to their lives. Workers were also able to very clearly assess the challenges that faced them. Mr Ntshangase, interviewed in 1982, suggested that the only thing the union could do was ensure a retrenchment package and then he would go back home...”to look after my cattle”.⁷³

It is also necessary to evaluate the success of the union here. Hemson has made the point that so many workers need not have been retrenched, especially given that casuals do the majority of work every single day.⁷⁴ Certainly if we look at stevedores internationally, organized labour unions have been able to keep the majority of stevedores permanent by the maintenance of a register system which shares out the work among stevedores, much like the guarantee system tried in the early 1980s by the GWU and SAS.⁷⁵ This is a tempting point, for perhaps the General Workers Union could have done better, however, this tends to minimize both the particularity of the South African working class and the politics of Natal in the 1980s. In the final analysis, I believe that the General Workers Union was successful as a union and revolutionary in that success, given the overwhelming conditions that it faced. Nevertheless, its tendency to accept management’s positions as an overall reflection of the problems of stevedoring in the docks was a failure, and it certainly should have pushed management harder against retrenchment. Finally, the disillusionment that the union experienced amongst its organizers in 1985, and their subsequent departure from the harbour was an additional weakness that could have been prevented.

⁷³ Mr Ntshangase interviewed by Tina Sideris on 19 November 1982. Wits Historical Papers, SAIRR Oral History Project, interview #44.

⁷⁴ David Hemson “Beyond the Frontier of Control”.

⁷⁵ Kees Marges, Secretary General of the International Transport Workers Federation. *Containerisation and Automation: how to survive as dockworkers*. Address to a conference on ‘Container handling automation and technologies’, 22 and 23 February 1999. Accessed on 25 February 2002 at <http://www.itf.org.uk/Sections/dockers/ilo37campagin.htm>