

**Creating contingent labor and Constraining Political Unionism: Interpreting Durban
Dockwork in the 1980s**

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*To the seminar: thanks for indulging me on this topic once again. Much has been rewritten and rethought,
and apologies for the typographic errors. Your comments, as always, will be much appreciated.*

The text of history, which must always be taken up over and over again,
doubles the doing, both as its trace and as its interrogation... History is not
a substitute for social praxis, but its fragile witness and necessary critique.

Michel de Certeau. *The Writing of History*.

The [Marseille] dockworkers recognized that their position was gravely
threatened.

William H. Sewell, Jr., on Marseille dockworkers in the late 1850s

Introduction

Dockworkers, to generalize William Sewell's description of work in the port of
Marseille during the mid nineteenth century, have "strange careers".¹ Writing on stevedores
in Durban, David Hemson, while reluctant to acknowledge that these workers were
disconnected from the rest of the South African working class, suggests that their struggles
moved "out of phase", sometimes "ahead", at others "lagging behind" radical political
struggles in the rest of South Africa during the twentieth century.² Although Sewell is

¹ William. H. Sewell, Jr. "Historical Duration and temporal complexity: the strange career of Marseille's
Dockworkers. 1814-1870" in *Logics of History* (Chicago, 2005).

² David Hemson. "The eye of the storm: dockworkers in Durban" in Maylam and Edwards (eds.) *The People's
city: African Life in Twentieth Century Durban*. (University of Natal Press, 1994). p. 165.

cautious in his discussion of general class solidarity in Marseille (arguing that this was a moment of shared consciousness rather than a process of universal proletarianization), both scholars demonstrate a common theme of “uneven development” and that dockworker organization “from below” became potent centers of political activity. In addition, both accounts, to which we could add two other comparative cases, in Rotterdam at the turn of the last century, and in San Francisco during the 1970s, dockworkers were confronted with decisive technological changes that displaced familiar working techniques, undermining worker organizations and leaving workers marginalized.³ Of course, harbors were site of radical technological innovation-- Harry Braverman once observed “the shipyard was probably the most complete product of two centuries of industrial revolution”— with each of the four studies revealing the speed of respective technological changes, and the clinical effects of these innovations on worker’s lives.⁴ The general schema, then, of the dynamics of dock work in different places over time suggests a certain particularism deeply connected with the labor process itself. This kind of work seems to generate a politicized subjectivity under conditions where the immanence of technological change and the fear of the loss of work haunts worker activity more consistently than in most workplaces.

In this paper, I will examine the changing infrastructure of work and the shape of union organization between approximately 1979 and 1986, and in particular the ultimate failure of radical trade unionism in the harbor. If we provisionally accept the comparative historiographical schema outlined above, what might we learn from another interrogation of Durban stevedores (longshoremen) during a relatively recent period of massive technological innovation in the port, a time when the intense and countrywide union organization failed to generate a sufficiently powerful organization in the Durban docks? What new insights can be gleaned by a (re)reading of the texts and traces in this recent historical record?

I wish to draw out two main themes that disturb the general scheme. Firstly, I will consider the complexity of unionism in Durban during the 1980s, and show that organization during this period in the harbor did not simply follow from the labor process or was merely a matter of activating a latent “class consciousness”. Instead, the construction of

³ Hugo Van Driel & Johan Schot. “Radical Innovation as a Multilevel Process: Introducing Floating Grain Elevators in the Port of Rotterdam” in *Technology and Culture* (46, 2005) and Joseph Blum. “Degradation without deskilling: Twenty Five Years in the San Francisco Shipyards” in Michael Burawoy (ed) *Global Ethnography*. (California, 2000).

⁴ Harry Braverman. *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. (Monthly Review, 1974) p. 5

a radical politics among dockworkers was a far more onerous task, and its failure had much to do with the inability of unionists to sufficiently come to terms with the worlds dockworkers' inhabited. In this respect, I share with Sewell the idea that politics is far more likely to be contingently constructed, to have a kind of "autonomy" from "material conditions" than Hemson's argument would suggest. Or, to re-phrase in language I am more comfortable with, that we cannot assume that the concrete circumstances of labor are themselves the principal condition in generating political activity, in South Africa or elsewhere, even if that politics is explicitly concerned with work.

Secondly, I wish to argue that while the difficulties that radical trade unionists faced in Durban might well be endemic to the kinds of technological changes that dockworkers faced in different locations over one hundred and fifty years, these processes of the changing organic composition of capital resonate, indeed, have confronted, many workplaces in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and we learn from the shape that organization takes under these conditions. It was not merely a question of the changing state apparatus or of the success or failure of certain strategies. Rather, I will argue that examining this period on the docks sheds light on the character of the late Apartheid state more broadly and on problem of union organization *in general* following a massive displacement of workers. What I hope becomes clear is that this tale of union organization among dockworkers is not the unevenness or particularity of their experiences, but rather a wider insight of the emergence of significant constraints on political unionism as labor becomes increasingly contingent. At another level, then, while the concrete labor conditions are insufficient to understand the production of politics, the dynamic of *abstract labor* powerfully mediates what kinds of politics are available at any given time.

The Early Apartheid organization of Durban Harbor and its crises

Of course, any attempt to understand social, let alone political, contexts in South Africa without taking Apartheid very seriously indeed would be absurd. As a state ideological system with a sophisticated, if incoherent and not completely functional, apparatus, the early apartheid government did engage in a serious attempt at social engineering. Although the effects of this system were not uniform and certainly not faithful to any "grand design", new kinds of racial, class, gendered, sexual, spatial, and ethnic identities (to name but a few) were produced as the (often unintended) outcomes of the numerous (and often incoherent) plans

and policies of early Apartheid administrators. That the government was able to accomplish even this, has to be understood in relation to a broader post-war social dynamic (from approximately 1945-1973) that saw states in different global sites more or less effectively intervening and reorganizing societies, whether we talk about Stalinism, Maoism, or the welfare infrastructures of Western Europe.

That said, the particularity of the South African context was remarkable. The driving contradiction of the early Apartheid state consisted in balancing a serious commitment to the rural “autonomy” of designated African ethnic groups with an even more serious attempt to control and regulate the presence of African people in the city, and more specifically, to reengineer an older, racially defined, order of cheap migrant labor to control precisely the numbers of workers needed in the city, eliminating the “excessive” presence of Africans in the city (of which African women were a prominent subset).⁵ For well over three decades many scholars have attempted to provide a critical synthesis of these contradictions, focusing on the reproduction of cheap labor, on the influx control infrastructure itself, and on the bureaucratic reordering of African urban and rural administration.⁶ Others have shown, through careful readings of archival documents and interviews, that such syntheses assume a far more coherent image of Apartheid than the evidence from everyday lives suggest, and that these syntheses privilege “the State” and “the Economy” over other equally important dimensions of Apartheid, such as the struggles over the meanings of the household, domestic reproduction, gender, and indeed work itself.⁷ Perhaps most significantly for my purposes here, these latter studies show that the attempts at “top-down” synthesis run the risk of presupposing precisely what needs to be investigated and contested, namely that Apartheid was a coherent ideological system “all the way down”

⁵ John Comaroff has theorized this driving contradiction in slightly different, although complementary, terms. See his “Reflections on the Colonial State, in South Africa and elsewhere: Factions, Fragments, Facts and Fictions” in *Social Identities* (4, 3, 1998)

⁶ For example. Harold Wolpe. “Capitalism and Cheap Labor Power in South Africa”, Doug Hindson. *Pass Controls and the African urban proletariat*, Mike Morris. “The Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture: Class Struggle in the countryside”, Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. Ivan Evans. *Bureaucracy and Race*. (etc, etc)

⁷ Again, for example. William Beinart. “Worker consciousness, ethnic particularism and nationalism: the experiences of a South African migrant, 1930-1960”, Belinda Bozzoli. *Women of Phokeng*, Jean and John Comaroff. “The madman and the migrant”. Charles Van Onselen. *The Seed is Mine*. (etc, etc).

and that people simply followed their administratively prescribed “roles” as African or White worker, subject, patriarch, and so forth.⁸

With that prefacing, how do we understand the specific shape of the contradictory currents of Apartheid as they manifested in the port of Durban? During the 1940s and early 1950s, like much of urban South Africa, Durban and the port in particular was characterized by prominent displays of African claims for space in the city, organized through a range of political organizations, including trade unions. The early Apartheid state, working through the Durban city council, sought to force the registration of all Africans in the city according to type of employment, an instrument designed to facilitate the eventual removal of any African in the city without “proper” work in the city.⁹ The idea, of course, was a variation on a much older South African, British colonial theme and even Victorian theme: remove undesirables from the city, restrict everybody to their racially defined place, and social order will follow.¹⁰ The key difference with the Apartheid administration, as we shall see, lay in different and more developed notion of what a racially defined place meant.

The employers of stevedores, however, had somewhat different sensibility. For them, employing casuals made a lot of sense given an irregular demand for labor. A centralized system of labor entailed a financial risk. The more standard approach to hiring African dockworkers, which persisted in other ports in South Africa, was described by a Stevedoring Employer who worked in Port Elizabeth before Durban:

I can remember going down at six one winter’s morning, surrounded by guys in big coats smelling of wood smoke because they had been sleeping around the fire. And that morning there weren’t many ships. In those days you had six or seven hundred men coming to work in Port Elizabeth, and you would only have employment for half of them... And it was a big joke among the [white] foreman when there was surplus labor. They would

⁸ Two further instructive examples here are Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961* and Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration*. Posel demonstrates that the early Apartheid bureaucracy really had no idea what they were doing, and that Apartheid planning was haphazard. Moodie shows that a different kinds of “moral economies” produced precarious constructions of identity, where ethnicity, class and sexuality could never simply be taken for granted.

⁹ Archival Document... [Check and add specific dates]

¹⁰ See for instance. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Fred Cooper. *The Struggle for the City* and *On the African Waterfront*, Charles Van Onselen. *New Babylon, New Nineveh*. Luise White. *The Comforts of Home*. Maylam and Edwards. *The People’s city*. etc. (A theme, of course, with “cleansed” variations, that still persists in middle class South Africa!)

throw two or three tickets into the crowd to see the guys fight at six in the morning to be employed.¹¹

So why did the administration of workers in Durban follow a different trajectory? On the one hand, the large numbers of stevedores were probably organized better than at any other time in the history of the port. Through the 1950s, numerous strikes in the harbor frustrated employees and no doubt caught the attention of Apartheid authorities zealously attempting to prove the disorderly “nature” of an unregulated urban population.¹² On the other hand, Durban had become the largest harbor in the country, and quite literally an important flagship for the city, and for trade in the country as a whole. If the Apartheid engineering of urban labor was to be put into practice, the Durban docks were a perfect place of execution.

Numerous meetings between government officials and employers followed between 1956 and 1959.¹³ What eventually seems to have broken the employers reluctance to implement a system regulated in terms of broader Apartheid policy was a massive strike in February 1959.¹⁴ After violently breaking the strike, employers and government officials developed an institution to regulate all dock work in Durban. This institution was called the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company, and began operating in at the end of March 1959.¹⁵

The Labour Supply Company was designed to centralize control African stevedores in Durban, managing and disciplining the practices of recruitment, housing, and the labor process. At the locus of this administrative architecture were older African men, called Izinduna (a term borrowed from mine work in Johannesburg, and summoning a “tradition” of pre-colonial Zulu authority) and supposedly able to create a more orderly environment for African workers by virtue of understanding their “culture” and language. Some Izinduna, particularly those responsible for the labor process, had worked on the docks prior to the Labour Supply Company. Many other Izinduna had not. Liaising with leaders of KwaZulu Bantustan, Izinduna recruited workers on nine-month contracts from remote areas in

¹¹ Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

¹² CITE the strike records. Corroboration from Hemson. JSAS 1977.

¹³ CITE the meeting records.

¹⁴ CITE these strike records.

¹⁵ SAB BAO 3075 vol. C39/1171/1. “Memorandum of Agreement entered into between African Associated Stevedoring, Consolidated Stevedoring, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, Jack Storm and Peter Kemp (trustee). 1 April 1959.

Zululand.¹⁶ Once in Durban, workers were housed in a centralized compound in Southampton St, in the point area near the harbor. The compounds housed between twelve and twenty people per room, and with a double work shift, workers would sometimes rotate the same bed.¹⁷ In these compounds, Izinduna became more like prefects, dining at a special table and punishing any “misbehavior”.¹⁸ At work, Izinduna led tightly controlled work gangs called “Stevedoring Labour Units” comprised of between eight and twelve members. The role of the Izinduna was to direct the process of work, to train new workers, and it was they who were ultimately responsible to management for the successful completion of each task. White foremen were also present during each stevedoring operation, but they played virtually no part in the specifics of the labor process.

How successful was this Apartheid reordering of work according to the control of Africans in urban areas and in terms of their “Zulu culture”? Within a year of the formation of the Labour Supply Company, over eighty percent of the stevedoring labor force were migrants.¹⁹ Very rarely, according to Company officials, were there any problems with the labor process or compound system. Indeed, for employers, the operation of the Labour Supply Company was an overwhelming success. Record turnover of cargo loads was experienced, with an industrial calm in the ports that contrasted dramatically with the two preceding decades. The countrywide economic boom contributed so significantly to the stevedoring industry, such was the demand to clear ships of cargo as quickly as possible, that more than half of workers’ average wages derived from overtime pay.²⁰ Despite an initial limiting of the labor pool after 1959, the numbers of stevedores increased with increased productivity, peaking at 2923 stevedores in 1964 and stabilizing at 2700 in 1966.²¹ For government officials, the Labour Supply Company was an overwhelming success. Attributing this success to the concentration of workers in a single compound under the rule of Izinduna and to the “distinct social organization of the Bantu that values the clan or

¹⁶ Meaning, quite simply, areas in KwaZulu where traditional African administrators had substantial influence. Two of the most notable areas of this influence were Nongoma and Mhlabathini, in Northern Kwazulu.

¹⁷ D.M. Ross-Watt. *Housing for Bantu Stevedores*. (B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970) p. 20. Interview: July Ntshangase. (Tina Sideris, 1982), Interview. Les Owen. 4 June 2001.

¹⁸ Interview. Siza Makhaya. (Personnel Officer, Labor Supply Company, 1973-1987) 11 July 2001, and David Hemson *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 546

¹⁹ SAB BAO 2401 31/3/36. Report by Kemp and Dreyer (Manager and Assistant Manager of the Labor Supply Company) “History and functions of the Labor Supply Company”, October 1965.

²⁰ David Hemson. “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”. p. 526.

²¹ SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.

family unit above that of the individual”, government officials proclaimed that they had found the “model Apartheid institution”, which should be replicated in other ports and workplaces across the country.²²

Several Stevedoring workers, on the other hand, described the system as considerably more arbitrary, and at times more malleable and negotiable. In mediating the relationship between African workers and White management, Izinduna constructed micro social arrangements of trust and obligation that we fraught with unequal power relations, but very different from the supposedly static “Zulu tradition”.²³ Furthermore, in describing the intense dangers and physicality of dockwork, both workers and izinduna spoke of the solidarities these forged in work gangs.²⁴ These solidarities were did not only serve to protect workers from danger: they also facilitated various types of “shortcuts” in the labor process, that helped to reduce time, among other things.²⁵ Moreover, potential conflicts were softened by overwhelming racial divisions. While Izinduna were expected to supervise and co-ordinate the operations from within the belly of the ship, white foremen would remain outside the ship, reading the newspaper. Stevedores sometimes spoke of the role of Izinduna as teachers in the techniques of stevedoring work. Ndebele noted that the positions of authority on a ship were more porous than the company imagined, having stood in for Izinduna on many occasions when the latter were absent.²⁶ Ngcobo and Ngema became Izinduna after starting as ordinary rank and file stevedores during the period of the Labor Supply Company, and spoke about the contradictory conditions under which they found themselves. As an induna, Ngema emphasized his role in training workers and the relationships of fear and trust existing simultaneously between themselves and workers.²⁷

²² SAB BAO 3075 C39/1171/1. Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. “Stevedoring Labour Units”, and SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.

²³ These interviews were conducted by Tina Sideris in 1982 and 1983 on behalf of the South African Institute of Race relations. Despite their richness, many of these interviews are unfortunately not as coherent as the archival documents. The other interviews in this paper were conducted by the author between 2000 and 2002.

²⁴ Ngcobo speaks of working directly with asbestos and problems it caused his lungs. Ntshangase claimed that “Carrying bags used to kill us here, when dealing with manure it was tough- it burnt, scalding the flesh from our hands... even the gloves they gave us, are torn apart the day after you have used them”. Interviews Ntshangase, Ngcobo, op. Cit

²⁵ Interview: Mr Khanye. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

²⁶ Interview: Mr Ndebele. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

²⁷ Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982. My thanks go to the late Thami Sibiyi for translating this interview.

It seems to me that while we might conceptualize these relationships in terms of Karl von Holdt's recent formulation, the "Apartheid Workplace Regime", where ideas of "baaskaap" run through a centralized system of the control of African workers, we should be careful to locate this in a historically specific moment, prior to the late 1970s, and also recognize that the workplace regime was far more arbitrary and precarious than Apartheid administrators believed.²⁸ But we also cannot pretend that this system of labor control had no effects whatsoever. It fundamentally recast what it meant to be an African worker in Durban, in terms of the kinds of solidarities and obligations that emerged, frequently to specific rural sites. These "hidden transcripts" did not, of course, undermine governments' or employers' belief that they had found a "cultural" *logic* for the exploitation of workers that could be both stable and profitable.

What did disturb this logic was a strike in 1969. The first weekend of April saw 2000 workers go on strike over wages. Economic boom in the port during the mid 1960s had seen stevedores earning significant amounts from overtime pay. After 1966, a slight downturn in the harbor economy saw workers doing far less overtime work, and consequently earning significantly less. The government board of wage determination met in late 1968, and decided that there was to be no increase in the basic pay of stevedores, and that overtime work should be taxed.²⁹ Although it is not entirely clear how this information was made known to stevedores (certain NUSAS and UND students were involved), the decisions of the wage determination board proved important enough for stevedores to risk their jobs by striking.

Management of the Labour Supply Company invited police to their meeting with striking workers, and demanded that strikers return to work. They then dismissed more than 1000 workers, with Kemp publicly claiming that there was ample manpower to call on.³⁰ A dockworker recalled how, during the time of the strike, scabs were hired and protected by armed police to ensure work continued in ports.³¹ Following the strike, the Labour Supply Company decided that its logic that indeed been correct, and that is necessary to tinker a little with its implementation: summoning a notion of a coherent Zulu nation that would be adequately controlled by Izinduna, the Labor Supply Company altered its recruitment

²⁸ Karl Von Holdt. *Transition from Below*. (UKZN, 2003).

²⁹ David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and migrant workers". p. 518-520.

³⁰ *The Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1969. "Half of Durban's Dockworkers sent home".

³¹ Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982

pattern, with a marked increase in the numbers of workers from Nongoma and Mhlabathini (“Zulu strongholds” during Apartheid) and substantially reduced the recruitment of non-Zulu workers.³²

For Hemson, this strike, and the one that followed in 1972 (over wages, working conditions and safety in particular) illustrated the re-emergence of a class consciousness latent since the late 1950s. While I have no evidence to counter this claim in this particular period, there was a rising public consciousness in the white press that the harbor had become both more volatile and more inefficient.³³ In this arena, it was widely felt that there was a problem that needed to be solved, and that the early Apartheid method of organizing African workers from above was failing. And, as I will argue in the next section, employers became increasingly pressurized to break their contract with the government and change the character of this “Apartheid workplace regime”.

New managerial dreams and abstract imperatives: units, containers, new workers

From 1969 onwards, the port was beset with delays.³⁴ By late 1972, following the October strike, this situation was consistently debated in the white press, who urged rapid “mechanization” as the solution to all problems.³⁵ As popular icons around the world began declaring, of different, although contemporaneous, global events: “the dream is over” or “whatever happened to the postwar dream?”, a section of the local Durban business community and international shipping lines seriously considered the problem of what to do with dock labor in the city.

The intermediate solution was to revert to recruiting casual labor independently to work alongside stevedores employed by the Labor Supply Company. This caused serious commotion among state officials, and stevedoring employers were summoned to meetings of the local Bantu Administration Board and Regional Labor Office to answer for their heresy. The main concern of government officials was not how efficient the Labor Supply Company was, but rather that the employment of casual workers on the docks threatened

³² David Hemson. “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”. p. 581.

³³ *The Natal Mercury*, 4 November 1972. “‘Mercury’ probes dock workers’ complaints”. Accidents increased dramatically between 1967 and 1970. David Hemson. “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”. p. 534. Izinduna working on ships did not actively participate in the 1972, but gave tacit support to the striking workers. David Hemson. “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”. p. 649.

³⁴ *The Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970, 20 May 1971, 29 November 1971, 24 October 1972.

³⁵ *Natal Mercury*. 23 Jan 1970. “Mechanization the Answer to Port Delays”.

the entire basis of the migrant labor system.³⁶ The response from the private companies was predictable: that they could not operate profitably within the limits of the legal restraints. The vague agreement emerging from these meetings was that casuals could be temporarily employed as long as they were registered with the government. Some employer or state official might just have read the then-recently published Harold Wolpe article, since the long term “solution” proposed was the establishment of “reserve armies” of African workers (!) in Bantustans.³⁷

But such solutions, in addition to what we learn from the traditional Marxists about their structural relation to the early Apartheid state, were rapidly becoming anarchonistic. Forms of mechanization had emerged relatively slowly in Durban between 1940 and 1970. The most significant was the standardization of cargo in unit loads, which could be moved around relatively easily. By the late 1960s, palletization, entailing the construction of moving platforms that could be transported easily by forklift trucks, had become standard in Durban. Gangs of stevedores were able to incorporate these relatively gradual changes into their labor process. But containerized shipping was the most elaborated and sophisticated version of unitization, and threatened to radically alter the labor process, was rapidly became standardized in ports across the globe by the early 1970s.

Pioneered by a US trucker in the 1950s, containerization enabled a significantly enhanced network of transportation: an infrastructure deploying emerging information technologies that facilitated the seamless movement of standardized cargo from ship to road or rail. From the late 1960s, the use of containers rapidly proliferated in ports across the globe, revolutionizing shipping, with East Asian ports and trade routes becoming major competitors to more established North Atlantic transportation hubs. The consequences of this innovation were massive for dock laborers, and stevedores in particular: the immediate worlds of work to which these laborers belonged were confronted by the constant threat of retrenchment. Containerized transportation did not require large numbers of physically powerful men, instead needing only limited numbers of highly skilled workers who operated sophisticated cranes and computers. Allan Sekula recently called the container “the very

³⁶ Durban Archives Repository (DAR). PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. “Labour Problems: Point and Harbour Areas”. Meeting held on 20 November 1974.

³⁷ DAR. PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. SB Bourquin. “Chief Directors Memorandum: Establishment of teams of Casual workers in the Neighbouring Bantu Homelands”. 28 February 1975. Wolpe of course had published his famous “Capitalism and Cheap Labor power in South Africa” in 1972.

coffin of remote labor power, bearing the hidden evidence of exploitation to the far reaches of the world".³⁸ In Durban, older ships continued to dock in conjunction with the newer automated container system. But the organization of work itself changed. With the completion of the container terminal in 1977, the Labor Supply Company folded completely. From 13 Stevedoring Companies in 1970, there was an eventual merger into two by 1980, 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.³⁹ In 1982, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrods Cotts merged into one company called South African Stevedores, and effectively became the only stevedoring company in Durban.

This kind of corporate consolidation saw a streamlining of the control of dockwork, with South African Stevedores running most of the stevedoring in Durban, at a ratio of approximately 6 to 1 to other companies.⁴⁰ This consolidation was not just about immediate profitability, however. The operations manager, Gordon Stockley, who worked through the entire period, retiring in 1994, was emphatic that the technological changes and the conditions for business necessitated a change in the character of labor itself.⁴¹ Beginning his tenure as operations manager in Durban in 1978, he expressed a humanizing vision of reordering working conditions at the port entirely. His vision, broadly, was to train workers with new skills, to create a corporate loyalty, and to encourage trade unions. Most ambitiously, he hoped to break the idea of the "large, unskilled single African man" by creating a living environment where workers could stay with their families in the port and ride bicycles to work. Stockley hired a liberal labor relations manager, Les Owen, and commissioned a study with Lawrence Schlemmer in order to discover what conditions workers themselves desired.

³⁸ Allen Sekula. "Freeway to China" in Comaroff and Comaroff. *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neo-liberalism*. (Duke, 2002).

³⁹ Mike Morris. The GWU and the Stevedoring Industry. *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 94.

⁴⁰ Interview Captain Dudley. SASSCO/SAS Regional Manager, Durban, 1977-1983. 15 August 2001.

⁴¹ The following is mostly based on an extended interview conducted with Capt Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001. Supplementary information provided by interviews with Doug Dudley. (Regional manager, SASSCO/South African Stevedores, 1977-1983), interviewed on 20 August 2001; and Les Owen (Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO/South African Stevedores, 1979-1984). Interviewed on 5 June 2001; 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). Thanks to Les Owen for making the latter document available to me.

Stockley acknowledged that these dreams would only be possible if they could be made profitable. Moreover, it was not simply an immediate question of profitability or a simple transition. Many managers labeled Stockley and Owen as radicals, and, in the late 1970s, it was not yet clear that new methods of working would be profitable.⁴² While the most ambitious of Stockley's visions was never implemented, he did succeed in changing how promotion happened, in encouraging trade unionism and fostering good relations with those unions, in running training schools for workers, and in general, in building company loyalty among workers.⁴³

Without questioning the remarkable intentions of Stockley (he was a white manager in Apartheid South Africa!), his ideas did not emerge in a vacuum. These kinds of corporate identification, retraining, multiskilling, and so forth, are a key dimension of the contemporary Post-Apartheid Workplace.⁴⁴ Moreover, as recent studies of management at the Engen Oil Refining and at Volkswagen in Port Elizabeth have shown, Stockley was a leading figure among others who tried to create efficient working conditions in a context where an older "Apartheid Workplace Regime" was increasingly becoming economically unsustainable.⁴⁵ Although he was more forthright than others about breaking with an older-style political machinery, his task was principally "to get the job done" in a manner that held long term prospects, rather than directly about challenging the politics of late Apartheid South Africa. It is in these traces that we start to see how the "Apartheid Workplace Regime" is disturbed well before an immediately political solution (characteristic of the late 1980s) confronts the government, and that, indeed, it is instructive to investigate these imperatives in order to grasp the dimensions of work in Post-Apartheid South Africa.

With the privilege of hindsight, it is possible to understand how the more successful of the progressive strategies of South African Stevedores were not merely contingent upon

⁴² Interview. Hugh Wyatt. Sep 6, 2001. Wyatt began as a foreman in 1974, and was in middle management in the early 1980s.

⁴³ Priority to SAS, promotions were based on age seniority rather than skill or duration of work on the docks. Interviews: Siza Makhaya, Personnel officer, SASSCO and SAS, 1978-1986, Themba Dube, SASSCO and SAS 1980- .

⁴⁴ See Phakathi and Masondo's articles in Von Holdt and Webster (eds). *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*. (UKZN, 2005). Bernard Dubbeld. "The Meanings of Work and Workplaces after Apartheid: Review of *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*". *Journal of Southern African Studies*. (Forthcoming)

⁴⁵ See Stephen Sparks. "The politics of Expertise", paper presented at the SHOT conference, Ithala, July 13-16, 2006; Chris Bolsmann "Trade Union Internationalism and Solidarity in the Auto Industry: Fighting Apartheid and Engaging with Globalization". paper presented at "Rethinking Worlds of Labour", University of the Witwatersrand, July 29-31, 2006.

the hard work and ideas of Stockley, Owen and other management, but also structurally embedded within a changing determination of work itself. Stockley's endeavor to encourage trade unions in the docks, however, had a more ambiguous fate than most of his strategies, and it is to these that we now turn.

Unionization and concrete uncertainty

If abstract imperatives start to become visible in the docks, altering what kinds of work and workers are necessary for productive stevedoring, where does this leave the stevedores themselves, over whom so much bureaucratic energy has been expended? In particular, how might the minute power relations, between city and countryside, between men of different ages, accorded different kinds of authority in the docks relate to these new imperatives, and to the energy that radical trade unionists were about to spend on them? The two questions confronting radical (and often white) trade unionists were "who were these workers?" and "how to we convince them to join our union?" In the docks, a third line of inquiry soon loomed as importantly as the first two: "what kinds of organizationally strategies are appropriate when, instead of particular conditions of work (such as low wages or intransigent managers) being major concerns, work itself is under threat?" An examination of the most successful trade union in the Durban harbor, the General Workers Union, suggests a troubled engagement with the first question, a fairly successful response to the second question, and set of creative answers to the third.

But lets begin with the emergence of formal trade unionism on the docks in the late 1970s.⁴⁶ The two early unions in the port, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), organized by Sam Kikine, and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), but neither were able to claim anything near majority membership, a requirement to be recognized as legitimate by employers. By 1980, the latter could claim a mere three hundred stevedores of a possible 2500.⁴⁷ However, a union established in Cape Town called the General Workers Union proved to be more successful. This union had considerable

⁴⁶ There are, of course, some continuities with the quasi-union structures, such as wage commissions and benefit funds organized predominately by radical students in the early 1970s, but the actual unionists involved, the management structure of the port, and the legal infrastructure of union organization were all different, and we cannot assume that workers in the port, despite many of them holding jobs for a long time, had the same relationship with workers.

⁴⁷ Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 1982. p. 20.

success in organizing stevedores in Cape Town, and decided to organize a national union of stevedores.⁴⁸ By the beginning of 1981, they had organized stevedores in Port Elizabeth and East London, and sent organizers, led by Mike Morris, a young but already prominent traditional structural Marxist intellectual, and 'Rev' Marawu, an experienced union official from Cape Town, to establish a base in Durban.⁴⁹

Unionists did initially face considerable skepticism on the part of workers. After six months of organizing, the General Workers Union had recruited five hundred from a possible two thousand workers.⁵⁰ Yet organizers made significant efforts, and by middle of the following year, 1982, the union was recognized as the official representative of stevedores in Durban. By early 1985, Morris claimed the General Workers Union had a 90% membership in the harbor, a greater proportion than any other union in the country.⁵¹ Yet, by the middle of the same year, the organizers of the union left the docks, with the General Workers Union merging into the much broader Transport and General Workers Union, who subsequently lost recognition on the docks.

The General Workers Union's engagement with technological changes, I would argue, proved to be one of its most significant reasons for successes in organizing stevedores in the early 1980s, and definitive in its eventual collapse. Even when they began organizing in 1981, "Containerization", to quote Stockley, "already had the industry by the throat". Approximately six hundred workers had lost their jobs between 1978 and 1981, with many more to follow. A major and creative strategy was required of the union if the majority of the workforce was not be casualized or lose out on work completely.

The union approached negotiations with South African Stevedoring Service Company and later South African Stevedores with a dual strategy. On one hand, no worker could be dismissed arbitrarily, without recompense to time worked at the port and proper notice. This was already a significant gain in a workplace which had seen hundreds of African workers over the course of an entire century simply be deemed surplus to requirements, with explanation or compensation. Eventually the Last-In, First-Out system

⁴⁸ Mike Morris. "The Stevedoring Industry and the General Workers Union, part 2" in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1986. p. 101-103.

⁴⁹ Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001. Also see the film *Passing the Message* directed by Cliff Bestall (1984) for an illustration of the initial attempts to organize stevedores in Durban.

⁵⁰ Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*. p. 19. Note the change from 2600 in 1978 to 2000 in 1981 reflected the already significant processes of retrenchment.

⁵¹ Mike Morris. "The Stevedoring Industry and the General Workers Union". *SALB*, 1986.

was agreed as a principle in cases where there was no alternative to retrenchment. On the other hand, in order to preserve work, the union negotiated a system that would ensure guaranteed days of work for all those employed, and even if there were no ships actually present in the harbor. 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.⁵² During 1982, this was increased to three-and-a-half, and then even four days by the end of the year. In addition, cycles of leave from work were more carefully monitored, regulating the numbers of workers actually present in the port at any one time of the year.⁵³ In addition, the General Workers Union (aiding the company) in moving beyond a system of a rank imposed from above according to “traditional” status (Instead, contributing to a system of rank, imposed from above, according to the quality of work, a no less cultural system of prestige, although one naturalized by rational capitalism!).

Stevedoring workers did acknowledge the grave threats to their jobs, and joined the union in significant numbers as it became clear that the General Workers Union had a strategy to at least limit retrenchment to its bare minimum. Yet after being so successful in 1982, the following two years saw the Union really battling with everything they had to prevent casualization. When another, smaller stevedoring company, Keeley’s Stevedores, entered the market in 1984, employed casual workers, and undercut the profitability of South African Stevedores, a major wave of retrenchment occurred as an almost inevitable outcome. In February 1985, 600 stevedoring workers were retrenched.⁵⁴ Principal organizers of the union, including Mike Morris, left the organization, deeply disillusioned by the experience.⁵⁵ The General Workers Union stuttered and had virtually collapsed by the time it merged with the Transport and General Workers Union a year later. The numbers of stevedoring workers had shrunk from 2700 in 1978, to just over 2000 in 1981/1982, to 1200 in 1985. By the dawn of the 1990s, only a few hundred permanent stevedores remained in the port.

One of the striking features of the rapid demise of the union was how disconnected union leadership was from rank-and-file stevedores. Although, ultimately, I think that the structural dynamic of transformation in the port was so powerful that rank-and-file leadership would only have forestalled rather than prevented eventual retrenchment, the

⁵² Interview: Les Owen, Senior Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO and SAS 1979-1984, 5 June 2001.

⁵³ Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, middle management, SASSCO 1974-1982, SAS 1982-, 6 September 2001.

⁵⁴ “600 Durban dock workers to lose their jobs” in *Natal Mercury*, February 18, 1985.

⁵⁵ Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

character of leadership of the General Workers Union does beg the question of the kinds of shared understandings that emerged between workers and unionists. Yes, the union was successful, for a time, at convincing workers to join their union. And the union also offered a highly innovative approach to preventing technological change. But did unions understand the dockworkers? Morris offered me two variations on the culture of stevedores in Durban:

Dockworkers are both individualists and team workers. They are highly individualistic in the sense that they bugger off and do all sorts of things. If you walk around the docks you find workers walking around doing their own thing, sometimes getting rid of all the stuff that they have stolen. But they are also team workers, they operate in and rely on a gang.⁵⁶

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. 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.⁵⁷ (my emphasis)

Both explanations attribute a kind of communal solidarity and perhaps also a “moral economy” to these dockworkers that did not conform to a standard traditional Marxian image of the working class. It seems hasty to reduce the differences in Morris's second observation to his prior comments about the “labor process”. We might say, at least, that the problem of understanding was probably mutual. A veteran dockworker, Mr. Ntshangase, shared his experience on his conversion to trade unionism in 1982:

They said ‘Mr. Ntshangase, we are not fighting with you, but we plead with you to join the union.’ I left them and told them ‘fuck you, I won't join you- you

⁵⁶ Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

⁵⁷ Interview. Mike Morris, Organizer, General Workers Union, 28 June 2001. Gordon Stockley noted in my interview with him the case of workers refusing secret ballots in the election of shopstewards. He attributes this to the workers wanted to establish a direct connection between those elected and those who supported them. Interview. Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

are fooling us'. I went away... I slept, I had a dream and my grandmother from my father's side called me... she said that go and join the union...that it is going to be very useful in future... The following day I returned and joined the union... then I fell ill and was diagnosed as diabetic... I went home. I asked for two months and it got worse. When I came back at the beginning of 1982 I discovered that the compound manager [Siza] Makhanya had removed my name because they did not know where I was and they told me there is nothing they can do for me. I went to the union office the next day and showed them my membership card and explained that I went home because I was sick but now I'm told I have been removed here, he [the union official] understood and phoned Makhanya and we went to see him the following day... I went back to work and realized this trade union was a real trade union.⁵⁸

Ntshangase statement reveals a myriad of intersecting motivations for joining the union: ancestors, kinship, medical problems, and an implicit link to life outside the city. Although he acknowledges, at the end of the passage, this union as a “real trade union”, it is certainly not clear that what this meant to him was equivalent to Morris. Or least, if we look at the effects of the departure from the docks of Morris and other senior organizers, that workers such as Ntshangase had sufficient understanding of the type of organization that Morris ran to actually step into the latter's place. In the same interview, Ntshangase made the rural link explicit by claiming that should he be retrenched, he would go home and look after his cattle. Far from holding a coherent class identity, Ntshangase's consciousness remained fundamentally connected to a rural area, and urban labor was for him, tied to rural accumulation, even in middle of 1980s.

That said, the failures to grasp the workers' identities and commitments by the organizers of the General Workers Union were not simply a matter of race. Rather, I would suggest, it was an inability to grasp the different kinds of commitments that African dockers had, working in Durban, holding real or imaginative identifications with rural South Africa. Morris was humble enough to recognize that he did not understand something quite fundamental about the dockworkers he organized. But in positing a choice between “union structures” and “tribal structures”, Morris reproduces a serious conceptual error. People

⁵⁸ Interview: Ntshangase. Op. cit.

might have claimed Zulu identity, or even tribal links very explicitly. Yet, as Ari Sitas has shown with regard to the summoning of Zulu identity in four different urban communities in Durban in the 1980s, there was considerable variation about what these terms meant, and different kinds of affiliations with social and political groups.⁵⁹ While it would be erroneous (and disastrous for a union organizer) to deny the significant effects of top-down interpellations of ethnic identity in KwaZulu-Natal, those categories are, in themselves, insufficient to understand the even more salient very particular, and even “bottom-up” constructions of these categories.

Conclusion: Containerization’s detritus, constraints on political unionism, and the unmaking of the African “working class”?

The processes transforming the contemporary world are general... encompassing many countries... [and] cannot be explained adequately in terms of particular state policies or local contingencies. Indeed, such historical processes indicate that the attempt to control politically the dynamic characteristic of capitalism, by means of the Keynesian state in the West and the Stalinist party-state in the East, has failed. Instead, the general historical development of recent decades implies the existence of a global structural dynamic of development.... Such a dynamic should [be conceptualized] as a fundamental, historically specific characteristic of capitalist society. Moreover, that dynamic should not merely be viewed positively, as a motor of human progress, but also critically, as a form of heteronomy that severely constrains the possibility of democratic self-determination. However, the strong intellectual reaction against structuralism... has emphasized agency, contingency, [and] resistance... in a one-sided way that effectively denies... historical dynamics. This has weakened the capacity... to grasp the sorts of qualitative structural changes... presently reconfiguring the world. In this way, positions intended to oppose heteronomy have, ironically, become disempowering inasmuch as they deny the central dimensions of [contemporary] domination.

Moishe Postone. *Contemporary Historical Transformations*

⁵⁹ Ari Sitas. “Class, Nation and Ethnicity in Natal’s Black Working Class” (1990)

The story of stevedoring work does not, of course, end in 1985 or 1986. Inkatha's Union, the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA), began to organize dockworkers, and by 1988, gained a recognition agreement as the majority union from South African Stevedores. With UWUSA summoning rural traditions prominently at a time when retrenchment was the most immediate concern of most dockworkers, it is hardly surprising that they received some support. Neither UWUSA nor the Transport and General Workers Union had any idea of a coherent strategy to deal with retrenchment. Very quickly, the 1200 permanent stevedores in 1985 became a few hundred in 1989. Those still permanently employed were products of Stockley's drive to create "new workers", and many of them had been recruited with particular skills in the 1980s. The migrant base of permanent dockworkers had come to an abrupt end.

For many that remained as casuals in the port, work became especially precarious. An older self-ascriptive labor that stevedores wore with pride, *Ozinyathi* (Buffalos) now become a term that described the most debased work in the harbor, with the word re-authored to now connote, quite literally, "those who move shit". During the 1990s, newer unions on the docks attempted to get a recognition agreement from companies (of which SAS was now one of several, including a couple of internationally based employers), and attempted to follow a strategy similar to that of the General Workers Union: protect the casuals working in the harbor and distribute work according to a guarantee system. These have had periodic success, although, given a competitive environment and no particular attachment or concern with the casuals, companies have not been able to agree to any long term guarantee system.

In San Francisco, a port with a long and radical tradition of "bottom-up" organizing, the impact of containerization was similarly traumatic for workers and unionists. Longshoremen consistently feared being transformed into "homeless bums", and while they attempted to cling onto older practices of work, the significance of these forms of work were undermined, to the extent that a constant fear of retrenchment hung over them.⁶⁰ And the harbor itself was threatened by closure and conversion into prime retail space, unable to compete with nearby ports like Oakland more able to handle containers. So once again: the familiar story of dock labor, and that level, the Durban story I have presented is a variation

⁶⁰ Blum. "Degradation without deskilling: Twenty Five Years in the San Francisco Shipyards". pp. 106-110.

on a theme confronting those who labor in the port. But as I have argued, embedded within this theme is a highly particular story, that relates both the particular South African situation, and even more locally, to the kinds of social life (and thus politics) that is possible.

Yet there is another critical comparison that still needs to be drawn out: the relationship between these workers, the General Workers Union, and a broader concept of work, workers, and unionization in late and Post-Apartheid South Africa.⁶¹

First, character of the African “working class” and the concept of labor. As Keith Breckenridge has noted in reference to South African historiography, social scientists who seriously attempted to understand the origins and making of the South African working class, were forced to confront the character of rural backgrounds of even the most urban African workers.⁶² This was certainly true in the case of the dockworkers. Both because of the intensively regulated migrant labor system, and because of rural imaginaries and *habitus* that persisted, and even re-emerged in the wake of retrenchment. But with the legal apparatus controlling migration gone, and workplaces across the country stressing the value of a hyper-urban efficient identity, the character of this class has changed significantly, and the kinds of dominant imaginaries being produced are unclear.

Even, and perhaps even more seriously, this change to a necessary caveat whenever claiming that was indeed a genuinely African “working class” has not simply meant had social scientists can unproblematically claim the existence of the “working class”. Because regular work has disappeared so rapidly, in an almost analogous respect to the processes described above for the stevedores, it is difficult to claim that the so-called “working class” are working in an easily definable sense. Of course, people are working harder, for longer hours than ever, but many of these forms of work are piecemeal and fragmented, very far from a traditional Marxist conception of the working class. The implications are massive and complex, and I’ll just point to one: many of the forms of work are premised on non-contractual labor, on a “just-in-time” recruitment of people to work irregular hours. Any sense of identity around labor, let alone government or union protection of work, is undermined by the character of the work itself. Instead of people developing solidarities

⁶¹ This broad reading is based on an excellent recent synthesis on work in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Edward Webster and Karl Von Holdt (eds) *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace: Studies in Transition*. (UKZN, 2005)

⁶² Keith Breckenridge. “Promiscuous Method: The Historiographical Effects of the Search for the Rural Origins of the African Working Class” in *ILWCH*. 2004

around work and working conditions, with the fundamental change in the terrain of work, solidarities surely emerge around different matters.

Second, for trade unionism, the changes in which parties they might negotiate with for better conditions poses a significant problem. This becomes even more critical when we take into account that a real split has emerged between those who have employment in the formal economy, and those who exist at its edges. Like the case of the General Workers Union, unions have been forced into defensive strategies, protecting workers against retrenchment, and by implication, against those at the margins. In comparison with famous union victories (in workplaces other than the docks) against racist conditions in workplaces during the 1970s and 1980s, the politics of this, more contemporary, kind of unionism becomes almost reactionary. Or, at least, so significantly constrained by the dimensions of general Post-Fordist conditions in South Africa as to render them virtually impotent in making concrete progressive proposals. In part, this is surely because the very idea of trade unionism cannot really come to terms with what it means to face such a massive assault on work itself. The Durban harbor, far from being a mere “uneven development”, teaches us much about this process.