

Labour Management and Technological Change:  
A history of stevedoring in Durban, 1959-1990

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**Declaration**

I declare that the following thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted for examination at any other institution

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the history of stevedoring work and workers in Durban between 1959 and 1990. In particular I focus on the two distinct themes of “labour management” and “technological change” in order to demonstrate the transformations that have occurred in the port. In examining the dramatic technological changes in the harbour I analyze the particular difficulties that the industry faced in coping with the demands of the changes in the structure of the global shipping industry. In discussing the different régimes of labour administration in the harbour I show the relationships between the implementation of Apartheid and the *practice* of stevedoring work in Durban. Finally I show how these themes are related in carefully considering the positions of these workers at the moments of technological change, retrenchment and unionization. I suggest that we cannot understand these processes of change without understanding the specific kinds of control under which these workers laboured during Apartheid.

## Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements.....	iv
Terms and Abbreviations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1. Breaking the Buffalo: The Transformation of Stevedoring Labour in Durban, 1959-1990.....	20
Chapter 2. Authority, Paternalism and the Apartheid State: Administering Stevedoring Labour in Durban, 1959-1977.....	54
Chapter 3. Negotiating Decline: Stevedoring work and unionization in Durban, 1978-c.1990.....	78
Conclusion.....	104
Bibliography.....	108

## Preface and Acknowledgements

Railway yard in San Jose  
I wandered desolate  
In front of a tank factory  
And sat on a bench  
Near the switchman's shack

A flower lay on the hay on  
The asphalt highway  
-the dread hay flower  
I thought- It had a  
brittle black stem and  
corolla of yellowish dirty  
spikes like Jesus' inchlong  
crown, and a soiled  
dry centre cotton tuft  
like a used shaving brush  
that's been lying under  
the garage for a year.

Yellow, yellow flower,  
and Flower of industry,  
Tough spiky ugly flower,  
Flower nonetheless,  
With the form of the great yellow  
Rose in your brain!  
This is the flower of the World.

- Allen Ginsberg, "In back of the real", 1954

The image that Ginsberg conjures up of the harsh environment of industrial work speaks profoundly to many generations of workers. Yet this environment is changing, although little is written of the precise implications that the new post-industrial, late capitalist, informational economy will have for the vast numbers of the world's population employed in industrial work. This thesis is an attempt to relate theoretical accounts of this new economy to the experiences of workers in an industrial environment. In this thesis I seek to empirically investigate the effects of a changed economic environment on workers.

In many ways, the arguments that I have developed about the working of the stevedoring industry in Durban can be applied to workers everywhere. But in an important sense, a study of these stevedores reflects the particular and local realities

under which these workers laboured. Primarily this will be shown by examining the institutions that controlled African stevedores in South Africa, institutions that were moulded out of an ideology that was unique to South Africa, Apartheid.

The development of the ideas in this thesis stemmed initially from my determination to write something about the South African working class at a time when it seemed unfashionable to speak about the fate of this class in South Africa. Through a combination of vast knowledge, great rigour and patience, Keith Breckenridge helped to forge this determination into first a workable idea and later a coherent project. He has been an excellent and thorough supervisor and I am deeply grateful to him.

There have been many others who have helped me through the process of researching and writing the thesis. The members of the history department at the University of Natal, Durban over two years have all in some manner or another motivated me through the thesis by excellent critical comments and encouragement. I must thank Jeff Guy, Catherine Burns, Marijke du Toit, Julie Parle, Sandi Thomson and David Gordon as well as the participants of the two seminars that I presented in the History and African studies seminar.

I would also like to thank a number of graduate students and friends, both inside and outside the department. Alex Wafer, Vukile Khumalo, Julian Brown, Elaine Binedell, Vashna Jagernath, Kameron Hurley, Stephen Sparks, Prinisha Badassy, Muzi Hadebe, Thamisanqa Sibiya, Jimmy Ngcobo, Thulani Mkhize, Vanessa FennerBarbour and Joe Guy all encouraged and assisted me in completing this thesis.

I also really appreciated the assistance of one company official in particular, Captain Gordon Stockley, whose willingness to share his vast knowledge of the industry proved invaluable.

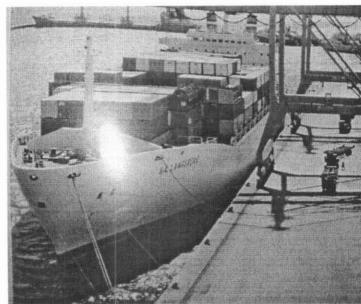
Finally, I would like to thank the National Research Foundation for material assistance towards this research and to my family and Adéla for love, patience and support.

## List of Terms and abbreviations

COSATU-	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DSLSC-	Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company
FOSATU-	Federation of South African Trade Unions
GWU-	General Workers Union
Induna (pl. izinduna)-	<i>isiZulu</i> term meaning an official, among workplaces employing migrants, induna came to mean African supervisor
Inyathi (pl. Onyathi)-	<i>isiZulu</i> term meaning Buffalo
SAAWU-	South African Allied Workers Union
SAS-	South African Stevedores
SASSCO-	South African Stevedoring Services Company
TGWU-	Transport and General Workers Union
Togt-	a term derived from Dutch meaning casual worker
UWUSA-	United Workers Union of South Africa

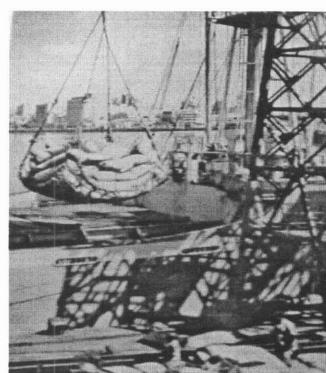
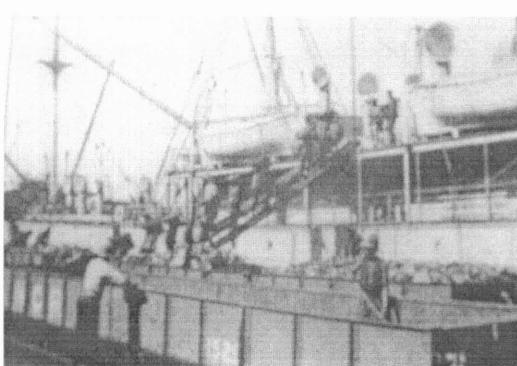
## Introduction

Picture Durban harbour today; the largest port in Africa at the end of the twentieth century. Many huge ships enter and exit the harbour everyday, transporting millions of tons of cargo every year. A redeveloped harbour, with huge cranes to lift the giant containers aboard the ships;



Looking at the port, there is a genuine sense of work occurring. Yet much of this work is being done mechanically, and there is scant evidence of any workers.

Contrast the image with one that could have presented years ago, of few mechanical aids assisting workers, and the bulk of the work being done by African workers, organized in gangs who called themselves Buffalos, because of the sheer physical strength involved in the work. These workers were at the centre of the harbour operation and were able to bring the entire harbour to a standstill with a strike.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> The first three pictures can be found at Tony Pearson. *African keyport : story of the Port of Durban : 29 degrees 52min south and 31 degrees 02min east*. Durban: Accucut, 1995. p. 124, 270 and 110 respectively. The final picture is found in a pamphlet entitled Durban: South Africa's Garden City, written and produced by Durban Publicity Association, 1954. p. 16.

This thesis presents the contrast between these two pictures. It is a narrative about labour control and Apartheid, about technological change and the decline of the stevedoring labour. I have, as far as possible, tried to place workers at the centre of my analysis and to investigate the particularity of stevedoring work and its transformation in South Africa. While recognizing the specificities of the industry that I am investigating, it is critical to take account of the ways in which the experiences of these stevedores reflects the realities of workers outside of the stevedoring industry in Durban. On the one hand, these stevedores were very much a part of a wider history of labour administration and control during Apartheid. On the other, a study of these workers suggests that they form part of a wider group of industrial workers throughout the world for whom job security and regular industrial work can no longer be taken for granted.

### **Technological Transformation and the Re-making of Work**

We live in an age where the nature of work has been fundamentally transformed. Throughout the world, industrial work that used to employ the majority of the population is disappearing, much of it being done by machines. New employment sectors, such as the service sector, are becoming significant employers for much of the population. But the change in working environment comes with changed conditions and an erosion in the security of work. For Manuel Castells, a prominent theorist of the “information revolution”, what is important is not so much the perceived move from industrial to postindustrial society, but rather the processes of the “informating” of work. He suggests that this process leads to the “individualization of work and the fragmentation of societies”.<sup>2</sup> Castells argues that the primary consequences of the advanced technologies of the information age have been to re-make the relationship between management and workers, and to create a new category of flexible employment. While a core group of workers have learnt new skills, the majority find themselves offering work on a temporary or intermittent basis. Ultimately, workers have been divided into those who have been skilled in new technologies and those who haven’t, and they have become

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<sup>2</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p. 201-208.

more vulnerable than ever to the threat of redundancy.<sup>3</sup> David Harvey recognizes this division in the labour force in his analysis of the new economy of flexible accumulation, and recognizes its unevenness among regions and countries. But he also describes the perils that the new regime of flexible capitalism holds for an older style of industrial workers.<sup>4</sup> The increased possibility of factories relocating in response to union organization and worker militancy severely limits workers' abilities to demand better working conditions.

But apart from these descriptions, what is at stake in these technological transformations? Castells' lightly dismisses any notion of technological determinism as a "false dilemma", claiming instead that 'society cannot be understood without its technological tools'.<sup>5</sup> Yet this claim seems too simple, for who precisely is society? Castells does recognize different agents involved in these processes, but insists that information technology "does not create or destroy employment per se".<sup>6</sup> What should be noted is that this study concerns itself with a particular type of "industrial" employment and its destruction in the last 30 years. It is certainly relevant to question the roles of specific historical actors in shaping technological change. Yet this concern is not new. To quote Marx, then Braverman;

*"The appropriation of living labour by capital is directly expressed in machinery. It is a scientifically based analysis, together with the application of mechanical and chemical laws, that enables the machine to carry out the work formerly done by the worker himself. The development of machinery only follows this path, however, once heavy industry has reached an advanced stage, and the various stages have been pressed into the service of capital, and on the other hand, when machinery itself has yielded very considerable resources. Invention then becomes a branch of business, and the application of science to immediate production aims at determining the inventions at the same time as it solicits them. But this is not the way in which machinery in general came into being, still less the way it progresses in detail. This way is a process of analysis – by subdivision of labour, which transforms the worker's operations, so that, at a certain point, the mechanism can step into his place. Thus we can see directly here how a particular means*

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 264-279. It is critical to make the distinction between workers who have marketable skills and access to knowledge and those who are excluded from this. For the former, flexible work is often not a bad thing, since they can market themselves and earn higher wages. For the latter group, the new regime of flexible work undermines job security.

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey. "The political-economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism" in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. London: Blackwell, 1990. esp. p. 140-153, 173, 191.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 265.

*of labour is transferred from the worker to capital as a result of this transposition. Hence we have the struggle of the worker against machinery. What used to be the activity of the living worker has become that of the machine*".<sup>7</sup>

*"The remarkable development of machinery becomes, for most of the working population, the source not of freedom, but that of enslavement, not of mastery, but that of helplessness".<sup>8</sup>*

What is required from these general assertions about the information age is a specific analysis of technological change and the power relations involved in these changes. Following Michael Burawoy, we need to concentrate on the particular politics of production to make any coherent sense of these general changes.<sup>9</sup> Even from the limited pictures presented in the opening quote, we get a clear idea that profound changes have occurred in the Durban Harbour. This provides the major context for my arguments in this thesis.

The major transformation in the port industry has been around containerization. Containerization began with the innovation of changing the means of transporting cargo from a variety of individual packages, boxes, bags and crates of different shapes and sizes to standardized size rectangular boxes that could be placed one on top of each other. These standardized boxes then grew in size in the 1970s and 1980s to twenty and forty ton standard units.<sup>10</sup> The implications of this change in cargo handling have been enormous. New infrastructure to facilitate this change has required harbours to dredge deeper channels and build massive shore cranes, and has required huge financial investment. Older ports have made way for newer ones, and traditional shipping routes have been altered. Broeze's focus on international shipping companies reveals that these companies have become part of a wider chain of land and sea transport, have jettisoned traditional links with home ports and countries, and have become part of a wider global

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx. *The Grundrisse*. Edited and Translated by David McLellan. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Braverman. *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974. p. 194-195.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Burawoy. *The Politics of production: Factory regimes under capitalism and socialism*. London: Verso, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Broeze. "Containerization and the Globalization of Liner Shipping" in David Starkey (ed) *Global Markets*, Research in Maritime History, no 14, 1998. p. 2.

‘service’ industry.<sup>11</sup> Castells does recognize that the impact of the new economy on labour varies from place to place based on the relationship between management and labour, the decisions made by management, and the particular industry concerned.<sup>12</sup> This study, while considering these processes, focuses primarily on the effects on these changes on stevedores, a particular group of dock workers whose traditional work loading and off-loading cargo on-board ships has been threatened- and ultimately destroyed- by these global processes.

Despite the fact that many of these technological changes happened during the Apartheid era, while workers were politically isolated, Durban has not been isolated from containerization. In 1974 work began on a container terminal, which was completed by 1977. Despite an Apartheid state that had become disorganized and insecure in its own labour policies, and the first legal unionization of workers in the late 1970s, retrenchment of Durban stevedores soon followed. From an all time high of 2800 permanent workers in the mid 1960s, this figure dropped to 1200 in 1985 and to approximately 300 permanent workers by the mid 1990s. By this stage, much of the stevedoring work was being done by casual workers who had no work security whatsoever. It is important to remember that containerization was introduced as a labour and time saving device, but its effects on workers have been disastrous. The “new” employment created by containerization in harbours is marginal, but containerization’s effects on stevedoring labour have been that of truly devastating.

Wrapped up in these wider structural changes in the international port industry and in work in general, are the specifics of labour administration and worker consciousness of transformation. Indeed it is impossible to consider these wider structural changes without an investigation of the particular history of African workers in South Africa and their unique experiences of the attempted social engineering projects of the Apartheid state.

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Broeze. “Containerization and the Globalization of Liner Shipping”. p. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 249.

## Apartheid Labour Administration and African Workers

Radical theorists of Apartheid in the early 1970s first explored the relationship between Apartheid and Capitalism in detail. Harold Wolpe suggested that Apartheid was a mechanism to guarantee a cheap and controlled labour force, under conditions where the premise of migrant labour was itself unsustainable due to declining agricultural conditions in reserved ‘native’ areas.<sup>13</sup> In examining the mining industry, Frederick Johnstone argued that profitability depended on a supply of African migrant workers, and that Apartheid should best be understood as a system of class domination.<sup>14</sup>

Deborah Posel has argued that in understanding the nature of the Apartheid state these theorists tended to underestimate the conflicts that developed between state administrators and employers.<sup>15</sup> While one important tenet of Apartheid labour ideology was certainly to protect white workers and limit African urbanization, employers of African workers were primarily interested in securing maximum profit, and sometimes did not share the practical belief that investment in Apartheid structures would yield stability in their workforce. This is most forcefully illustrated in the conflicts that developed through the 1950s between state officials and stevedoring employers.

Indeed, the attempt to put Apartheid into practice required substantial effort in administration. As Posel has shown, influx control and the labour bureaux system did not function particularly efficiently during the 1950s in controlling the movement of African workers or limiting urbanization.<sup>16</sup> She claims that this led to a shift in emphasis in the Apartheid ideological position from a recognition of differentiation between urban and rural African workers towards a position that suggested instead that urban Africans

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<sup>13</sup> Harold Wolpe. “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid” in *Economy and Society*. Vol. 1 no. 4, 1972. p. 430-431.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Johnstone. *Class, Race and Gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa*. Boston: University Press of America, 1976. p. 2-4, 217.

<sup>15</sup> Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise*. Cape Town: Clarendon Press, 1991. p. 19

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid*. In a recent study of the Bewysburo, Keith Breckenridge has shown just how chaotic the operation of registering workers and administering passes actually was. He claims that the failure of this system to operate in a controlled manner meant that increasingly the state had to rely on violence to control African movement in the cities, and in a sense, force the pass system to movement. See Keith Breckenridge. “From Hubris to Chaos: the makings of the Bewysburo and the end of documentary government.” Unpublished Paper, University of Natal, Durban, May 2002.

belonged in their respective tribal areas.<sup>17</sup> The result was a far greater emphasis on “traditional African cultures” and in effect, far greater political and administrative power to government appointed administrators from various ethnic groups in homelands.

In his investigation of colonial rule and its legacy in Africa, Mahmood Mamdani suggests that Apartheid be viewed as a “fully-fledged” system of indirect rule.<sup>18</sup> In *Citizen and Subject*, Mamdani discusses a move in African colonial policy towards a system that placed the onus of rule and authority over Africans on African authorities. Developed in the 1890s by Lord Lugard, indirect rule sought to create a bifurcated state, with a separate system of rule and laws for Africans and colonists. This could only occur through a “re-invention of tribalism” and the wholesale support for tribal authorities by colonial administrators. Mamdani sees Apartheid as the perfection of this system, using as his evidence legislation such as the Bantu Authorities Act (1951), that systematically sought to increase the power of African chiefs and allowed them to fund their own administration, and the development of separate territorial authorities, some of which developed into self governing or “independent” regions.<sup>19</sup>

The move towards the creation of traditional authority over Africans certainly had a dramatic effect on African workers. By the 1960s, and especially with the 1964 Bantu Labour Act, workers in urban areas had to be recruited through networks of homeland authority. In the stevedoring industry in Durban, the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company was formed in order to control all stevedores working in Durban and assist homeland authorities in the administration and recruitment of African workers. In the workplace itself, African administrators controlled the compound, decided which workers worked when, and supervised the labour process. What is important to stress, and perhaps to add to Mamdani’s analysis, is that the administration of African workers under Apartheid was not simply one that occurred in the designated African areas. Apartheid administrators went even further, and attempted to control the workforce *at work* using the strategy of indirect rule.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid*. p. 228-232. William Beinart understands the shift in policy under Verwoerd as a move away from the language of “baaskaap”, towards ideas of separate “cultures” and “nations”. See Beinart. *Twentieth Century South Africa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. p. 101, 89.

By focusing on the primary institutions of Apartheid, Mamdani provides an interesting and useful analysis of the operation of power and authority in South Africa. Yet by self-consciously focusing on these institutions he assumes that, at least for migrant workers, Apartheid strategies were successful, if only for a limited time. Without looking at workers and particular industries, and noting the lack of industrial strikes and upheaval during the 1960s, it seems as if his assumptions hold. Yet to sustain or question his assumptions, it is necessary to investigate notions of “authority” and “culture” in particular workplaces during Apartheid.

### Culture and African Workers

The shift in the focus of Apartheid towards African administration and “culture” raises the critical question as to understanding precisely the cultural dimensions of African workers living in South Africa. In Apartheid ideological-speak, Africans in South Africa were divided into a number of different tribes, who had existed timelessly before the intervention of colonialism. According to this ideology, the best way to restore lost African culture was to remove people from urban areas and place them under the authority of homeland leaders. Apart from the obvious fact that the land given to these homeland authorities represented a mere fraction of the total land available in South Africa before colonialism, white South Africa still needed Africans to work in urban areas. Thus the efforts of Apartheid administrators could not remove Africans from urban areas entirely. But what they could do was to resort to and to refine the migrant labour system, already in practice in South Africa since the nineteenth century. The Apartheid state moved towards the destruction of any permanent presence of Africans in urban areas, and required that migrant labourers be recruited through African administrators in homeland areas. In practice this was achieved with a varying degree of success depending on which particular area and industry migrant workers came from. This was, however, a difficult and expensive undertaking from the standpoint of employers, who often needed to replace workers, and, particularly in the 1970s, began to ignore Apartheid legislation in their demand for labour.

The particular focus of this study is on African, and predominately Zulu, stevedores working in Durban. The efforts of state legislators and administrators are in many ways mirrored in the administration of stevedores during this period. In the late 1950s, a new “company” was established to administer all stevedores working in Durban, centralizing all stevedores in a compound and controlling which workers were recruited and when they actually worked. Direct control over workers was given to African compound officials and to izinduna, who oversaw the labour process. Close links were cemented between the particular homeland authorities in Zululand and senior officials in the labour supply company. During the 1960s the Labour Supply Company appeared to work very effectively in terms of Apartheid policy, and this has led David Hemson to suggest that this company achieved the ideals of the Apartheid labour bureaux system in relation to stevedores in Durban.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the apparent success in controlling African workers in the Durban docks by the Labour Supply Company does not mean that we can simply assume that it succeeded in understanding and imposing a “Zulu cultural system” on stevedores. The relationship between work and culture first has to be explained and understood before we can evaluate the success of the Labour Supply Company. In the first instance it is useful to elaborate on some of the important theoretical understandings of this relationship.

For Marx, labour is a *moment*, in the sense that labour is a necessary element of capitalist relations, and only achieved at the culmination of a process in which pre-capitalist social relations are discarded.<sup>21</sup> Capitalist production can of course occur before capitalist relations have been realized, but it is only once a “contractual” relationship between the capitalist and worker has been established, once the worker has dispensed with all other means of livelihood, that the proletarian and capitalist relations as a whole comes into being.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*, University of Warwick, 1979. p. 388.

<sup>21</sup> In characterizing Labour as a “moment”, Marx understands “labour” as the culmination of a historical process in which the work in increasingly alienated from his work and the product of his labour. There is a discussion of this in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Dipesh Chakrabarty also finds a discussion of this in *The Grundrisse*. See Robert Tucker (ed). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. United States: Norton, 1972. p. 59-62. Also see Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Rethinking Working-Class History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 3-4. Finally compare note 2 in Chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this is why labour historians have been so concerned with studies of “Proletarianization”. William Sewell is particularly concerned with moving labour history away from this paradigm, towards a

EP Thompson problematizes this position by noting that the process of capitalist transformation does not occur simply from above, and simply as a function of material relations. What is critical for Thompson is the agency and experience that workers bring to the process of class formation. He notes, for instance, that the inherited political, religious and social traditions were crucial in the making of the English working class and that these traditions led to the particular form of working class that developed in England.<sup>23</sup>

Dipesh Chakrabarty takes Thompson's assertions to the context of Bengali Jute workers and suggests that cultural forms and perceptions of work, discipline and hierarchy are critical in understanding particular workers within capitalist production. What is crucial for Chakrabarty is that he believes that we cannot reduce even the *experience* of capitalist production to a universal experience. The way that workers experience this production comes both from the type of authority that they have been subjected to and their culture.<sup>24</sup> This also comes from the particular nature of capitalist production in different places, from industrial expansion in England to colonial exploitation in India.

Of course, this raises the question once again of the objectives of the Apartheid state. If the primary objectives of the state by the late 1950s were to create a stable migrant labour system, with a strong emphasis on different African cultures administering their own "peoples", an analysis of this system surely allows us to interrogate Chakrabarty's position more closely. Given Chakrabarty's basic suggestion that the particularities of Indian workers' culture explain the development of capitalism in Calcutta, it would be appropriate to investigate this conclusion outside India. Given that the South African state developed a system of authority in the harbour along cultural lines then, given Chakrabarty's position, it could have proved to be an effective and efficient mechanism in the control of workers. What this thesis will aim to do, through a close examination of work and culture in the Durban harbour, is to test this assertion.

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concentration on "the profoundly uneven and contradictory character of changes in productive relations". Sewell, quoted in Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The labor question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 13

<sup>23</sup> EP Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin, 1980 (1968). p. 213

<sup>24</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Rethinking Working-Class History*. p. 233.

Since the stevedores working in Durban are predominantly Zulu, it is appropriate to consider the difficulties in understanding their “culture”. Keletso Atkins has demonstrated that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Natal conflicts developed between colonists and African workers over different conceptions of time and authority.<sup>25</sup> For the colonists, authority and time came from particular European perceptions, both of an industrial world and of superiority over Africans, whereas African conceptions of time had more to do with lunar cycles, and the conceptions of authority more to do with particular roles in Zulu culture, notably one of generational respect and authority. The meeting of these two systems resulted in a compromise between colonists and workers that led to the evolution of the *togt* (daily or casual) system.

Following the 1879 Zulu war and the destruction of Zulu independence, it became important to incorporate these Zulu people into the emerging capitalist economy in South Africa. Instead of directly subjugating the Zulu population and forcing them to work, however, the Natal administration decided on a system that would limit Zulu entry into the urban economy. This system became known as the Shepstone system, whose main aims were to re-create an African system of authority, based on subservience to colonial rule that would facilitate recruitment and maintain order. Whatever the conflicts over space and authority may have been in the Zulu kingdom before 1879, what the Shepstone system did, as Jeff Guy points out, was to re-create the main functions of chiefly authority, alter the process of appointment of chiefs, and introduce hut-tax. All of this was done within the general maintenance of homestead production.<sup>26</sup> African administration over workers was thus introduced before the turn of the century, primarily to introduce a migrant labour system in which workers were dependent on a chief's authority to work, but could not remain in urban areas for more than a limited time. So even before the turn of the century, it was difficult to say what ‘culture’ Zulu people would respond to at work.

As I have already mentioned, Apartheid moved to create a similar, more intensified project on a national scale at the end of the 1950s. Many scholars have sought

<sup>25</sup> Keletso Atkins. *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money! The cultural origins of an African work ethic in Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993. p. 67-83.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Guy. “The destruction and reconstruction of Zulu society” in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds) *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa*. London: Longman, 1982. p. 188-190.

to understand and explain the relationship between African workers and culture. In studying the African urban population in Johannesburg in the early decades of the twentieth century, Van Onselen has shown how gangs developed around common cultural associations. But notably, these gangs, which came to be a threat to Johannesburg's "orderly" population, were built around associations of "culture", based on very loosely defined notions of ethnicity, and developed their own rules within the constraints of their "work" and their environment.<sup>27</sup> Jean and John Comaroff have sought to understand work and culture among the Tshidi and have suggested that there was an important distinction that developed in migrants' consciousness between work in the context of pre-capitalist production and industrial labour, and that this understanding changed over generations.<sup>28</sup> Others have shown how African workers remolded Apartheid understandings of cultural divisions into protective and even productive associations, that, although in some ways authoritarian, in no way mirrored a mythical African tribal path.<sup>29</sup>

The argument that I am drawing together is this: we cannot understand culture as an homogenized entity that is represented by a single consciousness. We must realize that Culture is itself a dynamic process that produces and destroys divisions, and cannot be divorced either from power or from particular contexts, whether they are industrial or agricultural.<sup>30</sup> While this work does not aim to investigate the many transformations in Zulu culture during the period, what I do seek to establish is the importance of culture in the particular workplace that I am investigating. But precisely what is this "culture"? As I have already mentioned, the Labour Supply Company in Durban came to be seen as a

<sup>27</sup> Charles van Onselen. *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2001. Most specifically, see the chapter on Nongoloza's "regiment of the hills". p. 379-382. The vast majority of Nongoloza's gangs was of Zulu origin, although other ethnic groups were not excluded. Authority within the gangs seemed to rely on a combination of re-made Zulu hierarchy and the practical conditions of a gangs operating inside and outside prisons.

<sup>28</sup> Jean and John Comaroff. "The Madman and the Migrant: work and labor in the historical consciousness of a South African people" in *American Ethnologist*, no 14, 1987.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1994 and Jeff Guy and Motlatso 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.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth mentioning that in this thesis I do not engage with the broad theoretical debate centred around migrancy and cultural identity, initially framed by Phillip Mayer and Max Gluckman in their ethnographic accounts of 'cultural dualism' among migrants in different areas in Southern Africa. For an interesting overview of this debate see James Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. p. 86-93. For an alternative position in the debate see Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*.

model Apartheid institution, yet the success of the company, I will argue, has more to do with the conditions of work in the industry itself than with “Zulu culture” or “tradition” *per se*. The culture created in the stevedoring industry was one that derived from a combination of the difficult conditions of industrial work and from the particular power relations at work.

The particular responses of stevedores towards their conditions of work reflects the fact that what developed in the industry was a paternalistic relationship between the workers and their immediate African superiors, the izinduna. This relationship was not one that existed in Zulu tradition, for these izinduna were created as African superiors only in the context of the work itself. But paternalism, as Eugene Genovese has pointed out, is not a relationship that is simply a one sided exercise of power. Instead, paternalism encompasses a set of mutual obligations and responsibilities, where both parties experience vulnerability, albeit unevenly so.<sup>31</sup> This was most powerfully witnessed in the docks when izinduna, rather than workers themselves, challenged the authority of senior officials in the Labour Supply Company because of constant worker pressure and discomfort at the practices of the company. It was also powerfully manifested in stevedores’ reliance on the knowledge of izinduna, when unions organized the docks in the early 1980s. Workers would rely on the advice of izinduna, not only in making decisions about unions, but also about their future as workers in a declining industry. However, these relationships were also marked by a clear separation in power and in roles and both parties were aware of their positions.

Before considering the traumatic period of the 1980s for stevedores, it is worth noting some theoretical reflections. While I accept Chakrabarty’s argument that the experience of work and consciousness of industrialization is different everywhere, his argument about these reflecting different cultural practices in different societies is too loosely defined, and does not reflect either the enormous changes that cultures experience in different material contexts or the particular conditions of any industry. Tentatively, perhaps, it is worthwhile to remember Marx once again and suggest that consciousness does have much to do with the industrial and class relationship in which individuals work

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<sup>31</sup> Eugene Genovese; *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The world that slaves made*. United States: Vintage Press, 1976.

and live. People may not react as hollow reflections of these class relationships, but neither do they react as similarly hollow reflections of culture.

Before proceeding, I must clarify my use of “culture”. Inasmuch as I use the term fairly freely, in accordance with both the language of Apartheid and with the theoretical positions I have already sketched, this thesis does not attempt to sustain any grand conception or definition of “culture”. It may well have been more expedient to avoid the term altogether, but it is so entrenched in both the discourse of the state and theoretical discourse that I found the use of “culture” unavoidable. In examining labour administration during this period, the most that this thesis attempts to say about “culture”, based on the empirical evidence of the working of the industry, is that both the Apartheid conceptions and some of the theoretical conceptions of culture are extremely limited. Rather than suggesting that this thesis examines culture, I would suggest that it examines a certain consciousness arising out of the particular politics in the workplace.<sup>32</sup> This “political” consciousness is at the very heart of this investigation, and the thesis needs to be read in this manner.

### **Unionization, politicized ethnicity and the experience of declining work**

It is the 1980s that powerfully bring the two main themes of this thesis together. The 1970s had seen the building of container terminals, and by the end of the decade the first major retrenchments had begun. In 1979, the Labour Supply Company was dissolved, being regarded by companies as inefficient and expensive. Recruitment of new workers stopped, but the majority of workers remaining in the docks were migrants and initially, at least, the work patterns controlled by the izinduna continued. However, with retrenchment and the international restructuring and ultimately, marginalization of stevedoring work, gang sizes were reduced and the role of the izinduna became less and less significant. In this climate of retrenchment, izinduna could do little to stop retrenchment and help workers.

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<sup>32</sup> This particular reading of “production politics” comes largely from Michael Burawoy. *The Politics of production : factory regimes under capitalism and socialism.* p. 10-12.

There were two other significant themes in the stevedoring industry in Durban during this period. The first was that trade unions made significant inroads into the industry, in line with increased national radicalism of workers and government recognition of the need for African trade unions in the late 1970s. Particularly during the early years of unionism on the docks, a union called the General Workers Union was especially effective in containing retrenchment, organizing good retrenchment packages for workers, and generally improving conditions (for example, pressurizing companies to introduce safety standards). One of the things that this union was also able to do was to bridge the gap between izinduna and workers by organizing both parties and emphasizing their common struggle to continue working in the docks.

The second theme was the emergence of politicized ethnicity in the docks. The Inkatha movement had emerged in Natal in the 1970s as a cultural association for Zulu people. Its main focus had initially been to promote African business in the KwaZulu homeland and provide an association to which Zulu people could belong. Initially not overtly political, other than in not challenging the main tenets of Apartheid, it developed rapidly into a political organization as ANC-aligned movements began powerfully asserting them in the country through unions and the United Democratic Front in the early 1980s.<sup>33</sup> While early union federations such as FOSATU sat uncomfortably beside it, the formation of COSATU in 1985 and its specifically political demands pushed Inkatha into attempting to provide an alternative political voice. Despite its liberal overtones, such as a free-market economy and opposition to sanctions, its methods were those of violence. In 1986 Inkatha formed an alternative union structure, the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA) to challenge COSATU. Despite its pretensions towards unionism, UWUSA proved to be little more than a way to prevent Zulu workers joining COSATU-aligned Unions. On the East Rand and in Natal between 1986-1993 violent clashes between Inkatha and ANC-aligned workers erupted.

It is also worth mentioning that this period was one during which the Apartheid state was ‘in crisis’. Unlike earlier periods of strong economic and political conditions,

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<sup>33</sup> Gerhard Maré has skillfully traced Inkatha’s development and strategies in two works. See Maré and Hamilton. *An appetite for power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the politics of ‘loyal resistance’*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987; Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood: Politics and Ethnicity in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992.

the state faced challenges from both an African population becoming more militant and organized in their demands, and an international community impatient with the rate of change in South Africa- and willing to back their impatience with economic sanctions. Local business leaders also began openly to reject Apartheid as inefficient. Previously tightly administered ventures by the state, such as the Labour Supply Company, were no longer controlled, and influx control simply became too expensive to administer. Because the state was more concerned in staying in power at all costs, and spent a great deal of resources in maintaining a faltering system, companies were able to alter what had become inefficient Apartheid labour administration.<sup>34</sup> For an industry based around migrant workers, the state was no longer a prominent actor. Instead, the 1980s was a period that allows us to ponder how deeply Apartheid divisions had become entrenched in worker consciousness.

The experience of the decline of stevedoring work in Durban was a tragic one for African workers in Durban. The first phase of heavy retrenchments between 1979-1985 was tempered by good organization by the General Workers Union and various schemes such as guaranteed work days and long unpaid leave to stall retrenchment. After a series of struggles between unions, stevedores chose the best union based on its commitment to the workers' cause. Yet in 1985, with more retrenchments pending, the General Workers Union abandoned the docks, disillusioned at fighting an obviously losing battle. After 1985, the COSATU-aligned Transport and General Workers Union formally represented the stevedores, but were significantly less successful in either gaining the support of workers or the recognition of management. This failure must be attributed to COSATU, whose strategy became focused towards the more militant and politically conscious urban workforce. Within this strategy, the migrant stevedores in Durban became an insignificant area of organization.

The second phase of retrenchments from 1985-1991 again hit the stevedoring workforce very hard. But there was little inspiration to be drawn by stevedores from this period. The major stevedoring company was determined to casualize as many workers as possible, leaving only a core of workers that they were prepared to train in the new

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Price. *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. p. 100-108.

methods of cargo handling. In 1987 UWUSA, after much worker intimidation and some worker resistance, became the majority union in the docks. It displayed very little understanding of the industry and did not fight casualization effectively. In 1991 it left the docks, leaving the stevedores without morale for work and cynical about the effectiveness of trade unions.

Part of the insight that this period in the docks provides us with, is in to the actual working of politicized ethnicity. It also challenges the general assumptions made by scholars that the conflicts in Natal between 1986-1993 were simply between urbanized African workers and Zulu migrants.<sup>35</sup> The misplaced assumption is that Apartheid had been so successful that it crafted ethnic division so centrally in the migrants' consciousness that he or she would not be able to clearly understand the political changes occurring. Of course this period also centrally confronts the failures of COSATU organizing strategies and shows that it was either too disorganized to concentrate on all workplaces, or that it too believed that migrants were not worth serious organizing.

It is important to compare the process of casualization in Durban with that of the international stevedoring industry. In Europe, with much longer traditions of militancy, retrenchment has occurred, but many more workers have been retained as permanent by the application of a rotational system.<sup>36</sup> It may well be true, in returning to the Marx quote given at the beginning of this chapter, to argue that technological advancement has replaced the need for workers. But within these "objective material conditions" it is crucial to reflect on the specific agency determining the kind of future that workers have. And in this narrative of industrial transformation in South Africa, stevedoring workers did lose, not only because of the oppressive labour policies of the past but also because of the failure of unions.

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<sup>35</sup> Most notably, Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*, p. 246-256.

<sup>36</sup> 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>

## **A Note on Method and Organization of the thesis**

This thesis aims to portray several “re-makings” of work in the Durban harbour. It attempts to suggest some wider trends relating to the implementation and effects of Apartheid policy and the relationship between technology and work. Where government records have been available, for the earlier periods in particular, I have used these as guides to analyzing the practices of labour management. After 1975, when government records are not available, I have relied on testimonies by workers and management. I have also had a limited number of union and company records at my disposal, which have been especially helpful in the period of the early 1980s. Regrettably, I have not been able to delve as deeply as I would have liked into the difficulties of politicized ethnicity in the late 1980s, as many stevedoring workers simply refused to talk about this issue. Indeed, it is worth noting that the perspectives of the transformations that this thesis describes are largely from management and unionists. Yet I have been fortunate to have enough worker interviews to be able meaningfully to contrast their perceptions of the changes that occurred.

The thesis is organized into three chapters that follow its three main arguments. The first chapter argues that technological change in the Durban harbour remade labour practice, and that although unique conditions of labour control existed, these technological changes were part of a wider global process. In this chapter, I further situate containerization within the framework of “the new international economy”. It is only once containerization is placed within this broader context that the arguments that I have presented here and in the conclusion of this thesis regarding the conditions of work in the new economy make any sense. In addition to these crucial arguments, the purpose of this first chapter is to present the overall economic transformations in the harbour, in order to give the reader a context for the specific changes described in chapters two and three.

The second chapter presents an account of the relationship between Apartheid labour practice and stevedoring work in Durban during the period of 1959 to 1978. I argue here that the practices of power and authority at work are critical in shaping and maintaining the industry. I attempt to show how, despite both the determination of both the state and

the stevedoring companies to implement Apartheid in the workplace, this project proved to be both theoretically and practically untenable.

In the third chapter I present “a social history” of the technological transformation of the port during the 1980s. I also tie this closely to both the arguments about paternalism that I developed in Chapter Two and to the turbulent political context of the 1980s. This chapter also addresses the difficulties of trade unionism during this period and I argue that the legacy of oppressive labour relations complicated the emergence of trade unions, and unlike in other parts of the world, workers were practically defenseless in a new technological age.

## **Chapter 1: Breaking the Buffalo: The Transformation of Stevedoring Labour in Durban, 1959-1990**

In Durban, South Africa, stevedoring workers were the most physically powerful workers of all, and were known as “Onyathi” in Zulu, or Buffalos, which aptly described the physical nature of their work. The Durban harbour and the stevedoring industry was very labour intensive throughout the century. As in most industries in South Africa, African workers built and maintained the docks. These buffalo developed the linkage that made Durban a thriving city and sustained the Apartheid economy. Yet today the buffalo are all but gone, replaced by onboard warehouses known as containers and container terminals. Machines have replaced the men once so integral to the survival of the city.

Since the early 1970s, harbours worldwide have been ‘re-made’ by technological change. Broadly speaking, these changes have involved a new method for handling and transporting cargo. Commodities which were previously stored in the hold of ships are now packaged into large containers that are secured and carried on the deck of ships. Containers are onboard warehouses that, if properly secured, prevent substantial damages to cargo and can quickly be loaded on and off trucks and trains, saving time and money in warehousing and the inevitable idle time waiting for goods to go through human hands.

To facilitate container transport, new ships have had to be built to accommodate these twenty or forty ton on-board warehouses. Harbours have had to be deepened by dredging to accommodate the new ships, and container terminals and massive cranes have had to be built. This has often disadvantaged older ports whose infrastructure was designed according to older patterns, because they have struggled to find space within their existing harbour to build these new structures. In addition, as the initial capital outlay is quite substantial, many cities have struggled to find money to develop their ports.

What is remarkable about these changes, all of which can broadly be described as containerization, is the pace at which they have occurred. Research into container transport began in the mid 1960s, and by the 1980s the container had become the standard for cargo circulation across the world. This rapid development has intensified difficulties for many ports and dramatically re-configured the power of various ports

according to container facilities.<sup>1</sup> Traditional shipping routes have also changed, with ports in the Far East gaining huge prominence and Atlantic Ports declining significantly in relative terms.

Workers have not been isolated from containerisation. Stevedoring work that primarily involved loading and off-loading cargo from holds using simple nets and winches has been substantially reduced. These workers have become peripheral, having to be content with the excess cargo that is still transported on older ships. Many of them have faced casualization (or re-casualization) throughout the world. The workers who have remained as permanent have had to learn new skills of lashing and securing cargo and using new machinery. The work-gang that for most of the century was a crucial part of stevedoring has also all but disappeared, replaced instead with workers who are multi-skilled, and able to perform all of the functions that were previously fixed as part of a gang.

While containerization has made a significant impact on harbours and stevedores worldwide, enough to be called a global process, it is incorrect to assume that global processes occur uniformly everywhere. It is important to realize that social, economic and cultural conditions in particular countries mediate the entry of particular kinds of global innovations.

In this chapter I set out to examine the stevedoring workers and work in Durban since 1959, partly in order to establish an economic framework or context for the rest of this thesis. In an opening section, I discuss the practice of stevedoring work internationally in order to situate the reader in the main terms of the discussion that follows. I then discuss the casual labour market and its persistence in stevedoring worldwide. Having given the very necessary background, I then focus on Durban and describe the struggle between casual workers and Apartheid labour controls, and the changes that occurred in policy and practice within stevedoring work. I describe how the stevedoring industry in Durban implemented Apartheid legislation and came to be seen as

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<sup>1</sup> In the Far East, ports like Busan in Korea were designed specifically around containerization. Within twenty years, Busan was the fifth busiest port in the world. Other ports, such as Sydney, designed second harbours because of the difficulties with re-designing their initial port structures. In 1994, 5 of the top 6 container ports in the world were in Far East. Frank Broeze. "Containerization and the Globalization of liner shipping" in David Starkey (ed) *Global Markets. Research in Maritime History*, vol. 14, 1998. p.15-20. I must kindly thank David Starkey (University of Hull) for kindly making this paper available to me.

a model of labour control. I explain how the industry attempted to deal with containerisation and how, during this period, significant differences appear within the industry that clearly separate the national and international interests of the stevedoring trade.

In a concluding section, I will situate containerization squarely within the framework of the “new international economy”. I will suggest that recent theoretical accounts of this “globalized” economy significantly match the changes that have occurred in world ports. In making this argument, I will consider Castells’ notion of technology and the creation of flexible work and examine Harvey’s discussion of a dual labour force arising in the 1980s comprising a core of specialized workers and a majority of casual workers used to supplement the additional labour requirements of various industries. I will show that the persistence of casual labour in the port in the 1990s cannot be viewed merely in isolation from other world trends in the movement of capital and the skills needed to harness the new economy.

The central discussion begins during the early Apartheid era. During this time, conflicts had arisen because of the state’s concern with the character of the labour in the city, as opposed to the interests of the shipping lines and stevedoring companies to ensure maximum profits by using the cheapest labour possible. The discussion ends in the early 1990s, with stevedoring workers more insecure about their employment than ever, as neither local companies nor unions nor the state were able to guarantee anything about their future.

### **The practice of stevedoring work.**

The regional importance of Durban as a harbour had much to do with its relative proximity to the Witwatersrand and to the sugar cane fields of Natal. By 1915 Durban had become the dominant port in South Africa, and by 1955 Durban was handling about 48% of the total cargo handled in country.<sup>2</sup> Simple cranes and winches were introduced from the early decades of the century in order to facilitate the moving of cargo from the

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<sup>2</sup> Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. Research Monograph, Economic Research Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1997. p. 14

hold of the ship to shore. With the exception of coal, oil, and other petroleum products, most cargo was transported in so-called “break-bulk” form. Break-bulk cargo was stowed in the hold of ships and was transported in bags, drums, boxes or simply as loose cargo and included commodities used by ordinary consumers such as mail, food, sugar and cars.

Stevedoring work was primarily responsible for this process. Stevedores worked in gangs varying in size from eight to sixteen members. In a gang work was divided between: a foreman who would oversee this process entirely, winchmen who would operate the mechanical winches that pulled the cargo from the hold (in nets or bags), gangwaymen who ensured that this process was timed correctly, to prevent injury; and a majority of stevedoring hands who would be responsible for loading the cargo into nets. These stevedoring hands were responsible for the most physically demanding aspect of the work, and they often suffered injuries if the process was not timed correctly or if nets were overloaded. From Durban to London, gangs were an essential part of stevedoring work, as a group of workers who relied on one another for security. Within gangs, aspects of respective traditions were preserved and remade.<sup>3</sup> (*See Pictures 1 to 4 in Appendix following this chapter*)

These patterns in cargo handling were followed more or less internationally, although often not at the same times. From the mid 1960s, dramatic changes were to follow in harbours throughout the world. Primarily these changes took the overall form of unitization, or the consolidation of cargo into unit loads. Initially this consolidation took the form of palletization, which meant that goods became packaged into easily moveable unit loads that could be easily handled by a forklift truck. The implication of this for stevedores was the removal of an important dimension of their work, since cargo arrived on ships (or at the shore) already packaged and ready for transportation.<sup>4</sup> Pallets were used in Durban from approximately 1970. (*See Picture 5 in Appendix*).

Although palletization caused a drop in the overall manpower needed, the situation was exacerbated by the second stage of unitization called containerization.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. London: Heinemann, 1978. For Durban consult chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis and David Hemson, *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 3-4.

Despite relying on forklift trucks, labour power was still needed to load and secure palletized cargo in the hold. Containerization eliminated this need. Cargo was now placed in massive twenty (and subsequently forty) ton onboard warehouses that were placed on the decks of ships. Huge shore-side cranes were developed to move these containers, effectively destroying stevedoring work in the long term. While some stevedoring work would remain as ports developed the necessary infrastructure, the long-term prospects for the stevedoring industry remained bleak. (*see Picture 6 in Appendix*)

The process of containerization did not happen overnight. The idea of containerization was developed in the mid 1950s by a US truck owner, Malcolm Maclean, who became frustrated at the long turn-around time that trucks spent waiting for cargo. Initially operating between a few ports in the United States, this technological change was to spread to the world's harbours during the following thirty years. The process was inevitably delayed because of the new infrastructure required. In the first place, new designs needed to be developed for ships and trucks alike to transport containers. For instance, one of the new types of ships became known as the "roll-on/roll-off" vessel that almost entirely eliminated the need for workers on ships. Secondly, ports themselves had to invest in costly terminals and to dredge new channels that could handle these heavier vessels. Besides the massive initial capital outlay for ship-owners and ports, these new techniques also had to convince ship-owners of their profitability. European and Australasian companies were only convinced of this by the mid 1960s, and it was only in the early 1970s that container transport got underway in earnest on a world-scale. Less developed countries, especially in Africa, took longer to approach these new technologies seriously.<sup>5</sup> They could simply not afford to rely on a gamble to invest millions in new infrastructure. During the late 1970s and 1980s, many of these ports serviced older and charter ships. In Durban, work on a container terminal began in 1974 and was completed in 1977.

Crucial actors in international transport are international shipping lines. More than local stevedoring companies or port operations, shipping lines are motivated purely by the need to be profitable. Before containerization, shipping lines were more or less bound to traditional ports of call and well established markets. Like local companies, an

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 5-6.

international tradition of worker militancy and a high degree of unionization meant that their turn around times were often severely affected. In addition, time losses due to the limits of human endeavour and the regularity of pilferage and theft limited their ability to extract maximum profit. Frank Broeze noted that liner shipping faced a financial crisis by the mid 1960s.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that containerization saved liner shipping, but also fundamentally changed it. Since the mid 1960s, following from high-powered takeovers and mergers between companies, shipping lines have become part of the global service economy. The industry has “de-nationalised” entirely by breaking links with traditional “home” ports and countries and sometimes moving into ownership or partnership with rail and road companies.<sup>7</sup>

So what have been the implications of these changes for Durban? In 1994, in terms of container traffic, Durban was the 23<sup>rd</sup> busiest port in the world and the busiest in the Southern Hemisphere.<sup>8</sup> Investment from both the private and public sectors has seen the port grow since 1977. Many of the actors mentioned in this primary section will emerge prominently in the second half of this chapter. But first I must consider the debates about casual labour in the port and the unique response in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **The Stevedoring Labour Market, Casual Workers and Regulation**

Irregular, tog or casual workers were a dominant feature of the stevedoring industry in Durban for the first half of the century. Yet this was in no way unique. In terms of the international stevedoring industry from London to Mombasa to Durban, casual workers were relied on because they seemed to serve the irregular nature of work in the industry best. This use of casual labourers was not unusual in emerging capitalist markets within colonial states in Africa. In this section I will explain both contexts for casual labour and show how casual labour was regulated in these different contexts. The difference in South Africa came with the regulation of casual labour in Durban. This difference, which will

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Broeze. “Containerization and the Globalization of liner shipping”. p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Broeze. “Containerization and the Globalization of liner shipping”. p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. p. 23.

be developed at the end of this section, reflects the unique and radically different state concerns in South Africa.

In London, Gareth Stedman Jones' seminal study of casual labourers during the second half of the nineteenth century has shown the moral threat that large numbers of unskilled and 'masterless men' presented to Victorian society. He has discussed how casual labour from the *residuum* was seen to be a problem by conservatives, liberals and socialists alike, and how these people were psychologically characterized as those 'with weak character and a poor physique'. Reformers in London also believed that these morally dangerous individuals would be eradicated by progress.<sup>9</sup> The problem for Victorian London was how to regulate an oversupply of workers into structured and permanent employment. This, they hoped, would ensure more stability. Jones notes that chronic casual poverty was only extinguished in the years following the First World War, with the dramatic acceleration of industrialization.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this change in the overall structure of the London labour market, in the stevedoring industry casual labour remained. John Lovell has noted that the port industry was resistant to the changes in the labour market.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Hill added that until the late 1960s, the employers' argument that "you cannot de-casualize dock labour at all" was widely accepted.<sup>12</sup> The basic position of the employers was that due to inevitable fluctuations in trade, there was no way that they could guarantee work for a set number of men on a daily basis. Despite this, there was relative job security for the casual stevedores due to a relatively stable supply of cargo ships and the hiring practices of casual stevedores. There was often more competition between stevedores for the best-paid work than for work at all.<sup>13</sup> Hiring was left to foremen who would be responsible for their men on the ships. In practice, this meant that gangs, once established as reliable work units, would change little.

The de-casualization of stevedoring work in London only occurred in the late 1960s, primarily as a result of the recommendations of the Devlin Committee of Inquiry

<sup>9</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones. *Outcast London: A study in the relationship between classes in Victorian society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. p. 11

<sup>10</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones. *Outcast London*. p. 348.

<sup>11</sup> John Lovell. *Stevedores and Dockers: A study of trade unionism in the port of London*. London: Macmillan, 1969. p. 217-218.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 15

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 20.

into the port industry (1965). This committee was set up by the government to investigate the future of stevedoring in the face of impending technological change. The primary recommendations of the report targeted both workers and companies.<sup>14</sup> For workers, the report recommended stevedores should become permanent employees of companies, and that (over time) the labour force should be trimmed by offering voluntary severance packages and limiting new recruitment. In addition, the piecework jobs that had characterized the port were to be abolished, and workers would be trained as flexible workers, who had the ability to fill any place in a gang. For companies, the report recommended that the number of stevedoring employers also be trimmed from thirty-five companies to ten. This had already begun to be reflected in practice, however, and by 1972, following mergers and liquidations, there were only four major companies and two minor companies remaining.<sup>15</sup>

In Mombasa between 1930-1955, Frederick Cooper discussed the casual labour market in detail.<sup>16</sup> He has argued that colonial officials perceived casual workers as a threat to the functioning of the economy. Because workers were not entirely dependent on employment in the city for their livelihood, they were able to work whenever it suited them. When demands on their labour power became too strenuous, they were able to organize and strike, crippling production. If the function of casual labour in the British colonies had been to prevent labour organization and militancy by circulating labour and not making them dependent on work in cities, it had failed, leaving employers constantly in demand of regular labour. In addition, casual workers often proved to be militant and their strikes materially disrupted the processes of colonial extraction. The solution for the British colonists was to re-make the labour force, giving them permanence, decent wages, and a stake in the success of the industry.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 2-10.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Hill. *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. p. 7. These mergers, and the English approach to casualization, provide an interesting resonance and contrast with the pattern followed in Durban. (described below)

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Cooper. *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*. London: Yale University Press, 1982. Cooper's concern is with labour in the city as a whole, although dockworkers feature prominently in his analysis. He also notes that the serangs (foremen) had substantial autonomy in the hiring of workers, the supervision of work, and the distribution of wages. See esp. 37-41 of the above mentioned work.

<sup>17</sup> In later work, Cooper described colonial casual labour policies until 1940 as an "albatross around officials necks that blurred the distinction between workers and urban low-life, between the orderly and the

In South Africa, the casual labour market developed out of colonists' demand for labour in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often through a compromise between Africans and colonial officials. In her study of the development of the tog (casual) labour market in Natal, Keletso Atkins has argued that the colonial attempts to regulate labour were hampered by a misunderstanding of an African work ethic whose conceptions of time and authority lay primarily within their own cultural norms.<sup>18</sup> She has suggested that the casual labour market in Durban resulted as a compromise between two different cultural systems, and because Africans were very aware of the economic advantages of being casual workers. In a study of Mozambican migrants in the second half of the nineteenth century, Patrick Harries has emphasized that unrestricted labour mobility was used as a bargaining tool for higher wages and better conditions.<sup>19</sup> For the South African state in the early twentieth century, unrestricted labour mobility for Africans became a concern, both because the white public feared being overwhelmed and because Africans were willing to work longer hours for less remuneration, often tempting employers to replace whites with Africans. Influx control was introduced for Africans with the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, which sought to retain the necessary African labour in cities, albeit under tight control, through the implementation of pass laws and the use of strictly policed compounds.

In the Durban harbour there was a constant demand for labour from the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Through the first half of the century, stevedoring employers were able to get away with employing casual workers, presumably using similar economic justifications to those of their English counterparts in London. This gave African stevedores substantially more permanence in Durban than other industrial workers. By the 1940s, stevedores claimed Durban as their home when told "to go home to rural areas".<sup>21</sup>

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dangerous". Frederick Cooper. *Decolonization and African Society: The labor question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 261

<sup>18</sup> Keletso Atkins. *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic in Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900*. Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1993. p. 3-6, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Harries. *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa c. 1860-1910*. Portsmouth and Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1994. p. 42-43.

<sup>20</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 35. According to Jeff Guy, rebellion against the colonial state in Natal was often punished by forced labour in the Durban harbour.

<sup>21</sup> David Hemson. . "Dock Workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles: 1940-1959" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 4, 1977. p. 93.

During the 1940s, previous influx control regulations had been entirely undermined in South Africa as a whole, as the demand for labour grew during the Second World War. Indeed, the process of African urbanization had been intensified to such an extent that by 1948, the ruling United Party had accepted that African urbanization was inevitable and based its election promises on this acceptance, arguing that this urbanization should be carefully controlled.<sup>22</sup> In response to the generally vague position of the United Party regarding urban Africans, the National Party produced a forcefully argued document called the Sauer Report that arguably won the election for them. The Sauer report protested ‘the black *oorstroming* of the cities’ and argued that ‘natives from the country areas shall be admitted to the urban areas only as temporary employees obliged to return to their homes after the expiry of their employment’.<sup>23</sup> The National Party government sensed the fears of the white electorate that poor and casual African labour presented a moral and material threat to their existence, in the form of Africans residing in cities, without regular employment, and with a willingness to work for less than white workers.

For the first 12 years of its power the National Party sought to develop its election promises into fully working policies. Part of this development was the centralization of controls in labour bureaux system administered nationally by the Minister of Bantu Affairs. There is some evidence to suggest that this process faced difficulty with individual industries, notably in the docks. In 1956 the stevedoring industry faced pressure from government on the numbers of casual labourers which they employed and issued a report on the conditions of stevedoring workers based on a request by the Department of Native Affairs. Among other things, the report indicated that a little over 2000 Africans were employed in Durban, of which the majority were tog labourers (labour employed on a day to day basis) and that ‘workers themselves prefer to work as casuals’.<sup>24</sup> Stevedoring companies realized that tog labour was far more profitable and argued that they did not create instability. As Minister of Native Affairs, Verwoerd announced in 1957 that, “only 2000 Natives would be allowed in Durban”. Stevedoring

<sup>22</sup> Dan O’Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Sauer Report, quoted in Dan O’Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> SAB ARB vol. 3317 file 1196/5/4/1. “Report on Conditions of Employment of Stevedoring Workers”.

companies protested that this would lead to a serious decline in efficiency, although by 1958 they seemed willing to agree to a centrally administered compound where African workers would comply with influx control regulations.<sup>25</sup> However, this was not an acceptance of an end to casual labour on the docks, and tensions between the state and the companies continued.

The strike by most of the stevedoring workers employed at African Associated Stevedoring Company on 25 February 1959 proved to be an event that changed the stevedoring industry and brought it into the general framework of Apartheid labour policy. Although the demands of the strike were not immediately clear, it was ascertained that the cause was a rise in wages for indunas, winchmen and gangwaymen and not for the general stevedoring workers as published in Wage Determination no. 183 of 6 February 1959.<sup>26</sup> The striking workers were met by the Bantu Affairs Commissioner of Durban and a manager of African Associated Stevedores, and told to return to work. The stevedores demanded an increase in pay, to which the Bantu Affairs Commissioner replied that the Wage Determination stood. The meeting ended in disorder<sup>27</sup>. Police then dispersed the area, and any workers left after a certain time were arrested. It was also decided to suspend the employment of all tog labour on the docks and dismiss all striking workers as agitators.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of being blamed on individual togt workers, the strike was seen as reflecting the dangers of casual labour. The report of the industrial dispute by government officials showed that all stevedoring in the port had been brought to a standstill, resulting in a loss of almost 2340 ‘man’ hours, and that the cause of the general standstill was a

<sup>25</sup> Quote from David Hemson. “Dock Workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles: 1940-1959” in Journal of Southern African Studies. Vol. 4, 1977. p. 117-118.

<sup>26</sup> SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/332. Police Report. “Strike: Native Dockworkers Durban: 25 February 1959”. 27 February 1959.

<sup>27</sup> SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/322. Notes of a meeting held between the Native Affairs Commissioner of Durban, A manager from African Associated and 1200-1400 Labourers from the stevedoring industry, 25 February 1959.

<sup>28</sup> SAB NTS vol. 7695 file 466/332. Police Report. “Strike: Native Dockworkers Durban: 25 February 1959”. 27 February 1959. see also SAB MAR vol. 81 file A2/44. Memorandum by Department of Labour. 16 May 1959. See also *Daily News*. 25 Feb 1959. “Harbour paralysed by stevedore strikes.”

result of intimidation by togt workers, who were dismissed. The report ends by “pleasantly” noting that the employment of togt workers had been suspended.<sup>29</sup>

The strike by togt workers was the breaking point for the companies. Already facing heavy pressure from the government for employing workers who contravened the specific legislation regulating the movement and employment of African labour, the companies could no longer argue that these workers did not affect productivity. The five major stevedoring companies met government officials over the following month, and by the beginning of April 1959 had refashioned the conditions under which stevedoring workers were able to be employed in Durban. The companies decided that a central system of labour should be introduced requiring workers to be recruited on a weekly basis, reside in company compounds and be signed on to work when work was available. This resulted in the cutting of the total workforce by about 500.<sup>30</sup> Weekly labour agreements soon became ten month contracts of employment, approved by traditional leaders in African areas (mostly in Zululand) and by representatives of the Department of Native Affairs.

The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company (DSLSC) was born out of an agreement between African Associated Stevedores, Consolidated Stevedoring and forwarding agency, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, Jack Storm Ltd. on the 15 April 1959.<sup>31</sup> The state’s project of regulating African labour and eliminating casual labour in Durban had been successful, and the stevedoring companies had to come to terms with making this new system of labour control materially viable.

Before discussing the new systems of work and control developed in the Labour Supply Company, it is necessary to emphasize two points about casual labour and its regulation. Firstly, the casuals employed in Durban during the 1940s and 1950s, while not always enjoying job security, were operating in an economic environment where their labour was in demand. This contrasts sharply with the economic position that casuals found themselves in during the late 1980s when casual labour once again became an important feature of Durban harbour. Secondly, unlike de-casualization in London, the

<sup>29</sup>SAB ARB vol. 1229. file 1042/15/1959. “Industrial Dispute involving stoppage of work” 6 March 1959. See also *Ilanga lase Natal*. 7 March 1959, New Strategies to Control Dockworkers.”

<sup>30</sup>SAB MAR vol. 81 file A2/44. Memorandum by Department of Labour. 16 May 1959.

<sup>31</sup>SAB BAO vol. 3075. file C39/1171/1 Memorandum of Agreement: “The formation of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company”. 15 April 1959.

elimination of casual stevedoring work in Durban was not driven by an overall concern for the industry or by any general economic imperatives. While state intervention occurred in both cases, the motivation in Durban was primarily to bring the industry into line with Apartheid ideology. This will be further explored in Chapter 2.

### New Methods of Work and Control: The Labour Supply Company

For Apartheid labour administrators, the new centralized system of control in the Labour Supply Company appeared to become an ideal example of labour control. During the 1960s, Mr. J. Kemp, the general manager of the Labour Supply Company, even suggested that it be used as a model of labour control for other towns and industries.<sup>32</sup> However, I will suggest that the success of the labour supply company was firmly premised on the economic boom that many South African industries experienced in the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> The economic boom was reflected in the stevedoring industry by an increase of total cargo handled in Durban between 1962 (4323 tons) and 1966 (8557 tons).<sup>34</sup>

The Labour Supply Company was more like a labour bureau for a particular industry than a company in its own right.<sup>35</sup> Its purpose was to house, control and supply labour to stevedoring companies when they needed it. It was based in a compound in Southampton Street in the Point area. Two white directors, Mr. J. Kemp and Mr. W. Dreyer ran the company with labour superintendents and African indunas.<sup>36</sup> They were responsible for the recruitment of labour, the housing of labour in compounds and the signing on of workers for particular shifts. The five stevedoring companies financed the

<sup>32</sup>SAB BAO 2401 file 31/3/336. Letter from PJ Kemp (general manager) to Dr P. van Rensburg (Dept of Bantu Administration and Development). 22 April 1966.

<sup>33</sup> And on the relationships developed between African workers and indunas, that is explored in Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> Statistical Year Book, 1976, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 512.

<sup>35</sup> My understanding of the labour bureaux system comes from Doug Hindson and Deborah Posel. Hindson suggests that the role of the labour bureaux was to “combine implementation of influx control [with] labour placement and direction”. While both emphasize the differentiated labour force, permanent urbanized workers as against migrants, I must emphasize that the vast majority of stevedores were migrants without rights of urban residence. Posel’s analysis of the excesses and inefficiency of the labour bureaux system is important in understanding the overall working of the system, however I again believe that the specific mechanisms established in the stevedoring industry in Durban, bypassed much of this inefficiency. See Hindson. *Pass Controls and the African urban proletariat in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987, p. 62-64; and Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. p. 192-202.

<sup>36</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. PhD. thesis, University of Warwick, 1979. p.388.

operation and sat on the board of directors, but had little to do with the daily operation of the company. From accounts of senior and middle management, any trouble in compounds or with workers occurred rarely.<sup>37</sup>

African workers were recruited from specific areas in Zululand (with a significant minority from Pondoland), and could only live in the compound in the Point on condition that they respected their fixed term contracts of nine or ten months.<sup>38</sup> The number of workers that the companies needed were signed on every day at the compound and transported to their workplaces. There were no more togt labourers or weekly contracts. During the early days of the DSLSC, in 1961, stevedoring companies decided to give a basic retainer to workers to ensure that they would be able to keep a constant workforce even during times of little work. The government-run South Africa Railways and Harbours (hereafter referred to as SARH) objected to this, because they did not give any such retainer to workers.<sup>39</sup> The stevedoring companies persisted in paying the retainer. This showed that the stevedoring companies would not yield entirely to government pressure and marked the beginning of a very tense relationship between the stevedoring companies, whose management was predominately English speaking, and the very Afrikaans SARH.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the retainer, most of the workers' wages came from the work that they actually performed. During this period, with lots of surplus work available, workers often received most of their wages based on overtime allowances.<sup>41</sup> The Labour Supply Company kept detailed records of each of the workers, listing where the worker had been recruited from, the number of contracts he may have had, and any disciplinary offences committed. A distance was thus created between the companies and the African workforce that allowed African izinduna to manage the workforce, and from the

<sup>37</sup> Interviews by the author: Captain Gordon Stockley (25 June 2001), Hugh Wyatt (4 September 2001). Both worked in the docks from early 1970s, Stockley as Operations Manager and Wyatt started as a foreman.

<sup>38</sup> The 1964 Bantu Labour Act made it law the African workers had to be recruited specifically through tribal labour bureaus.

<sup>39</sup> SAB MAR. vol. 81 file. A2/44. Department of Labour. "Re: Native Labour: The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company". 18 May 1961.

<sup>40</sup> An interesting tactic of the primarily English stevedoring companies was to employ Kemp and Dreyer, two Afrikaans managers with experience in "Bantu Administration" to run the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. Part of their job description was to report to the state on a fairly regular basis.

<sup>41</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 526.

companies' perspective, served to deal effectively with dissent. It also helped to eliminate the problem of large numbers of African workers in the city without fixed employment. Stevedoring companies did have to pay a little extra in terms of this retainer and to the officials of the DSLSC, but in return they gained a stable supply of labour, available whenever they needed it, effectively their own labour bureau. The retainer was a very small amount, particularly insignificant in the context of the economic boom in the 1960s that meant that workers often worked most days of the week and that the companies were making large profits.

Work itself became more tightly regulated during this period. Before the Labour Supply Company, stevedores worked in gangs, although these were organized in a haphazard way, at the last minute, when companies determined how many workers would be required on any given day. With the Labour Supply Company, workers would be allocated to particular gangs at the compound. A white foreman would be at the vessel and together with the induna, co-ordinate the operation. Once workers were finished clearing or loading a particular ship, they would be finished for the day. Workers were paid as gang per ship rather than per hour. This gave workers some leeway as to how fast they worked. Although it was in their interests to work fast to earn more money, they could not be transferred from one ship to another without getting extra money for it. Workers were organized into Stevedoring Labour Units, which was management's term for the work gang. Each gang consisted of a group of a minimum of eight stevedoring hands to which were added the semi-skilled winchman and gangwayman. The induna who led the gang picked the men he wanted. The gang would be divided with general stevedores in the hold of the ship, gangwaymen and winchmen on the hatch and indunas moving between. A foreman would supervise this process from the hatch.<sup>42</sup> There was very little interaction between workers and white foremen, except that the foreman kept a register of workers by referring to the band on each worker's wrist that gave critical details about the worker, such as his name and length of contract. These bands were heat sealed onto each worker when he became part of the DSLSC. Company management believed that this helped to streamline the process of both paying and disciplining

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<sup>42</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 396-400.

workers.<sup>43</sup> Individual stevedoring labour units developed as regular, and almost permanent, features over time, meaning that in practice, they were seldom chosen on a daily basis.

Authority in the Labour Supply Company largely rested with the induna structure. Many of the interesting developments within this structure will be discussed in the next chapter, however it is important to emphasize that the labour supply company's sole function was not simply to create a more stable and efficient stevedoring operation, but also to centralize labour supply and work around a specific reading of "Zulu culture". Part of this process was to centralize control in the compound, particularly around the figure of a JB Buthelezi. Buthelezi was an uncle of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who had, since the late 1950s, had powerful support on Native Administration Boards, and commanded a certain respect that he turned to political mobilization in the form of Inkatha in the 1980s. JB Buthelezi was the most senior induna, spoke for all workers at labour liaison boards, and sat on the management committee of Labour Supply Company. In later years, workers would protest Buthelezi's administration, and interviews reflected diverse worker opinion;

"I would say that this system was better than the togt system...we were able to work every day. Before sometimes we could not get work. On some days there were no ships for us to work. And when there was no work we even had to sell our clothes to buy food."<sup>44</sup>.

"at that time we had no access to seeing Apartheid from the whites the employers. We could only see the 'Apartheid' by people of our own race. You come to the gate, he doesn't know you, no matter how poor you are, he doesn't care, he will only take me because he knows my cousin."<sup>45</sup>

During the 1960s, the Labour Supply Company controlled stevedoring operations in Durban. Its directors prided themselves on having prevented even a single day of

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews done by the author. Capt. Stockley, 25 June 2001, Yoga Thinnasagren, 6 September 2001. Mr Thinnasagren worked as a labour superintendent in various stevedoring companies during the 1970s.

<sup>44</sup> Mr Nzuza, quoted in Tina Sideris. *Sifuna Imali Yethu: The life and struggles of Durban Dockworkers, 1940-1981*. Johannesburg: SAIRR Oral history project, 1983. p. 19

<sup>45</sup> Interview by the author. Bongani Dlamini, currently a casual labourer. Mr Dlamini began working on the docks in the early 1970s.

strikes since 1959<sup>46</sup>, and attributed its success largely to compound administration in accordance with Zulu tradition.<sup>47</sup> While the next chapter will problematize the use of “Zulu culture” as a successful mechanism of labour control, the following sections will show how the erosion of the economic stability in the docks severely tested these assumptions and showed that at least part of the success of the company was based on its relatively secure economic position during the 1960s.

### The Crisis in Production

The boom in cargo handling in docks slowed down after 1966, and by 1970 was as low as at the beginning of the decade.<sup>48</sup> Because there was less work available, the stevedores suddenly found themselves earning a lot less. In addition to this, the final wage determination of 1969 based its recommendations on 1966 figures of average earnings, grossly overestimating the actual wages of the workers.<sup>49</sup> A combination of this overall economic decline and the refusal of stevedoring companies and the state to recognize the real decline in wages of stevedoring workers led to a strike on the 4 April 1969 of almost 2000 stevedoring workers. The method for dealing with the strike was immediate, and left little doubt of the state’s commitment to urban order. More than 1000 workers were dismissed and sent home.<sup>50</sup> The strike was the first major one in over ten years and, at the very least, showed workers’ determination to be paid properly.

In the aftermath of the strike, the Department of Native Affairs in conjunction with the DSLSC set up new and stricter controls of recruitment. By 1972, the emphasis of recruitment had shifted to strongly Zulu traditional areas such as Nongoma and Mahlabatini and away from Pondo areas such as Mount Ayliff.<sup>51</sup> While Labour recruitment had always favoured a Zulu labour force, this move entrenched this supply

<sup>46</sup> SAB BAO vol. 3049 file C39/29. Dreyer, W. “Some notes on the establishment, methods and organization of a Stevedoring Labour pool”. Durban, 1966. p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> BAO 2401 file 31/3/336. Letter from PJ Kemp (general manager) to Dr P. van Rensburg (Dept of Bantu administration and development). 22 April 1966.

<sup>48</sup> Statistical Year Book, 1976, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 512.

<sup>49</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 516-517.

<sup>50</sup> Natal Mercury, 7 April 1969. “Half Durban’s dockworkers set off home”.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Dreyer by David Hemson, quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 581.

particularly from areas that were known for being conservative and especially traditionally orientated.

The strike was viewed somewhat more ambiguously by stevedoring companies. It led to a bottleneck of ships in the harbour, and many of the companies supported the call of many of the dismissed workers to be re-instated. But there were more serious long-term effects. Because the government viewed general stevedores as unskilled, it was possible to simply replace strikers with more ‘disciplined’ workers. But many of those dismissed workers had gained skills while working during the boom of the 1960s. There was a dramatic increase in the incidence of injury through accident in 1970.<sup>52</sup> This is undoubtedly due to a whole set of new workers who were expected to work as productively as workers in the 1960s. The productivity of stevedores also underwent a sharp decline in the early 1970s, causing large port delays. A spokesman for Royal Inter-ocean shipping line is reported to have commented;

*“I don’t care about the figures. All I know is that I have had ships waiting outside [the port] for four days”.*<sup>53</sup>

The pressures of productivity had not faced the stevedoring companies since the inception of the DSLSC. In addition, shipping lines changed their rate structures (see below) which largely increased the competition between stevedoring companies. By the early 1970s, stevedoring companies began employing casual labourers illegally in addition to the pool of labour available from the DSLSC to meet surplus requirements. Although this constituted only about 12% of the labour force on any particular day, this emerged as a challenge to the Apartheid system of labour control and distribution.<sup>54</sup> A series of meetings were set up by the Port Natal Bantu Administration Board with the Stevedoring Companies in order to try and solve this crisis. Stevedoring companies admitted to using casual labour and insisted at these meetings that they could not function without using casual labourers on particular days. Officials of the local Bantu

<sup>52</sup>David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. p. 534.

<sup>53</sup>Natal Mercury, 23 January 1970. “Mechanisation the Answer to Port Delays, say Agents”

<sup>54</sup>Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). SB. Bourquin (Chief Director). “Registration and Control of Bantu Dockworkers”. May 1975.

Administration Board stated that casual labourers were “bringing havoc to town” and “drinking illicitly”, and that the “town needed to be cleaned up”. Eventually stevedoring companies agreed that they would attempt to register workers and set up a pool that could be drawn on for excess labour requirements.<sup>55</sup> Yet it seemed that this resolution could only solve the crisis on a temporary basis and that the whole structure of stevedoring labour needed to be re-visited.

### **Problems of Competition, Effects of Containerization**

South African stevedoring companies had been controlled by shipping lines since the days of the great Union Castle mail-ship line, before the turn of the century, existing to ensure that their liners would be serviced as fast as possible. For instance, the Union Castle line owned African Associated Stevedores.<sup>56</sup> Private stevedoring companies were not guaranteed work and survived on extra stevedoring requirements during especially busy periods. Towards the end of the 1960s, goods began to be carried in containers, and many predicted that it would make the stevedoring industry substantially less important in ports worldwide.<sup>57</sup> The shipping lines were aware of the coming technological changes and first demanded a change in method of payment from a cost plus rate standard contract to an all in rate structure, irrespective of the cargo handled.<sup>58</sup> This change meant two things; firstly, the cost plus rate structure was based on set amounts depending on what kind of cargos were handled, and made allowance for more difficult cargos for stevedores; secondly, breaking the standard contract allowed for stevedoring companies to set their own rates. This meant that stevedoring companies would continually undercut each other, and shipping lines could always choose the cheapest option. Independent operators (outside the DSLSC) would employ casual

<sup>55</sup> Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). “Minutes of a meeting addressing the Labour problems in the point on Harbour areas”. 20 November 1974.

<sup>56</sup> Mike Morris. “Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1” in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 91.

<sup>57</sup> There were many such studies done at the time. I happen to have come across research commissioned by the International Labour Organization and done by AA Evans entitled *Technical and Social Changes in the world's ports*. Geneva ,1969. Evans predicts massive changes to cargo handling techniques and to a decline in stevedoring labour, with an emphasis among remaining labourers of flexibility and diversity of skills.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Morris. “Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1” in *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, no. 3, 1986. p. 91-92.

labour, despite the government regulations, and actively compete to provide better rates for the shipping lines. This caused vigorous protest from the local Bantu Administration Board.<sup>59</sup>

This competition and undercutting went on for about five years, and by 1976 the major shipping lines pulled out of stevedoring altogether, either disappearing or transporting new containerized cargo.<sup>60</sup> The first five years of the 1970s were critical because they represented a change in the dominant form of cargo transportation internationally, from break-bulk to containers. Captain Gordon Stockley, whose involvement in stevedoring in South Africa stretched for twenty years (1974-1994), and who became a prominent actor in the liberalizing of labour relations in the 1980s, explains what the tactics of the shipping lines were:

*What these guys in the shipping industry knew about was the effects of containerisation. This made me a little bitter, because they knew what was going to happen to the labour and that we would have a massive problem, but they weren't too interested in helping or showing us the direction to go. They just ripped the guts out of it to get better profits and to hell with the future of the industry.*<sup>61</sup>

Facing a declining but still quite large industry, stevedoring companies had to decide the best way forward. The previous five years of fighting had not done any of the companies much good, and it was clearly impossible to continue in this manner from the perspective of sustainability. In 1976 the 12 stevedoring companies operating in Durban, including many of the old companies previously owned by shipping lines, either merged into 4 main companies or went insolvent. At the end of the 1970s, the four main companies operating in Durban were South African Stevedoring Services Company (SASSCO), Aero Marine, Rennies and Grindrods. The dominant company was SASSCO, occupying 60% of the market.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Durban Repository Archives. PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport). "Minutes of a meeting addressing the Labour problems in the point on Harbour areas". 20 November 1974.

<sup>60</sup> Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1" in *South African Labour Bulletin*. p. 92-93.

<sup>61</sup> Interview by the author: Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001. Captain Stockley had been involved with the Union Castle line in the 1960s and came to stevedoring in Durban in 1973. He was the Operations Manager of South African Stevedores nationally until his retirement in 1994.

<sup>62</sup> Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 95.

The exploitation of the stevedoring market and merger of stevedoring companies was perhaps the first tangible effect of containerisation. The second was on the front of stevedoring labour. As companies merged, and the stevedoring trade became increasingly difficult to make profitable, remaining companies looked at ways of cutting costs. In the late 1970s, SASSCO, as the dominant stevedoring company, found that it were investing the most in the DSLSC and not getting any real material benefits. Furthermore, smaller companies were using the large labour pool of the DSLSC whenever they needed it, which caused SASSCO to feel as if they were providing the labour for these smaller companies. SASSCO also felt that it was important to give workers a company identity and bring workers closer to management.<sup>63</sup> The traditional hierarchies maintained in the DSLSC were expensive, and for a SASSCO management far more interested in surviving as a stevedoring company than maintaining Apartheid, the decision to withdraw from the DSLSC proved quite simple. In 1979, the DSLSC was wound down without a real fight from anybody, in contrast to its difficult and contested beginnings.

### **Facing the Challenges of the 1980s**

For the National Party Government, the 1980s was a period of intense difficulty marked by a huge increase in the use of violence to maintain its existence. The state faced increased political opposition both internally and abroad and the economy was in real trouble. One of the new areas of political opposition that emerged in the 1970s was from urban Africans generally and the labour movement specifically. As part of a strategy to de-politicize as much of civil society as possible without losing control, the National Party embarked on a series of reforms that led to the recognition of trade unions and a new form of influx control that recognized a permanent African workforce<sup>64</sup>. Gone from NP politics were grand ideological justifications for a moral order called Apartheid, and increasingly the dialogue changed to staying in control and maintaining power against a supposed communist revolution instigated by the ANC. These reforms allowed unions

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<sup>63</sup> Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.

<sup>64</sup> Dan o'Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. p. 272-273.

and companies a much freer space in which to operate, organize, and employ African workers, but were also misunderstood by many within the ranks of the state itself. Many in the SARH refused to recognize unions and believed that the reforms were a temporary measure aimed at re-building the economy. Some, believing that 1960s-style labour relations could go on forever, resented the collapse of the DSLSC and the new initiatives undertaken by the stevedoring companies.<sup>65</sup> The following section will sketch the events of the 1980s in the stevedoring industry and briefly link them to the changes in state policy during this time. It does not fully take into account the changing relationships between the state and private capital. However, it does demonstrate the main arguments that have run throughout this paper.

With the economic burden of the DSLSC gone, stevedoring companies and SASSCO in particular made an attempt to build company identity with their workers. While the technological changes of Containerisation and Roll-on, Roll-off ships had caused much difficulty in stevedoring internationally, other technological innovations specifically affected the stevedoring labour process. In particular, the introduction of forklift trucks and palletization in the early 1970s meant that some break-bulk cargoes were transported in far more uniform varieties that could be loaded onto a forklift truck from the ship. These innovations affected the size of the stevedoring gang, with the numbers of workers working on any ship being reduced from ten or twelve to four or six, and co-ordinating these workers to work effectively became a far more difficult task.<sup>66</sup> Before 1979, the African labour force of the DSLSC had been totally excluded from this process and SASSCO developed policies to train its workers how to handle palletized cargo, and also developed training programs to teach its workers English and general literacy skills. In addition, SASSCO attempted to multi-skill workers, giving them the flexibility to be either stevedoring hands or forklift truck drivers as any particular job might require.<sup>67</sup> SASSCO also recognized the right of African workers to be represented by trade unions and in 1981, following vigorous union organizing and a ballot, recognized the General Workers Union (GWU) as the representative of all stevedoring

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<sup>65</sup> Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Interview by the author. Hugh Wyatt. 6 September 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Interview by the author. Captain Stockley. 25 June 2001.

workers in the company nationally. In 1982 Rennies Grindrod also recognized the GWU, giving the union control of almost the entire stevedoring labour force.<sup>68</sup>

In an attempt to come to terms with the changed terrain of the stevedoring trade, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod entered into negotiations on a possible merger in late 1982.<sup>69</sup> At the end of the year, they submitted an application to the competitions board to create a single stevedoring company in the docks. In their submission, the two companies recognized the need for a stable and well-paid labour force and the need for capital investment in the stevedoring industry that could only really occur with the suspension of the competition between the two companies for the relatively meager resources. A stable work-force could be trained and developed to meet new industrial demands, and with the total cost of labour amounting to 40% of both companies' costs, it seemed that continued competition would destroy any future for stevedoring. An additional factor for this decision was based on the decline by 6.3 million tons of break-bulk cargo handled nationally between 1976 and 1981.<sup>70</sup>

The merger brought immediate benefits and problems. Casual labour was once again eliminated and workers were all given four-day guarantees, insuring that the company would pay the workers for a minimum of four days work. Through negotiations with unions, wages in the industry increased at the end of 1982.<sup>71</sup> The merger also resulted in an oversized staff consisting of both management and workers. Almost immediately when South African Stevedores (SAS) came into existence in August 1982, both management and workers were retrenched.<sup>72</sup>

In the work arena itself, SAS introduced a system of multi-skilling that aimed at teaching the labour force a variety of skills which ultimately undermined the fixed place of a worker in a gang. The idea behind this was to limit the idle time of workers aboard a ship and make gangs a far more flexible unit. If any worker was able to perform any of

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<sup>68</sup> The Argus. 23 June 1982. "Dockers Union, industry forge new deal". See also EP Herald. 22 June 1982. "Deal gives GWU 4-port standing".

<sup>69</sup> In 1981, Rennies and Grindrods Cotts had merged into Rennies Grindrod, leaving only two stevedoring companies on the docks.

<sup>70</sup> SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod. "Rationalisation of the Stevedoring Industry: Memorandum to Competitions Board". August 1982. This document does not come from an archive but rather was given to me by retired management of South African Stevedores.

<sup>71</sup> Daily News. 23 December 1982. "Wage increases for stevedores."

<sup>72</sup> Daily News. 25 August 1982. "Managers Axed after stevedoring merger."

the stevedoring functions, a ship could be cleared faster and the numbers in a gang reduced. This was a significant move away from the Stevedoring labour units of the 1960s. In addition, workers were expected to clear as many ships as possible during a shift, and were paid hourly instead of according to the amount of ships cleared.<sup>73</sup> This was quite unpopular among the workers, who believed that once they had cleared the ship that they were tasked with, they could have the rest of the day off.

With the trimmed labour force, the company existed through 1983 without competition. SAS management believed that the future of the industry was in their hands, and that they could build long-term sustainability in the industry.<sup>74</sup> The 1983 Industrial Relations Report of the SAS Corporate Plan of the next four years highlighted these challenges, emphasizing the need to develop an even more skilled labour force while also recognizing the potential for conflict with the state-run South African Transport Services<sup>75</sup> (SATS), particularly because the government-run SATS resented SAS' liberal attitude to African workers and political unions. The report argued that SAS could not afford to intimidate SATS, who had sole control over stevedoring licenses, and protected the fact that SAS had no competition.<sup>76</sup>

The *verkrampte* men in SATS had already had an encounter with the General Workers Union when they tried to organize all dockworkers in Port Elizabeth. The GWU had been forcefully told that their union would under no circumstances be recognized.<sup>77</sup> When Capital Radio interviewed Les Owen, the industrial relations officer in SAS, about the strike, Owen had explicitly said that South African Transport Services were in the wrong and that independent unions must be allowed to operate in the docks. Shortly after the interview, the directors of SAS were summoned to Pretoria and threatened with the loss of their stevedoring license.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Interview by the author. Captain Stockley, 25 June 2001.

<sup>74</sup> Interview by the author. Captain Stockley, 25 June 2001. By this time, Stockley was entirely in charge of operations in Stevedoring nationally. He was determined to make stevedoring work, and declared at a speech at the Durban Country Club in 1982 that he was not prepared to move at the speed of the slowest ship.

<sup>75</sup> South African Transport Services was the old SARH

<sup>76</sup> South African Stevedores Corporate Plan 1984-1987. Industrial Relations Report.

<sup>77</sup> Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 2" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 108.

<sup>78</sup> Interview by the author. Les Owen: Industrial Relations Manager, SAS: 1980-1985. 5 June 2001.

Relations between the state and SAS were very tense, and when ISCOR complained that SAS was a monopoly and controlled rates unfairly in the stevedoring industry, the state had a perfect solution.<sup>79</sup> ISCOR gave support to businessmen in the dock, SATS issued the stevedoring license and Keeley's Stevedoring was born.<sup>80</sup> At the beginning of 1984, the state actually issued a large number of stevedoring licenses, but Keeleys was the most significant because it had control of the transportation of ISCOR's steel contracts. Keeleys employed casual labour "off the street" and paid these workers substantially less than SAS. By having a much smaller labour cost, Keeleys was also able to gain a foothold in many of SAS's other markets. The GWU tried to organize in Keeleys and found that they had absolutely no knowledge of industrial relations, and had even attempted to make GWU a sweetheart union.<sup>81</sup> The Union even complained to the state that Keeleys was paying their workers below the minimum rate under the prescribed determination.<sup>82</sup>

The material effects of containerisation and the added pressure from the new companies made a real difference to SAS. In February 1985, they retrenched 600 stevedores<sup>83</sup>, and had to downscale many of their training operations because of this undercutting. But if the companies felt containerisation, the unions did too. As the GWU's main organizer in Durban, Mike Morris expressed his helpless position;

*we couldn't actually deal with it. It drove me out of the union in the end. It was constantly disheartening, we tried to negotiate the best deal we could, and it was never good enough.... It was an impossible*

<sup>79</sup> ISCOR, the major Iron and Steel Conglomerate in the country, imported and exported large amounts of irregular sized pieces of steel during the 1980s through Durban. Its relationship to the state stretched back to its formation in 1928, when the state considered it indispensable to industrialize South Africa without an iron and steel industry. It was strongly tied to national (as opposed to colonist) capitalist interests and protected white workers. See Ari Sitas. *African worker responses on the East Rand to changes in the Metal Industry, 1960-1980*. PhD Thesis. University of the Witwatersrand. 1984. p. 68-77.

<sup>80</sup> Mike Morris. "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 2" *South African Labour Bulletin*, p. 112-114.

<sup>81</sup> Interview by the author. Mike Morris. 28 June 2001. Morris was an organizer for the GWU in Durban from 1981 to 1985. Company management such as Stockley concurred with Morris' description of Keeley's Stevedoring. Stockley also suggested that many of those employed by Keeley's were retrenched stevedores.

<sup>82</sup> *Financial Mail*. 3 August 1984. "Wage Determination: Payment Problems".

<sup>83</sup> *Natal Mercury*. 18 February 1985. "600 Durban Dockworkers to lose jobs".

*situation and I did not realise, until I did the research afterwards, what a worldwide trend this was... we spent our time negotiating retrenchments.*<sup>84</sup>

### Marginal Workers: Stevedoring in the 1990s

After 1985, there was a serious decline in effective unionism in the stevedoring industry.<sup>85</sup> This was not helped by the changed strategies of new unions on the docks and the emergence of a union that only aimed to recruit workers for Inkatha. Another major wave of retrenchment followed in May 1987.<sup>86</sup> Retrenchments continued in the 1990s. The company cut its permanent 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. In contrast with stevedores' earlier sense of pride in their work, they no longer had any pride in their work, and felt that the mechanization of the port made them "weak".<sup>87</sup> Given that stevedores were highly exploited throughout the century, the final decade of the century saw their humiliation; they had become marginal and peripheral workers.

In contrast to the woes of the stevedores, Durban harbour was booming. In 1994, containerized cargo made up more than 30% of the total operations of the harbour, and this percentage rose steadily.<sup>88</sup> In their framework for new port developments, the new government hardly considered the position of the stevedores at all, despite much mention of re-dressing the imbalances of the past. They were far more concerned with issues of customer satisfaction, building new container terminals, and overall growth of the industry.<sup>89</sup> In government reports, they blamed the casual stevedoring industry on past inequalities. They did make one serious attempt to regulate casual labour by

<sup>84</sup> Interview by the author. Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

<sup>85</sup> I discuss this in detail in Chapter 3. Also worth considering is David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*, no. 30 1996.

<sup>86</sup> David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 97-99.

<sup>87</sup> 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.

<sup>88</sup> Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. p. 17.

<sup>89</sup> Dept of Transport. *White Paper on National Transport Policy*, 20 August 1996. This can be found at [www.gov.za/whitepaper/1996/transportpolicy1996.htm](http://www.gov.za/whitepaper/1996/transportpolicy1996.htm) Accessed on 19 June 2002, 12:00. Dept of Transport *Moving South Africa: A Transport Strategy for the year 2020*. Located at [www.transport.gov.za/projects/msa/msa.html](http://www.transport.gov.za/projects/msa/msa.html) Accessed on 18 June 2002, 14:00.

recommending the establishment of a common labour pool for stevedores.<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately, this only functioned successfully for a year before employers withdrew, claiming the pool was too big, too expensive and ultimately inefficient.<sup>91</sup>

### Theorizing Containerization

What I have argued in this chapter is that containerisation was responsible for remaking stevedoring labour in Durban. It is also important to note that containerization remade stevedoring work internationally. At the heart of this process was the destruction of the gang as the crucial feature of the labour process. A limited number of workers have since been trained to perform a number of different tasks and have become flexible workers. Individual workers, instead of gangs, have become the subject of scrutiny by management. More than ever, the labour process has become controlled by the employers.<sup>92</sup> Since the days of Malcolm Maclean, the industry has explicitly looked for technical solutions to eliminate human labour and gain firmer control of the labour process in an attempt to ensure as little “time-wasting” as possible. Especially in Durban, the experience of the majority of workers counted little when it came to retrenchment.

Throughout this chapter I have alluded to the idea that containerisation is part of the expansion of international trade that underpins what Castells describes as ‘the growth of the informational economy’ and is popularly referred to as globalization. In general, containerisation broadly aims to accelerate trade turnover and increase productivity, and the significant feature of this process is the pace at which technological innovation happens, and becomes not only economically viable, but profitable. Castells points out

<sup>90</sup> Best described in Simon Stratton “The Implementation of the Dock Labour Scheme in the Port of Durban”, Unpublished Paper, University of Adelaide, 1999.

<sup>91</sup> To some extent, employers were correct. The register of the pool was manipulated and even unionists admitted it was too big. Interview by the author. Tony Kruger, Chairman of Durban Stevedores Association, 28 November 2000.

<sup>92</sup> Harry Braverman. *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974. p. 57. Processes of surveillance at work are nothing new, and even the gang structure itself monitored individuals performance, by the use of time clocks and rubber bands heat-sealed onto workers’ wrists. Foucault, and Weber before him, recognized surveillance as an essential part of the capitalist system. But information technology enables a further step in this process by replacing men by machines and by giving the remaining core workers essential functions that immediately establish any kind of mistake on the job. See Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin, 1977. p. 209, 221-226 Weber, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Unwin, 1971. p. 47-48, 59, 69-70

that a defining feature of the information age is the speed at which innovations become economically profitable.<sup>93</sup>

Having made this broad comparison, I think it is necessary to look at the comparative effects of these processes on labour. David Harvey has discussed a new régime of flexible accumulation in the world economy characterized by the creation of a segmented labour market consisting of a core group of flexible workers and the casualization of the majority of workers.<sup>94</sup> In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells suggests a number of features about the transformation of work and employment, which he claims lead to a ‘redefinition of the relationship between capital and labour’.<sup>95</sup>

Firstly, Castells discusses the increasing interdependence of the global labour force through the mechanisms of international trade’s impact on employment and labour conditions and the new mode of flexible management. The movement among companies has thus been to retain a number of key workers in the sector and casualize everybody else<sup>96</sup>. This tendency has indeed been present among stevedoring workers, although the workers that have remained as permanent (the key workers) have themselves needed to become flexible, used by management for a variety of tasks as they arise, without becoming managers.

Secondly, Castells has suggested that;

The line of information processing is most productive when it is embedded in the natural production or handling of goods, instead of being disjointed in a stepped up technical division of labour<sup>97</sup>.

The entire process of containerisation has, after all, been about the integration of new forms of technology into the actual labour process. Stevedores have had to learn how to operate forklift trucks and larger cranes, and the increasing reliance on containers is something that is embedded in the advancement of the industry itself, rather than being imposed from outside the industry. It seems that the information economy started well before the 1990s in the stevedoring industry.

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<sup>93</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. p. 150.

<sup>95</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society* p. 277-278.

<sup>96</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 234-5.

<sup>97</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 211.

Finally, Castells notes that, “If technology *per se* does not create or destroy employment, it does profoundly transform the nature of work and the organization of production”<sup>98</sup> Castells may be correct here when considering the global picture of work in the information age, yet by closely considering the historical trajectory (as he invites us to do) of work in a specific industry in South Africa, we can clearly agree that while technology has transformed the nature of work and organization of production, it has also left many workers as casual labourers, uncertain of their future and over-exploited in their struggle for survival. It seems clear that key features of the information economy, particularly in relation to labour, came to the docks in the 1970s as a result of technological innovation. To understand globalization more clearly, it seems that we have to take specific technologies like containerisation more seriously as the innovations which ultimately create the conditions in which the information economy can occur.

## Conclusion

Throughout the world, ports have had to face containerisation. Yet this relatively simple technological innovation has produced new power relations and altered social conditions. Ports have made huge investments in new container terminals, dredged new paths for bigger ships, and abandoned the old methods of docking and warehousing. The increasing efficiency of road transport and communications has also meant that traditionally strong ports have also lost a degree of their power, because shipping companies are more freely able to choose the ports at which they dock. This has led a commentator to suggest that ports no longer have guaranteed markets, and are just one part of a set of multimodal transportation chains. Shipping companies have far more freedom to determine where they dock.<sup>99</sup> In short, the international shipping companies have an increased ability to determine local prices, and while labourers need to possess new skills, be increasingly flexible and have their labour time more strictly controlled.

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<sup>98</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. p. 265.

<sup>99</sup> Brian Slack. “Pawns in the Game: Ports in a Global Transportation System” in *Growth and Change*, vol. 24, Fall 1993. Although this certainly bears more truth in the northern hemisphere, many ports and companies in Durban fear that shipping lines may take their operations to Maputo or Beira if costs are not kept down.

Many older ports have become less significant than newer developing ports, resting largely on particular investment in container technologies.

Durban as a harbour has become a key container port and maintained a leading position in terms of ports worldwide. In 1994, of the total cargo transported through Durban of 41.4 million tons could be divided into Conventional Break-bulk Cargo still made up 21.83% of the total.<sup>100</sup> Although there is still some break-bulk cargo handled, one must remember that this market is increasingly unstable and that previously all the containerized cargo would have been transported in break-bulk. This chapter has been about the decline of the stevedoring industry in Durban and the material reality becomes clear when looking at the total numbers of stevedores permanently employed through the period; at the height of the DSLSC in 1965 stevedoring labour force peaked at 3500 workers, by 1978 this had shrunk to an average of 2500 workers employed, and by 1985 the permanent labour force was some 1200 workers. By the late 1990s, permanent workers employed in stevedoring were less than 300. Casual workers perform most of the stevedoring work, without any work benefits or state protection. While in Europe containerization has led to a decline in the permanent worker force, casualization has been prevented by the initiatives of organized labour unions through 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.<sup>101</sup>

The effects of this decline in Durban have been exacerbated by the failure of the state to provide any kind of alternative employment for retrenched workers but the legacy of the relationship between the state and African workers had never seen the state take any real interest in African workers, save when their presence threatened Apartheid's ideological platforms. Indeed it is impossible to tell this story without discussing the role of the Apartheid state and colonial interests in the South African economy. In the early parts of this chapter I have tried to contextualize the roles of various actors towards dock labour and how this reflected much broader positions in their thinking.

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<sup>100</sup> Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*. p. 17.

<sup>101</sup> 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>

Likewise, it is impossible to discuss stevedoring in this period without discussing the material consequences of containerisation, and how through a process akin to the broad term globalization, local markets were undermined and exploited in favour of international concerns. Further, I have demonstrated the fragility of local initiatives to protect and develop in the industry in face of rapid international change and shown how we can understand containerisation as part of a bigger set of technological changes enabling new kinds of work and destroying older methods. It is important to notice how the historically weak position of the general stevedoring worker in South Africa leaves him unable to constructively engage with global change.

Despite efforts by different historical actors motivated by vastly different interests, casual labour has remained an enduring feature of stevedoring labour in Durban. In the 1960s it was eradicated by the Apartheid government under conditions of intense control and repression for the political and moral well being of whites in the city. It must be remembered that these were times of economic growth. During the 1970s casual labour re-emerged after strikes, bottlenecks in the harbour and conditions of economic crisis. In the 1980s, joint efforts by stevedoring companies and the labour movement in South Africa seemed to promise a stable, well-trained labour force, free from both a system of crudely racist exploitation and from a system of casual labourers who were treated as unskilled, badly paid and enjoyed little or no job security. Yet it was at this moment that these initiatives began to fail: new types of work were needed, demanding a far smaller labour market. State investment in container terminals from the late 1970s ensured the long-term survival of the port, but not of the stevedores, their numbers were dramatically slashed. The stevedores that remained performed irregular work, often on older charter ships. Their work was no longer central to the operation of the harbour. Despite some militancy in the mid-1990s<sup>102</sup>, they no longer have the power to hold up production at the harbour. A pool of casual labourers today work in the harbour, dependent on the extra work which arises everyday but which is not constant enough to be guaranteed. Unlike earlier times, there are many workers and the supply of available work is scarce.

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<sup>102</sup> David Hemson. "Asinamali! Then and Now" in *Alternation* (1995). Hemson comments that in contrast with earlier strikes, which made front page news, this strike did not even feature in the local newspapers.

While Harries, Cooper and others have decisively demonstrated the agency and abilities of casual labourers to resist industrial discipline and to often ensure better conditions for themselves during the first half of the twentieth century, it is impossible to make similar assertions about casual labourers today. The remaining buffalo working in Durban face a constant battle for survival and have very little strength in an industry where there is little or no demand for their labour.

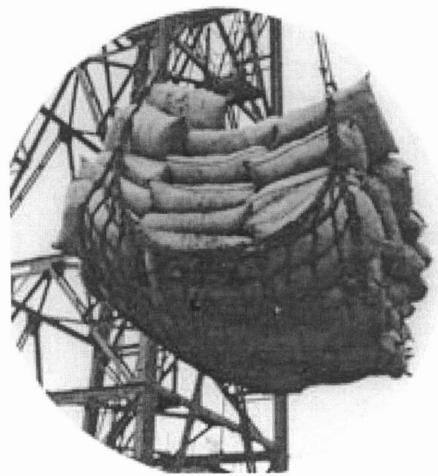
## Appendix to Chapter 1

### A. Cargo Handling: Pre-Unitization

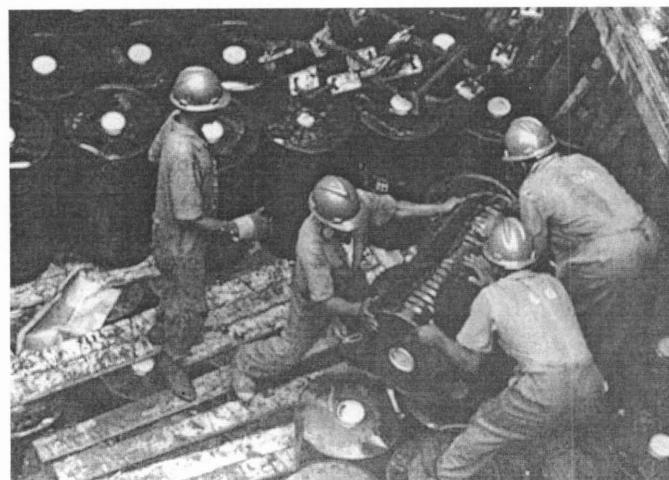
1.



2.



3.



4.



**Sources:** Pictures 1 and 3: Ross-Watt, D: *Housing for Bantu Stevedores*. B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970. p. 36

Pictures 2 and 4: Haarhoff, E. *Cargo Handling, Operations and Amenity Centre: general cargo handling facilities for the Point harbour, Durban*. B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970. p. 73

**B. Unitization. Picture 5 is Palletization, 6 is Containerization**

5.



6.



**Sources:** Picture 5: Haarhoff, E. *Cargo Handling, Operations and Amenity Centre*, p. 76.

Picture 6. Pearson, Tony. *African keyport : story of the Port of Durban : 29 degrees 52min south and 31 degrees 02min east*. Durban : Accucut, 1995. p. 248.

## **Chapter 2: Authority, Paternalism, and the Apartheid State: Administering Stevedoring Labour in Durban, 1959-1977<sup>1</sup>**

In 1959 a strike at African Associated Stevedores brought the harbour operation to a standstill. The strike was not unusual in the sense that it was built on two decades of militancy among stevedoring workers. Yet the strike was to mark a turning point of labour policy and management in the docks. The strike changed the way that stevedoring operated in the harbour, marked a moment where employers acknowledged the dangers of working class action, and finally gave way to government demands for a new system of labour control, one that fell closely in line with their envisioned ideals of Apartheid labour practice. The remaking of labour control following the strike created a new system of regulation which, unsurprisingly, affected the manner in which work in the harbour was done.

In grappling with these changes, and especially with the reaction of stevedores and the changed practice of work itself, it is possible to read this remaking in many ways. Particularly appealing is a certain moment of reformulating or modifying culture itself. An approach that immediately presents itself is the important theoretical discussion between E.P. Thompson and Dipesh Chakrabarty over a certain reading of Marx's notion of history. For Marx, capitalist labour relations are a constituent element of capitalist society, and are only realized when workers gain the formal freedom of a contractual relation with the owners of production.<sup>2</sup> Although certain pre-capitalist practices persisted after the introduction of capitalism, capitalist relations, and indeed the proletariat, are only realized once these practices are dispensed with. In following this

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter owes a considerable debt to the detailed empirical work done by David Hemson in his PhD thesis. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*, University of Warwick, 1979. Although our focus and arguments are clearly different, in many places further empirical detail can be found in this mammoth work of no less than 741 pages.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this particular reading of Marx's conception on the transition to capitalism from Dipesh Chakrabarty. This is partly due to the simplicity with which Chakrabarty presents the argument and partly because I have been unable to locate the specific section in the *Grundrisse* that the argument relies on. See Martin Nicolaus' translation of Karl Marx. *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth, 1974. p. 105-106, 297-308 and 464. Cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Rethinking Working-Class History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. p. 3-4. Also see David McLellan's translation of the *Grundrisse*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971. p. 106-118.

discussion, EP Thompson's work suggests that culture, and social and political tradition, shaped the making of the English working class.<sup>3</sup> In effect, Thompson problematizes Marx's division between pre-capitalist and capitalist social forms by claiming that the inherited traditions of these workers shaped their particular expressions and experience of work, religion, protest and organization: finally their consciousness. Dipesh Chakrabarty picks up this point in his discussion of Indian jute workers and suggests that the dominant bourgeois tradition that existed in England at the time of the industrial revolution was essential for the particular "making" of the working class. Chakrabarty argues that in places where different traditions were dominant, different experiences of capitalist production would be inevitable.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to show that the responses of Indian workers, in terms of their responses to authority and capitalist production, and in organizing and protest, were very different to those of English workers. Ultimately Chakrabarty suggests that "cultural practices" are so significant in the development of the "worker" in capitalist society that Marx's objective definitions are limited to being specific observations of the development of capitalism in Europe.

Scholarship focused on the beginnings of capitalist production in Natal does suggest that there were cultural misunderstandings of African work practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> However, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Zulu war (1879-1880), Jeff Guy shows that colonial administrators attempted to streamline the system of African labour supply from Zululand by retaining key features of the pre-colonial period.<sup>6</sup> Guy argues that colonial authority was based on three key features, namely the retention of features of homestead production, the introduction of hut tax, and wage labour outside Zululand. Most importantly, this system was administered by Zulu chiefs rather than colonial officials. These chiefs controlled the recruitment of Zulu workers and were responsible for their discipline in the workplaces.<sup>7</sup> Yet the power of these chiefs was based not only

<sup>3</sup> EP Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin, 1969. esp. p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Rethinking Working-Class History*. p. 219-225.

<sup>5</sup> Notably Keletso Atkins. *The Moon is Dead! Give us our money! The cultural origins of an African work ethic in Natal, South Africa*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Guy. "The destruction and reconstruction of Zulu society" in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds) *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa*. London: Longman, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 174 & 179. During this period the cash economy became increasingly important for Zulu workers, not only to pay hut tax, but also because it became accepted for lobola (dowry) payments. It thus became important for Zulu men to demonstrate their allegiance to these chiefs, despite many having questionable (from a traditional point of view) rises to power.

on traditional kinship structures but also on particular chiefs' submission to ultimate colonial authority. This mode of colonial administration, known as the Shepstone system, meant a very particular introduction of Zulu workers to wage labour. Above all, this system acknowledged culture as being of primary importance to the management of Zulu workers.

Hemson has shown that during the 1940s and 1950s casual stevedoring workers in Durban proved to be among the most militant in Durban. They not only rallied around struggles to improve their own wages and working conditions, but also joined in wider political and economic struggles.<sup>8</sup> Employers became increasingly frustrated by this militancy and eventually conceded to the demands of the Apartheid government to remake work (in co-operation with government officials) according to their own ideological model. Following the strike in 1959, the Apartheid government attempted to remake work, and especially labour control, as close to their perception of culture as possible. As early as 1952, the Native Affairs Department discussed the introduction of labour bureaux as limiting labour in the cities by the use of the *bewysboek* and by being able to streamline recruitment in African areas to bring labour into the cities, "only when it was necessary". The secretary of Native Affairs, Eiselen, claimed that it was the first attempt in the history of the union to develop a comprehensive system of labour administration.<sup>9</sup> With specific reference to Natal, it is clear that Zulu authorities had substantial ability to decide who worked when and where, and MG Buthelezi had significant influence in the Native Affairs Department.<sup>10</sup> The problem that emerges for Apartheid administrators, despite their absolute faith in this system, and their belief that the successes of the 1960s were premised on this new system of labour control, based on culture, is that they showed a fundamental ignorance of the possibility of cultural change. What I will demonstrate in this chapter is that the successes of the Stevedoring Labour Company were premised on something entirely different to whatever Zulu culture had

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<sup>8</sup> David Hemson. "Dock workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban, 1940-1959" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 4, 1977. p. 91-92

<sup>9</sup> SAB NTS 9794 1031/400 Dept of Native Affairs Head Office. "Discussions about Labour Bureaux". 21 October 1952.

<sup>10</sup> SAB SAP 494 15/2/52. Uitreiking van Bewysboeke aan Bantoe 1957-1961. Acting Native Affairs Commissioner Mahlabathini. "Issuing of Reference books to Natives".

become.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately there is insufficient evidence that among African stevedores in Durban, their sense of culture is linked as closely to their work and to political presentations of identity as Marx, Thompson and Chakrabarty might suggest. These workers may not have been part of the “moment” of labour in capitalist production, but neither were they docile workers whose consciousness stemmed directly from a hierarchical culture.

Instead, I will demonstrate that what occurred in the industry was that work was indeed remade; and the relationship between izinduna and stevedoring hands changed significantly and became tied together within the new relations of production. The new system of management under the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company brought with it new responsibilities of controlling work and keeping records of workers. This new authority also gave izinduna the power to decide who worked and how often. But these new powers did not exist in a vacuum: izinduna were also monitored and controlled from above, and the compound manager kept his izinduna very closely in check. Workers became more reliant than ever on izinduna in this new centralized system of control. This relationship can perhaps best be understood as a paternalistic arrangement that developed and served to protect both izinduna and the stevedoring workers.<sup>12</sup> In an objective sense, the remaking of stevedoring work created a greater distance between workers and izinduna, by offering izinduna more institutionalized power. But in a subjective sense, it bound them together. As vulnerable as workers might have been to the arbitrary whims of izinduna, izinduna were ultimately responsible for the functioning of their gangs, and were subject to the constant pressures of production demands. In exchange for respect and hard work, izinduna allowed workers certain freedoms while at work and even covered for workers. In understanding this relationship, Dunbar Moodie’s understanding

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<sup>11</sup> This thesis does not, regrettably, try to trace the cultural changes happening during this period. This would require extensive interviews with retired workers in Zululand about the specific upheavals that these workers must have experienced at home while Bantu Administration was trying to impose its specific will on chiefs. The evidence which I have presented in this chapter does show that the vision of the Apartheid government of Zulu culture does not concur with the experiences of African workers in Durban.

<sup>12</sup> In a very different context, Eugene Genovese has noted that while Paternalism undermines overall class solidarity, it recognizes mutual obligations by both parties, and creates a “fragile bridge” over contradictions that implies a shared respect between oppressors and oppressed. Genovese; *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The world that slaves made*. United States: Vintage Press, 1976. p. 5.

of moral economy as “mutually acceptance rules for resistance within systems of domination and appropriation” has proved a useful framework.<sup>13</sup>

Management endeavoured to keep these new structures of authority as close as possible to their approximations of what Zulu culture was. Workers were recruited from rural areas, and especially after 1970, the focus of this recruitment became especially tied to Zululand and areas where Bantu administration had a particularly powerful influence. Yet the fundamental misconception in management and the state’s position- during this period- was that power and authority flowed from above, and that this is what kept the system running during the 1960s, the heyday of the Labour Supply Company. This becomes particularly clear in their reaction to the strike of 1969 and the crisis that followed. By attempting to focus recruitment squarely on Zululand and to bring back a crucial figure of authority, they hoped to strengthen their own authority in the harbour. This failed miserably, because they misunderstood the actual processes underlying work and authority among stevedoring workers.

Indeed, I must emphasize that this chapter does not consider “culture” in any kind of comprehensive manner. My focus in this chapter is explicitly on what Michael Burawoy calls “production politics” or the relationships and identities that are built out of the particular conditions and power relations in the workplace itself.<sup>14</sup> My use of “culture” throughout the chapter has a dual purpose. In the first instance, I believe that it is appropriate to use the term “culture” in this specific workplace, where labour administration and the state celebrate the successes of labour control in these precise terms, the terms of cultural difference so entrenched in Apartheid labour ideology. In addition, two ethnographic accounts celebrated the practices of the Labour Supply Company as fulfilling the cultural understandings of migrant Zulu workers.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, this chapter speaks to “culture” in the sense that it shows the difficulty of its application

<sup>13</sup> Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*. Johannesburg, Witswatersrand University Press, 1993. p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Burawoy. *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under capitalism and socialism*. London: Verso, 1985. p. 10-12.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Sack, of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Natal during the 1970s, produced a thesis *Izimpohlo: the bachelors: a study of black migrant labourers in Durban* and paper entitled “The 1972-73 Strikes in Natal” praising the application of ‘Zulu tradition’ in the Labour Supply Company. Sack also advised an architectural student researching ‘housing for Bantu stevedores’. See Sack quoted in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 395, 415, 594. Also see D.M. Ross-Watt. *Housing for Bantu Stevedores*. B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970.

to the context of an industrial workplace and I show that we cannot celebrate or fetishize culture as an uncritical and immutable set of differences. It was precisely this insistence of cultural difference that drove Apartheid administrators in their misguided and brutal attempts to control the African stevedores in Durban.

This chapter is set against a very clear economic backdrop of the booming 1960s South African economy and its decline in the early 1970s. This undoubtedly affected stevedores more than most workers, since much of their income came from overtime earnings that were plentiful during the economic boom. After 1968, overtime became scarce, and this was clearly the reason for renewed industrial action in 1969 and 1972.

### **Conditions in the Harbour in the 1950s: Casual workers and militancy**

The 1940s and 1950s in South African labour relations were difficult times indeed. The war economy had seen an increased demand for African labour in the cities, and the state had turned a blind eye towards an ever growing presence of African workers in urban areas. Much of the pass law legislation of the 1930s had been ignored in an effort to maintain the economy. After the war, the National Party won the 1948 election by appealing to the white electorate that African urbanization needed to be reversed and more tightly controlled than ever before. The 1950s saw sustained effort by the National Party government to enforce this promise by the promulgation of the Population Registration Act (1950), the Abolition of Passes and Co-Ordination of Documents Act (1952) and the establishment of the *Bewysburo* to administer passes and regulate influx control.<sup>16</sup>

This upheaval was reflected in the stevedoring industry during this period. Togt labour had been used in the Durban harbour for almost 100 years, primarily because it suited the irregular nature of the industry.<sup>17</sup> The position of the casuals was interesting

<sup>16</sup> Two notable pieces detailing this process are Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; and Keith Breckenridge. "From Hubris to Chaos: the makings of the Bewysburo and the end of documentary government." Unpublished paper, May 2002. Breckenridge argues that by the early 1960s, the orderly and controlled distribution of passes had failed, and the state increasingly relied on violence to maintain order.

<sup>17</sup> Keletso Atkins makes an alternative suggestion in her study of the making of Togt labour in Natal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She argues that tog labour developed as a compromise between Africans and early colonists, who were unable to understand a uniquely African work ethic. See Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give us our*

and somewhat paradoxical. They had no guarantee of work nor any material interest in the industry beyond their own wages. These workers were able to take advantage of the surplus of work and the shortage of workers by moving from one company to another depending on the best rates offered. They were also surprisingly well organized. David Hemson notes that casual dockworkers had a long history of struggles to improve wages and working conditions, and engaged in wider political and economic struggles.<sup>18</sup> The 1940s had swelled the number of stevedores working casually in Durban to in excess of 3000. But their casual status did not mean that these workers were not political or acutely aware of their own exploitation. Indeed, a 1956 report on the conditions of stevedoring workers by Sergeant Mentz of Central Native Labour Board mentioned two significant strikes in the 1950s alone and noted that workers were able to embark on strikes and go-slows on the issues of wages and work categorization.<sup>19</sup> The evident militancy of workers was a cause of concern for employers, and more acutely, how was the Apartheid state to deal with the mass of casual labourers working irregularly in Durban and threatening to upset its neat plans of “re-tribalization”? While the experience of stabilizing “the residuum” in the city was not unique to South Africa, the solution of a tightly controlled migrant labour system and removal of all other prospective workers was indeed specifically South African.<sup>20</sup> These plans had been developed in the late 1940s and refined in the early 1950s by the Apartheid state. During the 1950s in the harbour, it was employers who refused this solution, believing it to be contrary to the profitability of the stevedoring industry.

In 1949, the State made its first investigations into the problem of surplus workers in Durban. Through the Durban City Council, African work-seekers were prohibited entry into the city if there was already full African employment, and the Native Commissioner for Durban reported that, within a few months, the estimated surplus of

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money! *The cultural origins of an African work ethic in Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900*. Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> David Hemson. “Dock workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban, 1940-1959” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 4, 1977. p. 91-92

<sup>19</sup> SAB ARB 3317 1196/5/4/1 vol. 1 Sgd. S Mentz, Central Native Labour Board. “Report on Conditions of Employment of Stevedoring Workers”.

<sup>20</sup> For instance see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* and Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront*. In the different settings of London and Mombasa, these authors both argue that the state solution to master-less and often militant casual workers was the development and extension of permanent employment, *within the city itself*.

African workers in Durban was reduced from 10000 to 6000.<sup>21</sup> The stevedoring employers reacted by obtaining togt licenses, exempting them for the City Council regulations, premising their applications by arguing that these workers were integral to the industry and agreeing to the extension of compound facilities. In 1957, the state and employers clashed again, this time over Verwoerd's (Minister of Native Affairs) declaration that only 2000 stevedores would be allowed in the point area, and that employers should be responsible for housing these workers.<sup>22</sup> Employers again protested that this would cause congestion in the harbour and ships would go to ports outside the country. While considerable pressure was put on employers, casuals remained working in the port, although moves were made by employers to find suitable accommodation for stevedores that would place all stevedores in the same place, irrespective of which company actually employed them. What was to break the back of the employers was the renewed worker militancy of the 1959 strike.

### **The 1959 Strike and the re-making of Labour Organization**

The 1959 strike is well documented in the state archives and is undoubtedly a crucial moment in the history of stevedoring labour in Durban. According to the Divisional Inspector of Natal, Strachan, the strike began on the 24 February 1959 when over 200 workers refused to start work at African Associated Agency and Stevedoring Company.<sup>23</sup> He suggests that the primary reason for their grievances was dissatisfaction with the increases that indunas and other grades of work classified as semi-skilled received, without any increase for the ordinary stevedores. By 25 February, the harbour was brought to a standstill when about 1400 workers refused to work. Strachan notes that he instructed the somewhat ambivalent employers not to give the workers more time or allow them to dictate terms. Following a meeting with workers, Strachan and the Police gave workers till 14.45 to return to work or be arrested, and many workers were duly

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<sup>21</sup> Report of the Department of Native Affairs, 1950, cited in David Hemson. "Dock workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban". p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> David Hemson. "Dock workers, labour circulation and class struggles in Durban". p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal). "Strike: Stevedoring Industry" addressed to the Secretary for Labour, Pretoria.

arrested or fired. By 26 February work resumed as normal, except that some workers had been fired, and that a plan had been made to re-organize the dock labour pool.

At the end of his letter, Strachan included minutes of the meeting held between himself, the Bantu Affairs Commissioner, the management of African Associated Stevedoring and the 1400 striking workers.<sup>24</sup> The workers' responses from the meeting indicate that they were well aware that the government controlled wages in the stevedoring industry, and believed that they did not receive the same treatment as the indunas. The workers also noted that they resolved to continue striking until they received increases and would not tolerate scab labour introduced by the employers. The Bantu Affairs commissioner replied to the workers that the strike was illegal and that there was "no question of negotiation since the law has been promulgated and must be complied with". He urged the workers to resume work and file complaints through the proper channels. The minutes conclude by noting that the meeting ended in disorder.

Despite the firm stance of the workers, work did resume in the port the following day. Togt labour, an institution of the port since the nineteenth century, was summarily abolished. Some of these workers were given weekly or monthly contracts, subject to being "screened" as to whether they were disruptive elements.<sup>25</sup> In addition, a plan was hastily drawn up to reformulate labour supply on the basis of a "pool system", comprising both members of the Native Affairs Department and employers.

By the 29<sup>th</sup> March, management from the various stevedoring companies had met and drafted a memorandum of agreement that would bring the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company into existence.<sup>26</sup> The main aim of the company was to centralize control of the workforce in a compound, from where all stevedoring employers would draw their necessary daily labour, and to control all the administration and recruitment of stevedoring workers. Peter Kemp acted as Trustee of the Company and as chairman. Kemp's background was as a member the Native Affairs Board. The picture conjured up suggests an increasing move towards surveillance. It is also interesting to

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<sup>24</sup> SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal). "Notes of a meeting held at 150a Point Road, Durban on 25 February 1959"

<sup>25</sup> SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Telex from Arbeid Pretoria to Arbeid Cape Town. 26 February 1959.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

suggest that authority in the compound was made up of a network of niches and individual power relations that existed between an already complex management-worker relationship.

The other members of the management team of the Labour Supply Company consisted of a deputy manager, Dreyer, and an African who would be responsible for administering the compound as the Bantu Liaison Officer. The companies would have to bear an extra cost for administration and a small guarantee fee for workers. However, this was compensated for by the promise of industrial order and the ever-expanding port industry and cargo loads.

The end of tog labour and the introduction of permanent work was met with an ambivalent response by workers. While some commented that permanent work gave them the money they needed to survive<sup>27</sup>, *Ilanga lase Natal* reported that the grievances that the workers went on strike for had still not been resolved.<sup>28</sup> The following month, the paper noted that the new workers employed were suffering serious injuries due to their lack of experience.<sup>29</sup> Despite these problems, the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company continued on the premise (for the stevedoring companies) that it safeguarded industrial order. At the same time it fulfilled the objectives of the National Party Government by maintaining order in the cities, ensuring that workers did not become proletarianized, and creating a “reserve army” of African workers in rural areas.<sup>30</sup>

However, it was clear from the 1959 strike that stevedores did not have a good relationship with the izinduna and demonstrated a remarkable ability to understand the failures of the order. During the meeting with workers following the strike, the spokesperson for the striking stevedores remarked that “indunas (*sic*) and workers do not eat from the same plate - stevedoring workers are forced to eat from the ground, while indunas are able to eat from a plate”.<sup>31</sup> Before 1959, the role of izinduna is not especially clear. Although employed to provide a channel of communication between white management and workers, they had no institutionalized function and seem to have acted

<sup>27</sup> Mr Nzuzu, Durban stevedore, quoted in Tina Sideris. *Sifuna imali Yethu: The lives and struggles of Durban Dockworkers, 1940-1981*. SAIRR Oral History Project, 1982, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> “The new strategy to control Dockworkers in Point.” *Ilanga lase Natal*, 7 March 1959.

<sup>29</sup> “The problem of dismissal has started afresh”. *Ilanga lase Natal*. 25 April 1959.

<sup>30</sup> David Hemson. . *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 385.

<sup>31</sup> SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal). “Notes of a meeting held at 150a Point Road, Durban on 25 February 1959”

arbitrarily in their exercise of authority. It seems that stevedoring workers understood izinduna as boss boys and had little respect for their authority.

The re-ordering of the system was not simply an attempt to limit casualization and ensure a smooth operation. What a “smooth operation” also meant was the attempt to break working class solidarity and tie recruitment, authority and cultural order together so strongly that dissent would be immediately suppressed. We will see how this played out in the following section.

### Apartheid Labour Administration: Stevedores in Durban during the 1960s

*“What the national network of labour bureaux sought to achieve in relation to thousands of companies, the Labour Supply Company worked out in relation to the stevedoring companies.”<sup>32</sup>*

Despite these changes and the militant tradition of the 1950s, the 1960s was a surprisingly quiet decade in terms of strikes in the docks. For Apartheid labour administrators, it was during this period in the docks that the system of carefully controlled Apartheid labour practice was perfected. Mamdani has referred to this practice within Apartheid as the perfection of the system of indirect rule, and perhaps this is more applicable for Natal than anywhere else in South Africa.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in order to hold any real force, this claim requires closer empirical investigation than Mamdani offers. Since the argument ultimately turns on the nature of authority, it is necessary to investigate this in detail. Furthermore, while Mamdani’s thesis is certainly attractive, I maintain that “decentralized despotism” must necessarily be read against both political economy and the politics in the workplace itself. The economic strength of South Africa during this period had direct benefits for stevedores who, while employed on 9 month contracts, received substantially more income during the economic boom of this period.

From both the perspective of the Stevedoring Companies and that of the state, the operation of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company was an overwhelming success during the 1960s. Record turnover of cargo loads were experienced, with an

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<sup>32</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 388.

<sup>33</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. Citizen and Subject. I suggest that Natal is the best case of Mamdani’s argument because of the close relationship between African “tribal” administrators and the Native Affairs department (see introduction).

industrial calm in the ports very unlike the previous two decades. Workers would work on 9 or 10 month contracts, and return home for the rest of the year.<sup>34</sup> Even weekly employment had been done away with, and although stevedores didn't actually work every day, they were classed as permanent employees. It is critical to note that their actual wages depended on the amount that they worked, so it was clearly in workers' interests to work as much as possible and not have too large a pool of workers. The economic boom contributed so significantly and directly to the stevedoring industry, such was the demand to clear ships as quickly as possible that more than half of workers' average wages derived from overtime pay.<sup>35</sup> Despite an initial limiting of the labour pool after 1959, the numbers increased with increased productivity and peaked at 2923 stevedores in 1964 and stabilized at 2600 in 1966.<sup>36</sup>

The most important piece of legislation in this period was the Bantu Labour Act of 1964. The Act provided for a broader network of labour bureaux which developed directly from the Bantustans to urban centres and workplaces. It increased the power of chiefs and homeland officials to regulate and cancel the contracts of workers, and it ultimately increased the dependence of African workers on Bantustan administrators for employment.<sup>37</sup> The direct relationship between state policy and the Labour Supply Company is spelt out in an *Illanga* article that discusses the "generous" donation of money from the Labour Supply Company to a school in Mahlabathini (the home district of MG Buthelezi).<sup>38</sup>

Work itself was regularized in the Labour Supply Company by Stevedoring Labour Units. According to this system, *Izinduna* were established and selected eight stevedoring hands to form a Unit and this unit remains unaltered unless somebody is incapacitated or goes on leave. Very rarely, according to Company officials, did the units break up or was there any cause for complaint. In fact, supervisory problems were few

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<sup>34</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 512.

<sup>35</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 526.

<sup>36</sup> SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development and David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 512.

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Bantu Labour Act, see David Hemson, *Class Consciousness and migrant workers*, p. 385-391, 410.

<sup>38</sup> "The help offered by Stevedoring Company to KwaZulu." *Illanga lase Natal*. 4 January 1964.

and labour relations “between White supervisors and African workers are excellent”.<sup>39</sup> In addition, this system allowed detailed records to be kept monitoring injury, illness, absenteeism and work record.

At first this system seems to follow a conventional pattern of the regularization of employment and an accompanying increase and diversification of surveillance that had been written about in detail both internationally and in Africa.<sup>40</sup> However, the key point here is the nature of authority (and tied to this, labour recruitment) that comes into play. For instead of this being the moment of the emergence of the proletarian urbanized worker, the system was based squarely on the migrant labour system. This meant that at the moment of potential industrial transformation, workers were required to come from rural areas and maintain permanent residence there. Indeed, the only way to gain access to work in the port was to be recruited from outside urban areas.<sup>41</sup> This fell in line with the National Party’s firm commitment to prevent African urbanization at all costs.

Although authority in the Labour Supply Company rested ultimately with the white management of the company (who were responsible to the Native Labour Bureau and to the private Stevedoring companies, control of the day-to-day activities lay with a set of African officials, or *izinduna*. The appointment of these officials often had to do with seniority and the relationship through extended family or kinship networks that reached into African rural areas.<sup>42</sup> Discussing the functioning of stevedoring labour units, the Labour Supply Company suggested that these units were efficient because they related to the “*distinct social organization of the Bantu that values the clan or family unit above that of the individual*”<sup>43</sup>, and because of the authority of the Induna in selecting the

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<sup>39</sup> SAB BAO 3049 C39/29. W. Dreyer, Deputy Manager, Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. “Some notes on the establishment, methods and organization of a stevedoring labour pool”. February 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. Gareth Stedman Jones. *Outcast London*. Frederick Cooper. *On the African Waterfront* to mention but a few.

<sup>41</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*, p. 414-416.

<sup>42</sup> Although beyond the scope of the present study, an investigation of the appointment of *izinduna* remains somewhat under problematized in the literature. It is clear that at various moments workers deeply resented the appointment and authority of the *izinduna*, and they are often presented as uniformly supporting and enforcing the will of management. In Chapter 3 I present a case of *izinduna* supporting trade unions, and again the relationship between the *izinduna* and the shop stewards in the 1980s was not always one of tension, as one would expect, given the literature. The only way that this could be done with any measure of rigour seems to be to trace the life histories of particular *izinduna*, between town and country.

<sup>43</sup> SAB BAO 3075 C39/1171/1. Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. “Stevedoring Labour Units”.

gang and being able to communicate with its members. In the port, izinduna performed two separate functions:

Firstly, *izinduna* worked on ships, both in the holds and on the hatches, directing actual work and training new workers in particular skills. While there was one white foreman to a ship, there were four to eight gangs (stevedoring labour units), each with their own induna. These izinduna not only decided on the members of their particular gang, but were also directly involved in the labour process. They shared the lived experiences of the difficulties of stevedoring work and were often subject to the same difficult treatment from the white foremen.

Secondly, a minority of senior izinduna ran the compound, where workers lived for the duration of their contracts. These izinduna did not share the same experiences of work as those who ran the stevedoring operation. Many of them controlled the overall recruitment of workers from rural areas (as opposed to the work gangs) and were responsible for ensuring order in the compounds. The conditions of the compound accommodation in which stevedores lived was dreary, with poor lighting and approximately 20 stevedores occupied each room.<sup>44</sup> Many workers resented the authoritarian manner in which the compounds were run and especially J.B. Buthelezi.<sup>45</sup> These izinduna had the power to dismiss workers without warning and, seemingly ran a very efficient surveillance network that safeguarded against any form of dissent.<sup>46</sup> The most senior induna, and the head of the compound for most of the existence of the Labour Supply Company, was J.B. Buthelezi. Buthelezi was an uncle of MG Buthelezi. The relationship between Buthelezi and his izinduna seems to have been a rather fragile one. Initially they derived their power from him, but especially the izinduna working on ships seem to have grown resentful of his authority and treatment of workers, and would eventually back a petition to have him removed (see below). Management likened the

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<sup>44</sup> D.M. Ross-Watt. *Housing for Bantu Stevedores*. p. 20. Unfortunately this thesis is more concerned with analyzing the possibilities for new housing arrangements for stevedores and gives insufficient detail on the specific placements of izinduna, compound managers, and ordinary stevedoring workers to be able to establish any kind of evidence of the relationship between power, surveillance and architecture following Bentham's panopticon as discussed by Foucault and Linebaugh.

<sup>45</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and migrant workers*. p. 580, 617.

<sup>46</sup> Interview: Siza Makhaya. June 2001. Makhaya became the compound manager after the labour company collapsed at the end of the 1970s. He abolished the system, but recalled that surveillance was so efficient that any dissent from the workers could be traced within a hour.

structures of authority to that of a prefect system, with Buthelezi as head prefect.<sup>47</sup> We shall see that management overestimated the relationship between Buthelezi and his izinduna and underestimated the relationship between izinduna and workers.

In a report issued to the Department of Bantu Administration and Development in 1966, the deputy manager of the Labour Supply Company noted the success of this system in terms of industrial calm and Bantu administration during the first five years of operation of the company. Kemp attributed this success primarily to the fact that virtually all of the workers lived in the centralized compound.<sup>48</sup>

### **Paternalism and Moral Economy**

The success of the Labour Supply Company requires explanation. An industry with a tradition of worker militancy experienced no industrial action for a decade. Employers spoke favourably of industrial calm and regarded the system as running very smoothly. The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company was seen as a model of labour control by the Apartheid government.<sup>49</sup> As I have mentioned already, workers directly benefited from the growth of the harbour during this period, due to the structuring of their wages and the substantial overtime allowances that they earned. When the harbour went into temporary decline between 1969 and 1972, workers did protest and eventually struck work because their basic wage was insufficient. However, it is important here to reflect again on the relationships of authority that existed in the harbour. We have already seen the structures that were developed by the Labour Supply Company in answer to their perceptions of traditional Zulu culture. Yet neither the draconian Apartheid laws nor the authoritarian style of management sufficiently explains the apparent quiescence of the workers to new system of authority. Instead, what appears to have made work tolerable was the development of close relationships between workers and izinduna. As has been already outlined above, the majority of izinduna who supervised the operation of work were often caught between the demands of white

<sup>47</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 546

<sup>48</sup> SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.

<sup>49</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 383.

company foremen and African workers. Their authority was severely restrained by the ability of workers to stop work or at least slow the operation down. Because these izinduna were seen as leaders of their particular gang, a constant failure to keep up with the pace of production might have resulted in them losing their jobs. It was imperative for izinduna within this relationship to gain the absolute trust of the workforce. From the inception of the Labour Supply Company in 1959 it is clear that these izinduna relied substantially less on the use of arbitrary force to discipline their gangs.

In some ways these approaches to authority and discipline in the stevedoring industry are not unique to Durban. In London, Stephen Hill has suggested that “Reciprocity was an essential part of the link between foremen and their individual dock workers, because foremen saw the relationship as an exchange of favours”.<sup>50</sup> He suggests that nepotism in hiring and allocation was part of the system, and was justified by foremen in terms of their necessity for an efficient gang. Despite the fact that a similar reciprocity existed in Durban, izinduna were not ordinary foremen in a European industrial context. Their powers of authority and abilities to discipline the workforce were far greater than in any European context. Misbehaviour at work could potentially result not simply in being fired, but also in gaining a bad reputation among homeland authorities.<sup>51</sup> The relationships between izinduna and the stevedoring workers that developed were much closer to those of paternalism. These relationships were reciprocal in the sense that they acknowledged the mutual obligations of both parties, but were backed up by disproportional powers for the izinduna. It is crucial to realize that these relationships were built during the 1960s and based on trust that developed within the gang structure itself and does not fall back into any ill-conceived notions of Zulu “traditional” paternalism.<sup>52</sup> These relationships were built from the shared experience of difficult and often dangerous stevedoring work.

An interview conducted in 1982 with Mr Ngema is revealing. He worked in the Durban harbour from the 1950s, starting as a casual worker, and was re-employed as an induna following the 1959 strike. He believed that conditions improved with the

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Hill. *The dockers: Class and Tradition in London*. London: Heinemann, 1976. p. 23

<sup>51</sup> Interview: Siza Makhaya, 12 June 2001.

<sup>52</sup> A nuanced suggestion of paternalism in pre-capitalist Zulu society can be found in Jeff Guy. “Gender Oppression in Southern Africa’s pre-capitalist societies” in Cherryl Walker (editor). *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. Cape Town, 1990.

introduction of the Labour Supply Company because workers were no longer forced to do piece work, there was job security and the money was better. He claimed that there were seldom problems between indunas and workers. He also believed that workers trusted him and explained that sometimes he would cover for a worker when they were ill or absent.

*"They trust me, they trust me as a foreman. Even during the time when the law said that you must not answer back to your foreman, they still trusted and respected me".<sup>53</sup>*

As an induna, Ngema's position on J.B. Buthelezi was ambivalent. Although Buthelezi "treated us nicely", Ngema feared him. He claimed that some workers disliked him, and believed that he should be removed. Ngema suggests that Buthelezi often "shouted" at the workers, but that he treated us "according to his plans" and "that there is nothing bad in that". This suggests that there was a clear division between the senior izinduna in the compounds and the majority of izinduna working on the ships. Another senior worker (although not an induna) Mr Ndebele, supports this by claiming that although he was not an induna he performed the duties of an induna in his absence.<sup>54</sup>

The paternalistic relationship that developed was not simply one-sided respect of workers for izinduna. Mike Morris observed during his period working as a unionist that stevedores were often stealing goods off ships.<sup>55</sup> He argued that the gang was the most important structure for stevedoring work and that izinduna often allowed this process in exchange for the respect and trust they earned from the workers.<sup>56</sup> But izinduna did not

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<sup>53</sup>University of the Witwatersrand Historical Documents. AD 1722 SAIRR Oral History Project interview no. 45. Mr. Ngema interviewed by Tina Sideris, 17/11/82. My thanks go to Thami Sibiya for translating this for me.

<sup>54</sup> University of the Witwatersrand Historical Documents. AD 1722 SAIRR Oral History Project interview no. 56. Mr. Ndebele interviewed by Tina Sideris, 23/06/83.

<sup>55</sup> It is worth mentioning how entrenched the practices of theft were in dock work. In considering crime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Peter Linebaugh has noted that the dockers main source of income was to steal wooden chips from the timber used to build the ships. While having little exchange value, wood was an essential source of survival for residents of 18<sup>th</sup> century London, and was even sanctioned to a limited extent by employers. Linebaugh goes on to describe how these practices were curbed by the introduction of forms of surveillance and fairly simple technological innovations designed by the Samuel Bentham (Jeremy's brother!) to monitor every moment of work more closely and to remove individual initiative and knowledge from the labour process. See Peter Linebaugh. *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 371-401.

<sup>56</sup> Interview: Mike Morris, organizer General Workers Union 1981-1985, 28 June 2001.

simply sanction theft and pilferage, they also covered for stevedores' absenteeism and injury. Furthermore, izinduna were sensitive to workers' discomfort with the senior izinduna and even petitioned to have J.B. Buthelezi removed in 1972 (see below).

Following Genovese's assertion that paternalism undermines the possibility of class solidarity, the development of paternalism in the working relationships of the stevedores certainly limited the earlier direct confrontations that they had with indunas and management. Yet the objective possibilities of any successful resistance to the institution of the Labour Supply Company were very restricted. The administrators of the Labour Supply Company were determined to maintain industrial peace at any cost. In the context of tightly policed compound administration, Van Onselen has looked to the moments when workers subverted the system in other ways besides direct class struggle and organization. He has suggested that actions like theft, desertion and go-slows are "hidden forms" of class resistance.<sup>57</sup> While stevedores certainly engaged in some of these activities to avoid or ease exploitation, they also engaged in them to simply supplement their income. Perhaps more useful in describing their actions is Dunbar Moodie's interpretation of EP Thompson's notion of "moral economy"<sup>58</sup>. He describes moral economy as "encompassing mutually acceptable rules for resistance within systems of domination and appropriation". Although "resistance" by stevedores never threatened to upset the hegemony of Durban labour supply company directly, obviously irritated employers later claimed that containerisation at least helped to prevent pilferage and theft.<sup>59</sup>

### **Rocking the Boat: 1969 and 1972 strikes**

If, as I have suggested, the success of the Labour Supply Company was balanced on economic strength, the decline in the overall amount of cargo loaded, and the reduction in overall wages, would provide a challenge to the illusions that companies and the Labour

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<sup>57</sup> Charles van Onselen. *Chibaro*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980. p. 237-244.

<sup>58</sup> Crucial to Moodie's reading of moral economy is constantly contesting authority and its limits. See Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*. p. 86 Also see Thompson original use of the concept in EP Thompson. "The English crowd in the eighteenth century" in *Past and Present*, 1971.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Tony Kruger, Chairperson of the Durban Stevedores Association, 28 November 2000. Mike Morris believed that theft of cargo was considerable for stevedoring workers.

Supply Company held of hegemony. Yet even though challenges to the system happened during this time, they revolved more around the wages and the authority of JB Buthelezi than as a threat to the izinduna structure as a whole. In fact, while indunas did not actively participate in the strike themselves, they did attempt to get rid of Buthelezi.

The first strike that the stevedoring industry in Durban had seen in a decade occurred in 1969. Overall cargo loaded during 1968 and 1969 showed a sharp decrease from the previous year, and consequently, overtime work was not as plentiful as before. Workers hoped that the new wage determination would offer higher wages. Instead, Wage Determination 308 of 1969 was based on calculations of workers' wages (including overtime) of 3 years earlier. It recommended that wages stay at the same level and that workers should be subjected to income tax.<sup>60</sup> Naturally, workers were furious, and they struck work on the 4 April 1969 demanding an increase in basic wages from R6 to R14 a week. The state's response typified the politics of the period.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

A significant change in recruitment pattern followed the strike. After 1969 a greater percentage of workers came from Northern Natal, especially from two districts that had previously provided almost no dockworkers, Nongoma and Mahlabathini. The choice of these districts was deliberate, since they were districts of MG Buthelezi and represented absolute adherence to his understanding of Zulu "tradition".<sup>63</sup>

The stubborn insistence on the part of the Labour Supply Company that these workers were "unskilled", and thus utterly dispensable, had concrete repercussions. The pace of work slowed substantially, and ships lay idle outside the port. There was also an increase in the number of injuries among workers. Employers became increasingly frustrated with state labour policy and the decreased work output that followed as a direct

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<sup>60</sup> David Hemson. Class Consciousness and migrant workers. p. 518-520.

<sup>61</sup> Posel suggests that by 1968, the Bantu Administration Department entered its toughest ideological phase, rigid and uncompromising in its implementation of influx control and African labour regulations. Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961*. p. 249.

<sup>62</sup> "Half of Durban's Dockworkers sent home" in *The Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1969.

<sup>63</sup> David Hemson. Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers. p. 581.

result. Shipping agents believed that mechanization, rapidly developing in international ports, would solve the problem of work delays.<sup>64</sup>

Another strike followed in October 1972, primarily about the proposed changes to the working hours (limiting the possibility of overtime earnings) and wages. During this strike the workers also made clear demands about removing JB Buthelezi and articulated their demands to the white press. Under the threat of sacking, the workers did return to work; however the white press was full of stories and even investigated the workers' demands.<sup>65</sup>

Hemson notes that during this period the greatest challenge to J.B. Buthelezi's administration emerged. It seems that Buthelezi was the one induna whom workers abhorred. In fact, they even wrote to the KwaZulu government complaining about his excessively harsh treatment of the workers. In addition, izinduna seem to have taken the initiative of speaking to the paramount chief about his excessively harsh treatment of workers, and at the end of August 1972, Buthelezi left the DSLSC.<sup>66</sup> The main reason workers disliked Buthelezi was that he openly argued against workers receiving higher wages, and tried to persuade them to be happy with what they had. In addition, his authoritarianism and his willingness to publicly humiliate and fire any worker or induna exposed him very clearly as a stooge of the employers and the state.<sup>67</sup>

Seemingly at the insistence of the employers, J.B. Buthelezi returned six weeks later. September 1972 had seen rising tensions and with a strike imminent, employers believed that Buthelezi would ensure order. This merely added to the frustrations of workers, many of whom claimed that they would have killed him if they had seen him during the October 1972 strike.

The figure of Buthelezi personifies the employers and the states' misunderstanding about the source of industrial stability in the 1960s. They believed that his overall authority and control of the workers of the Labour Supply Company was critical to the success of the company, and therefore ensured that he returned after a few difficult weeks in 1972. Workers disliked him intensely, and yet the system worked, not

<sup>64</sup> "Mechanisation Answer to port delays, say Agents" in *The Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970.

<sup>65</sup> See *Daily News*, 23, 24 & 25 October 1972. and *The Natal Mercury*, 24, 25 & 28 October 1972

<sup>66</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*. p. 618.

<sup>67</sup> Interview. Siza Makhaya, 12 June 2001. Also see David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers*, p. 577 & 639.

because of his authority, but because of the relationships that developed between stevedores and izinduna in the gangs and on the ships.

### The instability of the mid 1970s

For all the State's and company management's political repression of the 1969 and 1972 strike and the re-emergence of Buthelezi as a powerful figure, political stability proved to be economically disastrous. Lack of experienced workers resulted in a logjam at the port. Eventually the situation forced employers to employ casuals. A number of newspaper articles between 1969 and 1972 tell of the continual buildup of ships outside the harbour.<sup>68</sup>

Stevedoring Companies were forced to act. For all the claims about the excellence of the Labour Supply Company, the price of maintaining authority had been too high for companies. In 1973 they began taking on casual workers to meet the excess of work needed. This greatly annoyed the Port Natal Bantu Administration Board and the regional labour office, and despite an initial tolerance of the situation, in November 1974 the Board called a meeting of all stevedoring companies to address the problem. Their main concern was not how effective the Labour Supply Company was, but instead that unregistered Africans were being employed by the companies, thus threatening the entire basis of the migrant labour system.<sup>69</sup> In response, employers argued that what they were doing was necessary from an industrial point of view, and that to stick to influx control regulations would cripple the production of the harbour, and damage national interests. Both sides compromised. The employers agreed to register these workers and Bourquin (the Chief Director of the Port Natal Bantu Administration Board) drafted of a memorandum which allowed for the temporary condoning of casual labour, the move by employers to register all casual workers, and the recommendation to investigate the

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<sup>68</sup> *The Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970, 20 May 1971, 29 November 1971, 24 October 1972.

<sup>69</sup> Durban Archives Repository. PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/71. "Labour Problems: Point and Harbour Areas". Meeting held on 20 November 1974.

establishment of reserve teams of African workers in the homelands.<sup>70</sup> Despite these compromises, unregistered casual workers continued to be employed.

In practice, neither the registration of casual workers nor “reserve armies” of labour were particularly viable. Casual labourers were used to make up the daily excess of work required. The stevedoring companies did not want to employ them on a permanent basis, give them accommodation or pay them retainers when there was no work. Bringing in workers from rural areas would have meant these extra responsibilities for companies. From 1969 and 1972 it was also not clear that these workers would be especially disciplined or fall in naturally with the demands of the employers. So despite the sentiments of Bourquin and the Railway and Harbour Police, casuals continued to be employed.

At the same time, it was becoming evident that stevedoring companies felt less sure than ever that the Labour Supply Company could meet their requirements. The Company’s operation was to continue for another 6 years, but during this time the companies themselves changed. Companies were aware that Containerisation was imminent, and that they would be competing for an ever-diminishing market. Stevedoring companies began to merge, and by 1978, there were only two stevedoring companies left.<sup>71</sup> In this situation, it was senseless to continue paying for the administration of workers by outside bureaucrats. The Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company was finally closed in early 1979.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have been predominately concerned with the “production politics” that were essential for both the success and failure of the stevedoring labour administration in the Durban harbour. It is clear that that Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company was finally shut down because its operation had become too expensive. However, from the moment employers started to employ casual labourers in addition to the labour

<sup>70</sup> DAR. PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/71. SB Bourquin. “Chief Directors Memorandum: Establishment of teams of Casual workers in the Neighbouring Bantu Homelands”. 28 February 1975.

<sup>71</sup> Mike Morris. “The stevedoring industry and the General Workers Union” in *South African Labour Bulletin*. Vol. 11, no. 3, May 1986.

provided by the Labour Supply Company in the early 1970s, this company had failed. This failure reflects something deeper about Apartheid labour administration and its misunderstanding of cultural practices.

In returning to the debates raised at the beginning of this chapter, I acknowledge that some form of culture is important in shaping a worker consciousness. I have given prominence to the *work culture* that developed out of the particular political conditions in the stevedoring industry because they were crucial in sustaining production in the industry. Above all, this chapter demonstrates that the conceptions of “tribal culture” that the Apartheid state attempted to implement were ultimately useless at the point of production. For all the resources that the state invested and beliefs that this system was indeed responsible for the success of the Labour Supply Company, the success of this company arose out of something entirely different. This is not to suggest that the particular cultures, values and traditions that workers bring to work play no role in their consciousness, but to draw two fundamental conclusions. The first is that we cannot, following Michael Burawoy, forget that the politics of the workplace, the demands of particular kinds of work, and the authority present at the point of production mould worker consciousness and identity in important ways. Given this conclusion, the second fundamental point is that we cannot accept fetishized conceptions of culture as determinant and all embracing in ordinary people or workers’ lives. That would be to accept a basic premise on which Apartheid was built, that cultural differences are so inescapable that societies should be divided accordingly.

The experiences of stevedoring workers in Durban show that paternalism developed as a response by workers and izinduna to a changed management style that attempted to box them in a specific set of misunderstood cultural practices. But this paternalistic relationship did not include those administrators with no actual relationship with the workers themselves. Nor did it prevent both workers and izinduna combining forces to lay serious complaint about the imposition of very authoritarian controls placed on workers from the top of the management hierarchy.

The importance of the paternalist relationship that developed between management and workers cannot be underestimated. This becomes clear in the next chapter, when, under conditions of virtual collapse of the industry, the workers once again turned to the

izinduna for support and protection. They also turned to the izinduna for advice and leadership in choosing which unions to support. This will be developed in detail in the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Negotiating decline: Stevedoring work and unionization in Durban, 1978- c.1990**

Technological change in societies produces new forms of social relationships. Nowhere is this felt more strongly than by people at work, who experience these changes directly, since they have to change their working methods and often find themselves without work. In the context of industrial revolution around the world, technological innovation and change produced insecurity and upheaval among workers, many of whom felt threatened by the onset of more efficient modes of work and understood them as threatening their stability.<sup>1</sup> These reactions were not unreasonable, since many technological innovations have sought to reduce the numbers of workers and the amount of labour time needed to produce commodities. Whereas chapter one gave an account of the overall process of technological change in Durban harbour, and chapter two discussed the practices of labour administration in the port, this chapter will analyze the specific responses of stevedores in Durban to the technological change.

As I have outlined in chapter 1, the specific technological change in the shipping industry was called containerization. Unlike other technical changes in ports, such as the improvement of cranes or the storing of goods, containerization drastically altered the way in which harbour work was done. It impacted on virtually every aspect of shipping, from the international shipping lines that controlled the ships, to the size of ships required, to the infrastructure needed in harbours and the manner in which work was done in harbours, to the physical process of loading and unloading ships. The change in the nature of work, for the people responsible for the latter process, the stevedores, has been a primary concern of this thesis, and thus this chapter will consider the changed social and work relations produced by the technological innovation known as containerization.

It is important to remember that while the actual technological innovation may be the same everywhere, the contexts in which work happens are radically different. In

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<sup>1</sup> Among many works I could highlight the work of British social historians, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh stands out in their descriptions of industrial revolution in England. For South Africa, I again highlight a single collection of work among many, Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone. *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa, 1870-1930*. London: Longman, 1980.

South Africa, containerization happened approximately five years later than in the major North American and European ports. While this difference in time is important and reflects the interests of the international shipping companies and the structure of this market, the South African labour market was unique for a more obvious reason. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the necessity to secure a stable migrant labour force was a primary interest of the Apartheid state, and the stevedoring industry fell very squarely into these plans. Even before the 1980s, the Apartheid state was in crisis, with the economic prosperity of the 1960s not sustained in the 1970s and the increasing suspicion on the part of business that Apartheid, and especially its reliance on cheap African labour, was no longer economically sustainable.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the growth of resistance among African workers, especially in the form of politicized trade unions suggested to the government that urgent reforms in the structure of the labour force were necessary if it was to maintain control. These reforms involved loosening influx control measures and legalizing African trade unions; premised on the hope that these trade unions, once they had gained access to lawful methods of protest and negotiation, would become de-politicized, and would not provide yet another avenue of opposition to faltering government control. While the actual violence and brutality administered by the state in the 1980s seems to suggest its control of the forces of coercion, it belies its actual weakness in maintaining a system which had become both unsustainable and generally hated. Unlike the 1960s, the 1980s would see state administration having lost much control of labour, and acting in an increasingly arbitrary manner.

In addition, the other critical phenomenon of the 1980s in South Africa, and in particular in Natal, was the emergence of politicized ethnicity. The politicization of ethnicity was one of the worst legacies of Apartheid-manufactured tribal divisions. The most prominent example was the Inkatha movement in Natal.<sup>3</sup> Formed in 1975, Inkatha claimed to represent the “Zulu nation” and was led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Buthelezi’s own involvement in South African politics stretched back to the late 1950s, when he participated in homeland authorities and sat on native representative boards. While

<sup>2</sup> Dan O’ Meara. *Forty Lost Years: The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 176-178.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussion of Inkatha see Gerhard Mare and Georgina Hamilton. *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the Politics of ‘loyal resistance’*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987, and Gerhard Mare. *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood: Politics and Ethnicity in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1992.

formed as a “cultural association” for the Zulu people and in formal opposition to Apartheid, Inkatha was built around the same logic as Apartheid, emphasizing the differences that ethnic groups had, and mobilizing around one particular group. In the 1980s, Inkatha became an active and overt political force, especially in response to the ANC-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF). In 1986, Inkatha launched its own union movement, the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA), in opposition to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). In Natal and in hostels on the East Rand, violent clashes were a prominent feature of the political landscape. As tempting as it is to read this violence in terms of urban radical dwellers versus Zulu migrant workers, I will offer an alternative analysis in this chapter through the evidence of conditions among predominately Zulu stevedores.<sup>4</sup>

These disparate contexts all feature in the stevedoring industry in Durban during the 1980s. But this chapter will discuss stevedoring in Durban during the 1980s and will focus specifically on unionization and worker responses to the destruction of their work. It must be remembered that the specific paternalist structures and organization of work that played such a crucial role in both maintaining order and facilitating production in the 1960s did not simply disappear but continued to play an important role in shaping worker understanding of the technological change. This is not to say that this paternalist structure did not undergo significant changes, as it evolved from a substantially hierarchical arrangement between *izinduna* and workers towards a system in which *izinduna* became respected gang leaders. Eventually, as more and more stevedores were retrenched by the late 1980s, this structure became relatively insignificant.

However, this chapter does not confine itself to merely analyzing the structural transformation of work and its effect on workers. I also emphasize the agency that workers displayed during this period. Although the structural transformations inevitably led to an overall decline in the amount of work available, this should not allow the careful reader to believe that workers played no part in shaping the transformations that occurred. In choosing one trade union over another, in their experiences and actions in response to politicized ethnicity, and in their reactions to retrenchment, workers’ decisions were

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<sup>4</sup> Drawing together the historiography of this violence, Mahmood Mamdani presents a clear analysis in favour of this position. See Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 246-256.

ultimately a crucial part of stevedoring after 1990.<sup>5</sup> In continuing with the framework developed in chapter two, the focus of the chapter will be on the “politics” of stevedoring work within the workplace itself.

Equally important to the agency of the stevedores were the trade union decisions during the 1980s that were fundamental in shaping the future structures of the stevedoring industry. I will evaluate the success of the trade union movement in comparison with trade union achievements in international ports. Given the difficulties that trade unions experienced in South Africa, these comparisons may seem rather uncharitable, since in European trade unions were freely allowed to organize for many decades longer than South African trade unions and often enjoyed some state support. Yet these comparisons are important because they show that the fate of stevedores in South Africa was not the inevitable consequence of technological change. Instead I understand the position of the stevedores working in Durban as a reflection of technological change in combination with a state that regarded African workers as an unavoidable hindrance to its racist ideology. We also cannot forget, that despite these difficult conditions, trade unions did fail to push key decisions at critical times.

### **The legacy of the Labour Supply Company**

While the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company ultimately did not succeed in implementing Apartheid at a micro level, or in recreating the supposedly timeless tribal structure among stevedores in Durban, it did create specific channels of power and authority and cemented the power of izinduna over the stevedoring labour force. As I have explored in the previous chapter, the Labour Supply Company began to falter in supplying adequate amounts of workers to companies in the mid 1970s. By the end of the decade, the remaining stevedoring companies decided to dissolve the company because it proved unprofitable, because of the extra distance that it created between management and workers and because it was premised on the idea of maintaining a supply of unskilled

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<sup>5</sup> In James Ferguson's contemporary study of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt, he investigates the effects of urban and industrial decay on urban residents. Although this chapter does again not address consciousness directly, I hope that this project is the initial steps towards writing something similar to Ferguson's project of “an ethnography of decline”. See Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

African workers to the companies; a reality that companies no longer believed was sustainable in the climate of technological change.<sup>6</sup> While I will expand on these reasons further on, for the moment I will reflect on the structures between workers and management created in the Labour Supply Company. Understanding these structures is crucial to comprehending the tasks that faced both trade unions and companies as they attempted to re-organize the labour force, whether their end was a stable and profitable labour force or one that could defend itself against exploitation or retrenchment.

The paternalism that developed as a defining characteristic of the relationship between workers and their immediate superiors, izinduna, was certainly a productive relationship that sustained the economic boom of the 1960s. Yet it was a relationship marked by a structural division of power between workers and izinduna. Although at various moments workers could be promoted to the position of izinduna, this relationship was far from a fluid one. Unlike “normal” capitalist relations, workers were not promoted to supervisory positions because of excellent work or commitment to the company. Instead, promotion was fairly rare, and izinduna were often drawn from the ranks of people with significant places within the structures of homeland authority. When workers were promoted, conditions for promotion came from age and seniority.<sup>7</sup> The highest position that an African could achieve was that of senior induna. Siza Makhaya, a personnel officer during the 1980s, explains their status:

*“...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 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....”<sup>8</sup>*

It is crucial to realize that the paternalism that had developed during the 1960s came specifically out of an adaptation by workers and izinduna to the conditions of work in the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview: Gordon Stockley, Operations Manager SASSCO 1978-1982, SAS 1982-1994. 25 June 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews: Siza Makhaya, Personnel officer, SASSCO and SAS, 1978-1986, Themba Dube, SASSCO and SAS 1980- .

<sup>8</sup> Interview Siza Makhaya. 11 June 2001.

industry. This came primarily from the gang structure itself, which was the central unit of work in harbours across the world before containerization. A stevedore gang in Durban comprised between eight and sixteen workers and included a winchman, a gangwayman and an induna. The induna was ultimately responsible to white foremen for the success of the gang, and had the freedom to recruit and assign tasks to the various stevedoring hands at the point of production. Other izinduna and senior izinduna controlled conditions at the compound and co-ordinated how many gangs would work on any particular day. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, a reciprocal relationship, albeit an unbalanced reciprocity, developed between stevedoring workers and izinduna, with workers dependent on izinduna for work, and izinduna dependent on worker reliability for their positions.

What becomes critical in this period of technological change is the trimming, and finally, the destruction of the gang unit itself. Work in the harbour had, for a considerable time, been dependent on this relationship, and its destruction would inevitably result in new relationships developing between izinduna and workers. Even before this, the end of the Labour Supply Company meant that companies no longer invested as much power and responsibility in the gang structure. Yet these structures of power were well embedded in worker consciousness, for as one stevedore described in the early 1980s, workers simply did not communicate socially with one another across different grades of work, and the division of power was clearly laid out.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the 1960s and 1970s, izinduna seldom supported any of the grievances of ordinary workers.<sup>10</sup> So the problem becomes clear for the stevedoring companies; how was this divided workforce to be transformed into a modern industrial workforce able to cope with the new demands of containerization? For the unions the problem was similar: how was the workforce to be united in the face of impending retrenchment?

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<sup>9</sup> 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 University of the Witwatersrand Dept of Historical papers. These have proved invaluable to my work and my thanks goes to Mike Morris for informing me of their existence.

<sup>10</sup> David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*. Ph.D thesis, University of Warwick. The important exception to this, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, was the J.B. Buthelezi case.

## **Structural changes in the stevedoring industry and early trade unionism in the early 1980s**

Between 1976 and 1982, the landscape of the stevedoring industry changed significantly. Stevedoring companies became involved in a series of mergers in an attempt to preserve the viability of the stevedoring industry. Work began on the Container Terminal in Durban in 1974 and was completed in 1977. Faced with the prospect of an 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 1980,<sup>11</sup> 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, and controlled most of the labour at a ratio of approximately 6 to 1.<sup>12</sup> In 1982, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrods Cotts merged into one company called South African Stevedores, and effectively became the only stevedoring company in Durban.

In 1979, the companies decided 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, as it simply added 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.<sup>13</sup> The breaking of the Labour Supply Company can be seen within a general trend of employers and white business no longer believing that the system of unskilled African workers (that was a fundamental premise of Apartheid

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

<sup>12</sup> Interview Captain Dudley. SASSCO/SAS Regional Manager, Durban, 1977-1983. 15 August 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, Operations and General Manager SASSCO/SAS, 1976-1994. 25 June 2001.

policy) would be sustainable or profitable in the future. This was particularly acutely felt in the stevedoring industry where, without re-training in the new working skills, the workforce would become redundant. In any case, the end of the Labour Supply Company set the stage for a new regime of industrial relations to develop on the docks during the early 1980s.

While there had been some degree of loosely defined union organization amongst stevedores in the 1940s and 1950s, this had been stamped out by the Labour Supply Company.<sup>14</sup> The two strikes by stevedores in Durban in 1969 and 1972 had not been organized by any formal union body because African unions were illegal. During the early 1970s, benefit funds and advice bureaus were established across the country and were peripherally involved in the 1972 stevedore strike and the wider 1973 Durban strikes when they attempted to highlight the immediate exploitation of workers in their particular workplaces.<sup>15</sup> Yet these organizations were not unions, and were comprised primarily of white leftist intellectuals whose position was always to advise workers on the best course of action. These intellectuals had little experience of the realities of working under the difficult conditions that Apartheid had constructed. This is not to question their often noble intentions, but to question their real significance in worker consciousness and action. Furthermore, the danger of over-emphasizing their role in the strike removes much of the agency that workers themselves displayed during the strikes.

In any event, the mid to late 1970s witnessed not only a resurgence in worker militancy but also the beginnings of a new union movement in South Africa. Unions began to form tentatively in many workplaces, and a new trade union federation, called the Federation of South African trade unions (FOSATU), formed in 1977. Although these unions often bore the hallmarks of the older benefit funds, unionists became more

<sup>14</sup> David Hemson. "Dock workers, labour circulation and class struggles" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*. vol. 4, 1977. p. 95-100

<sup>15</sup> Another example of this type of involvement with the African working class was the wages commissions set up at white "liberal" universities across South Africa. A typical wages commission document would advise workers of their positions and encourage them to strike for high wages. These documents were available in both English and Zulu. For a University of Natal wages commission document on the stevedoring industry in Durban see University of the Witwatersrand, Fosatu Collection, AH 1999 C3.19.12.1 Wages Commision, University of Natal. Also see Hemson's somewhat exaggerated account of the role of the Benefit Fund in the 1972 Stevedore Strike in David Hemson. *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban*, p. 605-670. For an account of involvement in the 1973 Durban Strike, again somewhat over-emphasized, see Gerhard Mare (ed) *The Durban Strikes 1973 "Human beings with souls"*, Durban: Institute for Industrial Education, 1976. p. 69-76.

adventurous and open in their practices of organizing. Unlike confident National Party regimes of the past, the government adopted a new strategy towards these unions. Instead of suppression and mass banning, the government, following the recommendations of the Wiehahn commission, decided in 1978 to allow African trade unions to form and organize workers, provided that they explicitly stayed out of politics and concentrated on industrial issues. The clear rationale behind this policy was an attempt to de-politicize an increasingly confident and militant African working class.<sup>16</sup> The Wiehahn strategies enjoyed very limited success, even in the early 1980s, and instead allowed trade unions to become a platform for anti-apartheid organization and widespread resistance to Apartheid.

In the docks, trade unionism spread in the late 1970s. Senior management in the major stevedoring companies almost encouraged the development of trade unionism within part of their plans to develop the workforce for the changes that were imminent in the industry.<sup>17</sup> Middle management were not very comfortable with the development of trade unions during this initial period, with a number of recorded disciplinary incidents, and one in particular where a white foreman told union members to collect their wages from the union.<sup>18</sup> Despite these incidents, the two early unions in the docks, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) were hardly able to claim anything near majority membership in the stevedoring industry. In 1980, the latter could claim a mere of 300 stevedores of a possible 2500.<sup>19</sup>

### The rise and fall of the General Workers Union

In 1981, a union established in Cape Town called the General Workers Union (GWU) arrived in Durban to organize the stevedoring industry. This union had grown out of the former Western Province Advice Bureau, and comprised a significant number of white

<sup>16</sup> Dan O'Meara. *Forty Lost Years*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996. p. 273

<sup>17</sup> Interviews: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001, Siza Makhaya, 11 June 2001. Makhaya commented that many in middle management regarded senior management as taking 'crazy and radical' steps in reforming the workforce.

<sup>18</sup> Wits Dept of Historical Papers, FOSATU Collection AH 1999 C.1.9.12.8.3 Grindrods Discipline

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 1982. p. 20.

intellectuals. The union had organized in a number of industries in the Cape, most notably the meat workers.<sup>20</sup> They had considerable success in organizing stevedores in Cape Town, and following their defeat in the meat industry, they decided to move towards a national union of stevedores. By the beginning of 1981, they had organized stevedores in Port Elizabeth and East London, and sent organizers, led by Mike Morris and 'Rev' Marawu, an experienced union official from Cape Town, to establish a base in Durban.<sup>21</sup>

However, organizing stevedores in Durban was not going to be a simple task. For one thing, other unions already had some presence in the docks. Even more importantly, the structures of authority surrounding work in Durban were distinct from other ports.<sup>22</sup> These stemmed from the days of the Labour Supply Company. Organizers came to Durban with an established sense of how to organize stevedores in Durban and immediately encountered difficulties. Mike Morris recalled an incident where he attempted to call a meeting at the same time as an induna, and nobody arrived at his meeting.<sup>23</sup> Eventually organizers realized that there would be no way to organize the stevedores except through well-established routes. Morris explains;

*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.*<sup>24</sup>

There was also other resistance towards the General Workers Union. Workers generally distrusted the motives of this union, especially because of different regional origins, and

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Captain Gordon Stockley emphasized this particularity, having worked at all four major ports in the country. Interview conducted on 25 June 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Morris cited in David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*, no. 30, 1996. p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Interview. Mike Morris, Organizer, General Workers Union, 28 June 2001.

articulated these in ethnic terms, as “Xhosas meddling in their affairs”.<sup>25</sup> These difficulties meant that the process of organizing was slow and difficult, and after 6 months of organizing, the GWU had recruited 500 out of a possible 2000 stevedores in Durban.<sup>26</sup>

Yet the distrust that workers had in the GWU would not endure. 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”.<sup>27</sup> Word spread fast among the workers as to 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.*<sup>28</sup>

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.*<sup>29</sup>

Neither SAAWU nor Mangosuthu Buthelezi had an answer to these waves of retrenchment. When workers had initially appealed to Buthelezi personally for help when retrenchments began, the KwaZulu government replied to workers that “the law does not

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

<sup>29</sup> Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

stipulate how much money the employer must pay when retrenching workers".<sup>30</sup> Similarly, SAAWU promised workers large sums but failed to secure any compensation money.<sup>31</sup> In Tina Sideris' interview with Mr Ndebele, he describes how SAAWU encouraged retrenched workers not to take the severance packages of R600 that the GWU 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> It was becoming clear to workers which union to join and that "traditional" sources of support had failed. Morris was able to claim that within a year of the union's presence in Durban they were able to claim 90% of the stevedoring workers in the country and a significant majority in Durban.<sup>34</sup> By June 1982, the General Workers Union was able to claim recognition in the four major ports in South Africa.<sup>35</sup> 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. It became obvious that that the GWU were a more far successful union in the stevedoring industry. 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, such as of being able to prevent the merger between Rennies 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.<sup>36</sup> Within a year of the merger into SAS, SAAWU had all but disappeared from the docks.

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<sup>30</sup> Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

<sup>31</sup> Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris

<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> Mr. Ntshangase: Stevedore in Durban. Interview on 19 November 1982 by Tina Sideris.

<sup>34</sup> Mike Morris. "Stevedoring Workers and the GWU" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> "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.

<sup>36</sup> University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection. AH 1999, C6.8, FOSATU collection.

"General Workers Union letter to FOSATU", by David Lewis, 6 October 1982.

It is important to note that much of the success that the General Workers Union achieved was due to working alongside existing structures rather than dramatically reshaping them. The one important exception was perhaps in slightly altering the power relationships between izinduna and stevedoring hands into a shared understanding of their exploitation by management, and their common position as workers. Izinduna became more like team leaders than authoritarian foremen.<sup>37</sup> However, the union was not able to encourage Durban stevedores to support solidarity struggles of workers in other ports.<sup>38</sup> Of course, it is uncertain whether even the most organized worker from a country without the same legacy of oppression would have supported a solidarity strike under the conditions of mass retrenchment and little job security prevalent in Durban during the early 1980s.

Besides organizing good retrenchment packages, the GWU also ensured the introduction of health and safety regulations. The major way that it was able to fight retrenchment was through 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.<sup>39</sup> 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 also limited the number of retrenchments during the period.<sup>40</sup> 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 their stability in an industry whose presence was threatened by massive technological restructuring, and one whose past had reflected the apartheid industrial relations system in operation.

<sup>37</sup> Part of this reshaping was a result of technological change, since both izinduna and stevedoring hands faced retrenchment during containerization.

<sup>38</sup> "Durban Dockers unlikely to back Cape go-slow". *The Daily News*. 31 August 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Interview: Les Owen, Senior Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO and SAS 1979-1984, 5 June 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, middle management, SASSCO 1974-1982, SAS 1982-, 6 September 2001.

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 African 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.<sup>41</sup> SAS 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.<sup>42</sup> 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 did not simply try to fall in line with union demands or make life more comfortable for workers. Indeed, they understood their position as one seeking 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.<sup>43</sup> Many in the company, especially middle managers, thought that their policies were too progressive and even mad.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> The company also intervened on behalf of a widow of a stevedore who had been

<sup>41</sup> Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews: Les Owen, 6 June 2001 and Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

<sup>44</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> Les Owen. Interview. 5 June 2001.

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.<sup>46</sup> Almost naturally, it seems, the relationship between SAS and the GWU was described by both sides as a good one.<sup>47</sup> 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 better wages than ever.<sup>48</sup>

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; the size of the workforce fell 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.<sup>49</sup> The company argued that its financial statements were open to the union, and that unionists could see the figures and the inevitability of the retrenchments. They also argued that the emergence of competition at the end of 1983 made the maintenance of their wage levels impossible.<sup>50</sup> I would also 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 industry 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, which I will explore later in the chapter.

<sup>46</sup> SARH vs SASSCO, *South Africa Law Reports*, 1983, part 1. p. 1066-1089.

<sup>47</sup> Interviews: Stockley, Owen, Makhaya, Dudley, Morris.

<sup>48</sup> "Wage increases for Stevedores". *The Daily News*. 23 December 1982.

<sup>49</sup> David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*. 1996. p. 94

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Gordon Stockley, 26 June 2001.

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's desire 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.<sup>51</sup> Inevitably, this meant that SAS dropped its rates, and much of the good work done by the GWU was thus undermined.<sup>52</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup> For organizers like Morris, the combination of Keeleys and constant retrenchments really led them to give up hope.<sup>54</sup> Hemson has also suggested that the close relationship between the GWU and SAS fuelled speculation by the workers of union and management co-operation. Particularly in the face of so many retrenchments, workers believed that the union could have done more.<sup>55</sup> 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.

### **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, it firmly believed in worker controlled workplaces. The irony is that many of the upper ranks of FOSATU were

<sup>51</sup> 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".

<sup>52</sup> "Wage determinations: Payment Problems" in *Financial Mail*, 3 August 1983.

<sup>53</sup> "600 Durban dock workers to lose their jobs" in *Natal Mercury*, February 18, 1985.

<sup>54</sup> Mike Morris. Interview, 28 June 2001.

<sup>55</sup> David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*, no. 30, 1996 p. 91

controlled by leftist white intellectuals and there was always a distance between the leadership and the membership of the organization. Yet the unionists in FOSATU 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.<sup>56</sup> 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 specifically why they refused to align under the UDF.<sup>57</sup>

COSATU, on the other hand, certainly was not dominated by white intellectuals. There was a constant debate in COSATU about the role of unions in the “National liberation struggle” and gradually, FOSATU’s commitment to the centrality of shopfloor politics and “workerism” was diluted in more pressing concerns of national politics. In this regard, 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> UWUSA advocated free market principles and opposed sanctions, claiming that COSATU’s policies would destroy the 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 relaxation of influx control laws in the early 1980s, and their scrapping in 1986, most of the dockworkers opted to stay in the company hostel and not

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<sup>56</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. Cape Town: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 253-255.

<sup>57</sup> “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.

<sup>58</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. P. 255-257.

<sup>59</sup> 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.

move into town with their families, often because this proved a much cheaper option.<sup>60</sup> Although the TGWU now organized the stevedores, without nearly as much vigor as the GWU, the union 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.<sup>61</sup> 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 Gatsha 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.*<sup>62</sup>

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

The docks were to become just one sphere of UWUSA operation from 1986. For stevedores, this period would become a battle over the importance of ethnicity within the context of technological change and retrenchment. But the struggle would not be between permanent urbanized workers against migrant rural ones<sup>63</sup>, but rather about migrant workers having to decide between two unions, one that seemed to negotiate better conditions for them at work, and another that claimed to secure their 'traditional' way of

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<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Schlemmer (et al) *Future Dwelling Preferences of Hostel Dwelling Migrants: A study of the housing needs of stevedores in the Durban metropolitan area* and interviews with Themba Dube, Les Owen, Gordon Stockley, Mike Morris.

<sup>61</sup> South African Stevedores. *SAS Corporate Plan 1984-1987*. November 1983, p. 45.

<sup>62</sup> Interview Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

<sup>63</sup> 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.

life. Within the particularly difficult environment of retrenchment in the docks, the latter option seemed additionally attractive.

Yet, UWUSA's operation was not simply one of contesting for the support of stevedores by emphasizing different concerns. Underlying their promises was also a great amount of intimidation. Much of the intimidation was based on a politics that occurred outside the workplace and held such force, that many of the 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".<sup>64</sup> Siza Makhaya, a personnel officer who had been instrumental in abolishing the privileges of senior izinduna in the compounds in the early 1980s, claims to have left his job because of threats from UWUSA in late 1986.<sup>65</sup> 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.*<sup>66</sup>

Despite this, Dube would not directly implicate UWUSA in the killing.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps this was because the company wanted to distance itself from the politics of the time.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Christopher Gcebu, TGWU shopsteward cited in Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 97.

<sup>65</sup> Siza Makhaya, interview, 12 June 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Interview: Themba Dube, 8 March 2002

<sup>67</sup> Interview: Themba Dube, 8 March 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, 6 September 2001.

Another shop-steward, Christopher Gceba, also received death threats in 1987 for remaining faithful to TGWU.<sup>69</sup>

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 were never able to successfully negotiate any benefits for workers.<sup>70</sup> 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 did not help the cause of fighting retrenchments since major retrenchments followed in May and November 1987.<sup>71</sup>

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 stevedoring industry. By this time, UWUSA had all but disappeared from the docks. The period of UWUSA in the harbour 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 lost, and a situation was created 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 opened the door for workers to reject both the tribal categories created by Apartheid and the paternalism that had become so necessary for their survival in the docks during the 1960s. 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.

### **The destruction of morale: Stevedoring work in the 1990s**

I will not be considering stevedoring work in the 1990s in any detail. This section merely enables the reader to understand fully the implications of the turmoil in the industry in the

<sup>69</sup> David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 98

<sup>70</sup> Interviews: Themba Dube, Gordon Stockley, Siza Makhaya. There is also secondary source support for this position in David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control".

<sup>71</sup> David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control". p. 97-99.

1980s. The marginalization of stevedoring workers in Durban followed as a direct consequence of the turmoil of the 1980s. Retrenchments would continue in the early 1990s, and the permanent workforce would be cut down to approximately 300 workers. Much of the stevedoring work would be done on a daily basis by casual workers, and with the loss of job security, stevedore morale plunged.

Besides the obvious cause of retrenchment for the drop in worker morale, the destruction of the gang structure that had for so many years been central to the labour process on the docks also affected worker morale. Stevedores no longer felt part of a team of strong “buffalo” who made the harbour work. 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”.<sup>72</sup> Even before the 1990s, many stevedores realized that the prospects of a long-term future in the industry were small. Their responses were to turn back towards the only area that they had any promise of security within the migrant labour system. For instance, 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”.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> These views represented one of the bitter ironies of the migrant labour system in the stevedoring industry in Durban. In the 1950s stevedores had claimed Durban as their home, and engaged in a losing struggle with the Apartheid state. By the end of Apartheid, stevedores had so little hope left in the industry that they turned back towards the homeland areas that the Apartheid state had designated as their homes.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> 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.

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

<sup>74</sup> David Hemson. “The Global Imperative? Containerization and Durban Docks” p. 8-14.

<sup>75</sup> In a different context of industrial decline, Ferguson has shown that a ‘return to the land’ is by no means unproblematic. See James Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity*. p. 123-128.

Among the growing numbers of casual workers in the harbour after 1990, union organization was fragmented and largely characterized by opportunism.<sup>76</sup> Part of the problem was that stevedoring companies no longer directly employed casual labourers, and instead left this process to be managed by a number of labour brokers, who contracted workers out to stevedoring companies. This was part of a new regime of industrial relations that developed in many industries, and established trade unions had very little idea of how to deal with labour brokers.<sup>77</sup> The best that the TGWU 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup>

### **“Tribal structures” and trade unionism**

Both union officials and company officials assumed that stevedores were organized along the lines of ‘tribal structures’ and that technological change and unionization disrupted or upset these structures. Yet as intensive as the efforts of the Apartheid state were in the 1960s to re-create tribal structures in workplaces around South Africa, these efforts failed in the stevedoring industry in Durban. Instead, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, a

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<sup>76</sup> I thank Joe Guy, organizer, Dock and General Workers Union, 1998-2001, for much of the information on casual workers.

<sup>77</sup> Temporary work agencies have become a phenomenon of work across the world during the 1990s. Manuel Castells. *The rise of network society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p. 223. For a local example of labour brokers, a honours essay on the Engen refinery by Stephen Sparks; “Work and Technology at the Wentworth Refinery” (2002) has been most illuminating.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

<sup>79</sup> Interviews by the author: Mr Ndumo Dlamini and Jabulani Mchunu, 22 December 2000.

paternalistic relationship developed between izinduna and stevedoring hands in Durban. And in as much as this relationship was a hierarchical one, one that union officials had to accommodate when organizing stevedores, it was a structure that was built and developed in the workplace, rather than in homeland areas, or established as a consequence of established ‘Zulu tradition’. As workers and izinduna were unionized in the early 1980s, many izinduna became shop-stewards and actively supported the demands of the GWU.<sup>80</sup> It was this paternalist structure that changed during the 1980s in the docks.

The efforts of Inkatha and UWUSA to forcefully maintain or re-assert the importance of ‘tribal structures’ were also based on the misconception of ‘a loss of culture’ among workers. But these ventures into the docks were based on a more serious political concern, since it seemed increasingly possible that Inkatha’s traditional support base might have supported the ANC, its main rival. UWUSA’s attempts to organize the stevedoring workers came at a crucial moment when retrenchments were an ever-present concern for workers. Faced with the choice between unions, stevedores made pragmatic choices based on their perceptions of a future in the industry and concern for their families, many of whom lived in areas where Inkatha had a strong presence. Based on the evidence presented in this thesis, it is impossible to understand the decisions of these workers as part of their ‘inherent Zulu tribalism’. Furthermore, the conflicts between older and younger workers were surely not part of some long standing generational conflict in Zulu society.<sup>81</sup> Instead these decisions were pragmatic, as older workers had families and interests in homeland areas and younger workers had far more at stake in the industry.

In two significantly different contexts, Dunbar Moodie and Ari Sitas have examined the process of organizing African workers during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Moodie’s research on mineworkers reflects on the attempts of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) to improve the wages and working conditions of miners, set against the context of migrant workers and what he refers to as ‘the moral economy’ of

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<sup>80</sup> Interview: Mike Morris, 28 June 2001.

<sup>81</sup> See Benedict Carton. *Blood from your Children: The colonial origins of generational conflict in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000; for an interesting argument about the importance of generational conflict. While Carton offers important discussion for the period (c. 1806-1910) that he considers, I am not convinced that the theme of generational conflict is as significant in later periods.

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.<sup>82</sup>

In his investigation of the metalworking industry, Sitas has demonstrated that the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) was successful in destabilizing established power relations in hostels and uniting migrants and urban dwellers behind a common goal.<sup>83</sup> He has also shown how individual workers became active parts of the union organization.<sup>84</sup>

Yet there are significant differences between these two cases and the particular one that I am analyzing. The two glaring differences lie in the composition of the workforce and in the nature of the union. In the mines and steelworks of the Witswatersrand, there was a great diversity of ethnic groups working, whereas in the docks in Durban the workforce was predominately of Zulu origin. By the early 1980s, there was also a significant portion of miners living in urban areas, unlike in the docks. Furthermore, union organization on the mines took a different form, organized mostly by African urban dwellers and lawyers, such as Cyril Ramaphosa. The particular biases of union organizers on the mines may well have been towards an urbanized way of life. In the docks, unionists came with other biases, but these reflected particular readings of Marxism and white liberal identity. The analysis made by Moodie ultimately falls more squarely onto a conventional reading of the violence of the late 1980s as being between urban workers and rural migrants. As I have already demonstrated, the violence in the docks did not follow this pattern. Nevertheless, it is important to evaluate the successes and failures of trade unions in the industry. Crucially, however, this can only happen within the particular conditions of the industry and not within a general framework of trade unionism in South Africa.

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<sup>82</sup> Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*. Johannesburg: Witswatersrand University Press, 1994. p. 263-265.

<sup>83</sup> Ari Sitas. *African worker responses on the East Rand to changes in the Metal Industry, 1960-1980*. PhD Thesis. University of the Witswatersrand. 1984. p. 415.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 420-429.

David Hemson has made the point that so many workers need not have been retrenched, especially given that casuals do the bulk of work every single day.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> 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.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reflected on the difficult process of organizing stevedores in Durban during the 1980s. This process was difficult not only because it was set against the restructuring of the stevedoring industry and the consequent retrenchment of workers, but also because of the politics within and outside the docks. Within the stevedoring industry, relationships between workers and izinduna had developed over many years, and these far from uncomplicated processes had to be understood and worked with for any union to be successful. Outside the workplace, the collapsing Apartheid structures and the emergence of politicized ethnicity emerged as prominent features during the 1980s, which proved to be difficult obstacles in union organization.

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<sup>85</sup> David Hemson "Beyond the Frontier of Control".

<sup>86</sup> 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>

The trade union movement itself was far from uncomplicated. The General Workers Union emerged out of a context of advising workers what to do, rather than from workers within the industry. While they enjoyed much success during the early 1980s, they eventually withdrew from the docks when conditions became too difficult. Had a union emerged strongly from inside the industry, a withdrawal would never have been an option. And this withdrawal would prove crucial, since it opened the way for both companies and for a movement of politicized ethnicity. Following the withdrawal of the GWU, retrenchment continued virtually unopposed, and violence became a feature of workers' lives. This violence and intimidation did not occur predominately at the workplace, or between workers, but instead happened in workers' rural homes, a crucial area for migrant workers.

Given these contexts stevedores displayed remarkable agency in making decisions about their futures. When choosing unions, they resisted narrowly defined ethnic categories that both the Apartheid state and many scholars are so keen to place them in. Ultimately, though, this chapter has reflected on a tragedy, in which a combination of the technological changes in the ports and the legacy of Apartheid proved too difficult to overcome. Part of the tragedy is that perhaps, had different decisions been taken by the General Workers Union, some of the resulting retrenchment and loss of worker morale may well have been prevented.

## Conclusion

In one of his last published works, Pierre Bourdieu probes the difficulties and suffering of contemporary society.<sup>1</sup> One of the major contexts that the book discusses is that of the decline of industrial work and the resultant anxieties and pressures felt by people who were no longer guaranteed any kind of secure or permanent employment. Particular contributions to the book analyze the growth of temporary work and the difficulties that arise, often pitting worker against worker in the struggle to survive.<sup>2</sup> By presenting interviews with workers, the book demonstrates the social effects of these changes, by showing, for example, the harsh conditions under which ‘temps’ work and the impossible task that trade unionists face in organizing the new workforce.

While the evidence for Bourdieu’s book has been based largely on conditions in France, it does not require a great leap of faith to extend his general conclusions to other societies. We should return for a moment to Castells, whose general assertions are that the new economy does not create or destroy work, but instead re-shapes the conditions of work.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, Castells is correct, work has certainly been reshaped, but as Bourdieu shows, the numbers of young computer experts are insignificant in number when compared to the industrial workers who face uncertain and difficult futures. Flexible work may have its advantages for the highly qualified technicians of the information age, but is an extremely difficult fate to bear for industrial workers.

This thesis has discussed the emergence of this new economy for a group of workers in South Africa. In the last twenty years, these workers have experienced precisely the disillusionment felt by the workers in France presented by Bourdieu. The stevedores in Durban suffer from poor morale; they realize that their skills are worth less and less and that their prospects in the new economy are extremely limited.

However, we need to pose the question about the value of older style industrial work. This work was often highly exploitative and many of the workers’ struggles throughout the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were attempts to

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Bourdieu. (ed). *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. (translated Priscilla Ferguson)

<sup>2</sup> See articles by Michel Pialoux, Stéphane Beaud, Louis Pinto and Bourdieu in Pierre Bourdieu. (ed). *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society*. p. 255-419.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Castells. *The Rise of Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p. 265.

improve the difficult conditions of industrial work. In South Africa, the exploitation of industrial workers was amplified by the racial policies of the Apartheid state. I have discussed the particular administration of stevedores in Durban and shown how, despite some ingenuity on the part of workers, they formed part of the wider societal exploitation of cheap African migrant labourers. During the height of Apartheid, the stevedores worked for low wages, and were forbidden from organizing their workplace or protesting against the state. They enjoyed little protection from the dangers of dock work and were frequently injured at work. These workers were not part of an industrial system or a society that recognized their rights as citizens, but were instead part of an industrial relationship where they were treated more like subjects.

It is a tragic part of the history of South Africa that at the moment that workers began to gain rights at work similar to their European counterparts, global economic changes began to undermine the position of industrial workers as a whole. These changes were felt particularly acutely by the stevedores working in Durban, because harbours were the frontline of the new economy, where mass retrenchments were happening a decade before these new economic conditions would manifest themselves in other industries. The changes to the industrial relations system in South Africa meant that, at the moment that containerization caused the destruction of work in the industry, stevedores were being unionized for the first time. Unionists with little practical experience were confronted simultaneously with the impossible task of re-making the working relationships of the past and the specter of mass retrenchment. Unlike in European ports, the unions failed to prevent the casualization of the majority of the stevedoring labour force. These casuals enjoy little of the freedom that casuals may have enjoyed fifty years before, when companies were dependent on their work and workers could often negotiate their conditions of employment.

In writing this thesis I have also reflected on the difficulties of writing a history of the working class. To establish “knowledge of working class conditions” I have relied on a careful analysis of the “production politics” present in the stevedoring industry in Durban. I have based my conclusions on a wide range of government and company sources in addition to a number of accounts from stevedores themselves. In contrast to another major theorist of working class history, Dipesh Chakrabarty, I have not had to

recreate these power relationships in the workplace based on the silences and absences in my sources.<sup>4</sup> By emphasizing the importance of the politics within the workplace itself I have avoided sliding into the position of interpreting unusual forms of authority as “culturally specific”. While there is certainly much evidence to suggest that the Apartheid state embarked on a project to create a culturally specific workplace, what I have shown in this thesis is that this project failed and that the conditions of authority that prevailed in the stevedoring industry in Durban were more akin to other stevedoring workplaces internationally. This is not to say that the power structures created by Apartheid had no effect at all, on the contrary, they were responsible for creating oppressive and paternalistic relationships at work. Yet these relationships developed not as reflections of cultural traditions, but out of a mediated struggle with power structures that allowed African workers to survive Apartheid.

This is also not to suggest that “Zulu culture” played no role in the stevedores’ lives. Rather it is to recognize the caution with which we must approach the use of cultural specificity as an explanatory framework when considering ideas of work and authority. It has not been the aim of this thesis to investigate the relationship between cultural change and the experiences of authority and decline that must have been significant for workers during the period that I have considered. In future explorations of the topic, I would like to address these experiences more completely, and following James Ferguson, construct an “ethnography of decline” that would enable me to evaluate the precise importance of “culture” in determining the choices made by the stevedores.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that while this thesis has primarily been about structural change in the stevedoring industry and different régimes of labour administration, I have attempted not to present merely a ‘history from above’. Instead I have shown that stevedores, while not having control of the wider economic and political determinants of their situation, did play a significant role in shaping their conditions of work and the nature of authority exercised over them. They also displayed remarkable agency, given the structures of power, to make clear decisions about unions, ethnicity and their future in the industry. But as the closing quote of this thesis reveals, the stevedoring

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<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty. “Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (editors). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

workers were always presented with difficult conditions of existence, whether it was during the times of Apartheid Labour practice, retrenchment, or the “mere” process of work itself.

*“When there were many ships work used to kill us, but now because of containers there is no work”*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

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Mr. Yoga Thinnasagren, 6 September 2001  
Mr. Themba Dube, 8 March 2002

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