

**“A life’s work”: Harriet Bolton and Durban’s trade unions,  
1944 – 1974**

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**Supervised by Dr. Marijke du Toit and Professor Jeff Guy**

**DECLARATION**

I, Hannah Keal, declare that this Masters dissertation entitled "**A life's work**": **Harriet Bolton and Durban's trade unions, 1944 - 1974**, is my original and independent research. It has not been previously submitted for any degree, and is not being concurrently presented in candidature in any other University. All sources and literature have been duly acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to document the life and work of veteran Durban trade unionist Harriet Bolton, with a particular focus on the years from 1944 to 1974. Harriet Bolton lived and worked through many of the crucial developments in South Africa's labour history, and her personal history is closely entwined with this broader history. Her recorded memories of her years as a trade unionist offer a unique 'way in' to revisiting South Africa's labour history and particularly the critical period of Durban's early 1970s. Harriet's testimony, gathered through a series of interviews, forms a core narrative throughout the thesis. However, archive and newspaper material provide detailed contextualisation for the interviews and opportunity to gain some perspective on questions of memory and of Harriet's own relationship with history. Her recorded memories of these years substantially concern her experience as a trade unionist, but also as a working woman who was a wife and mother, later a widow as well as an engaged citizen of Durban society through her involvement in community organisations and welfare groups. As such, deeper insight into what it meant to be a working woman of her generation is gained. An important component of the thesis is a consideration of the history and politics of the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal) and its workers. The union was founded by Harriet's husband Jimmy Bolton, and was for forty years closely associated with the name and legacy of the Boltons. I examine Harriet's leadership of this union in the context of the shifting demographics of the union, and a changed political and economic landscape in South Africa. This thesis is also concerned with the role that the Trade Union Council of South Africa played during the period under consideration. Harriet's relationship with TUCSA and her experience as a white woman trade unionist organising black trade unions 'within' the structures of this organisation provide the historian with a unique perspective on TUCSA's somewhat under-researched history. Harriet's role as a trade unionist during the tumultuous and critical period of the early 1970s, and a consideration of her contribution to the emerging non-racial trade union movement, is an important component of the thesis. The years both pre and post the 1973 strike wave are revisited through Harriet's lens. Insights into the question of women's roles and contribution to South Africa's labour movement are generated through gaining an understanding of Harriet's perspectives.

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFCWU	African Food and Canning Workers Union
AFL/CIO	American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations
ANC	African National Congress
BAWU	Black Allied Workers Union
CAS	Central Administration Services
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CNETU	Council of Non-European Trade Unions
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
CWIU	Chemical Workers Industrial Union
FCWU	Food and Canning Workers Union
FEDSAW	Federation of South African Women
FWIU	Furniture Workers Industrial Union
FOFATUSA	Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa
FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
FP	Federal Party
GFWBF	General Factory Workers Benefit Fund
GWCC	Garment Workers Consultative Committee
GWIU	Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal)
GWU	Garment Workers Union
GWU-CP	Garment Workers Union – Cape Peninsula
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa
IIE	Institute for Industrial Education
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Metalworkers Federation
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation
MAWU	Metal and Allied Workers Union
MK	Umkhonto weSizwe
NIC	Natal Indian Congress
NISWU	Natal Iron and Steel Workers' Union
NRWIU	Natal Rubber Workers' Industrial Union
NUCW	National Union of Clothing Workers
NUDW	National Union of Distributive Workers
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students
NUSWEL	National Union of Students Welfare and Social Action Department
NUTW	National Union of Textile Workers
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
PDL	Poverty Datum Line
SACLA	SA Confederation of Labour
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions
SASO	South African Students Organisation
TLC	South African Trades and Labour Council

TUCSA	Trade Union Council of South Africa
TUACC	Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council
TWU	Typographical Workers Union
TWIU	Textile Workers Industrial Union (Natal)
TWIU (SA)	Textile Workers Industrial Union (South Africa)
TUC	Trade Union Congress (Britain)
UTP	Urban Training Project
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WPWAB	Western Province Workers Advice Bureau

## Foreword

“For her, work was life. Her life represented a spirited defence of the oppressed.”<sup>1</sup>

“We will remember her for her steadfast refusal to succumb to apartheid security branch pressure to abandon non-racial unionism and to split the Garment Workers’ Union along racial lines, as well as the practical support rendered for the formation of other sister trade unions...”<sup>2</sup>

A week before this thesis was due for submission, Harriet Bolton passed away in Durban. While I only knew Harriet for several years, in the time it took to complete this thesis she has never been far from my mind. I am deeply saddened by the news of her death. The biographer’s relationship with his or her subject is one that is inevitably characterised by its complexity and, at times, ambivalence. This is perhaps even more so when researching someone who is alive and invested in the project. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to meet Harriet in person, and believe that this project gained hugely from our interviews and interactions. Getting to know Harriet was an inspiring experience which has challenged me in innumerable ways to rethink my understanding of South Africa’s past and future. I hope that this thesis goes some way towards providing a record of her remarkable life and contribution.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hemson, “So long to a fiery spirit”, *The Mail and Guardian*, November 27, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Andre Kriel, “Harriet Bolton passes away”,

<http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?include=docs/cosatu2day/2009/pr1122.html>, accessed: November 27, 2009.



# Introduction

For thirty years I have tried by peaceful means, through work in the trade union movement, to give hope to workers for equality, justice, fraternity – but I say that a thousandth-of-a-millimetre shift in thirty years is no change and gives me no hope for a peaceful life. I don't want to participate in the upheavals which the Government and the privileged classes are inviting. They feel the need to protect their spoils and I can't join them. I believe in justice, hope and opportunity for all peoples, and as I feel there is nothing more I can do in a land of the blind and the deaf it is time for me to go.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, “Durban’s rebel trade unionist” Harriet Bolton justified her decision to leave South Africa with her children for the United Kingdom in early 1975.<sup>2</sup> Harassed by police, concerned about her children’s safety, ostracised by her colleagues in the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) and seemingly out of step with the leadership and membership of the Garment Workers Industrial Union (GWIU), her self-described ‘community’ for thirty years, Harriet felt her only option was to go. Through her departure, Durban’s emerging independent and non-racial trade unions lost one of their staunchest allies.<sup>3</sup> Her leaving also closed a chapter for the Natal garment and furniture unions, which since their establishment had been associated with the name, and legacy, of the Boltons.

This thesis seeks to document Harriet Bolton’s life and work in Durban’s trade union movement, from 1944 to 1974. Harriet lived and worked through many of the crucial developments in South Africa’s labour history, and her personal history is closely entwined with this broader history. A white South African woman who started her working life a few years before the National Party’s ascendancy to power, she lived through the decades in which Apartheid was legislated and put in to practice. A focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Bolton, “Why I am leaving South Africa.” *The Mercury*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Mrs Bolton Foresees Natal’s own ‘TUCSA’”, *Daily News*, February 12, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987) 87. The new unions which organised from the early 1970s were referred to collectively both at the time, and in the historiography, by a number of different terms, including the ‘non-racial’ unions, the ‘independent’ unions, and the ‘democratic’ unions. While in reality the unions organised mostly African workers, they were in principle non-racial. All of these terms sought to set the unions apart from the established and registered Trade Union Council of South Africa affiliated unions as well as the Black Consciousness influenced Black Allied Workers Union which rejected white activists’ involvement in trade unions. See, for example, Johann Maree (ed.), *The Independent Trade Unions. 1974-1984. Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987).

her life story facilitates a critical look at some of the major issues in the struggle for democratic trade unions in South Africa. Harriet's recorded memories of these years substantially concern her experience as a trade unionist, but also as a working woman who was a wife and mother, later a widow as well as an engaged citizen of Durban society through her involvement in community organisations such as the Housewives' League and various welfare groups. Of particular concern to this thesis is an investigation of Harriet's relationship with TUCSA and her experience as a white woman trade unionist organising black trade unions 'within' the structures of this organisation. TUCSA's role in the period under scrutiny is therefore an important component of the story. Post-liberation and a generation on from the trade union movement's renaissance, Harriet's recorded memories of her years as a trade unionist offer a unique 'way in' to revisiting South Africa's labour history and particularly the critical period of the 1970s.

In her personal accounts, the figure of Harriet's husband and fellow trade-unionist James "Jimmy" Crossley Bolton looms large. Jimmy moved to South Africa from York in 1928, the year after Harriet was born. A young furniture upholsterer schooled in the British tradition of trade unionism, and with the first hand experience of the General Strike still fresh in his mind, he set about forming a union for furniture workers and, later, a union for clothing workers. By the time Harriet first started work for the clothing workers in the mid-1940s Jimmy had firmly entrenched himself and his majority male Indian unions in the Durban trade union movement. He was also the provincial representative on the national federation, the Trades & Labour Council (TLC) for a number of years. Harriet was widowed in 1964 and took over the administration of the furniture and garment unions. Establishing herself as a leader in her own right, from the late 1960s she became an executive committee member of TUCSA. Her trade union work took a controversial turn in the 1970s through her support for the emerging non-racial trade unions. Her contact with activist academic Rick Turner and student activists during this time led to the establishment of a number of worker-related organisations, and ultimately several trade unions. Harriet was also an important conduit for funding from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which was a contentious issue at the time.

In her personal testimony, Harriet consistently maintains that Jimmy taught her “everything” she knows about trade unionism. Taking this claim seriously, this thesis explores Jimmy’s politics and trade unionism, with the aim of gaining a deeper appreciation of Harriet’s politics and actions. This is particularly with reference to the period when she took over the running of the furniture and garment unions and, I argue, influenced some significant breaks with the GWIU’s past history, all the while paying tribute to Jimmy’s legacy. Under pressure from the GWIU’s executive committee because of her involvement with organising African workers, Harriet chose to resign from the GWIU in 1974. Durban newspapers lamented the loss of a “mother of six and 30 000” when she left for England with her children the next year. While there, she made ends meet as a casual agricultural worker and cook. However, she maintained some connections with the Durban unions, particularly through the ICFTU. She returned to Durban ten years later where she briefly continued her work with the garment union, mostly in an administrative capacity. Harriet left the country again in 1987, this time for Zimbabwe. She moved back to Durban at the turn of the century and worked behind the counter at a fast-food restaurant several times a week. This thesis documents and contextualises this extraordinarily rich and active life.

### **Situating Harriet Bolton in the history of women trade unionists in South Africa’s labour movement**

Harriet’s role in South Africa’s trade unions does not slot easily into available discourses, arguably making her history a more interesting and challenging one to tell. To an extent, she was set apart from other prominent South African women trade union leaders of her time by generation, class and ideology. Important also for the period under consideration was that she was based in Natal, which in terms of its labour and political history was in various ways distinct from the other major centres of the Transvaal and the Cape. In order to contextualise Harriet’s position further, I shall now turn to a broad discussion of the history of women trade unionists in South Africa’s labour movement.

Despite historically being a minority in a largely male South African work force, women have played a significant role in the country's labour movement. This was mostly, through not always, as leaders and members of majority female trade unions. As the title of her chapter "Generations of struggle: Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930-60" suggests, Iris Berger locates the origins of South African feminism in the trade union movement.<sup>4</sup> Berger argues that women trade unionists led the way in the early 1980s by being among the first to introduce, at a grassroots level, explicitly feminist concerns to their organisations. She points out that although many of these women were cut off from preceding generations by bannings and exile, they were perhaps unknowingly tapping into a long tradition of demands for women's issues to be taken up by trade unions, and taken seriously.

In the early twentieth century Mary Fitzgerald or "Pickhandle Mary", a moniker she first earned for her handiness with the tool during a tram workers' strike in 1911, was "one of the most radical and combative of the Rand labour activists."<sup>5</sup> An Irish immigrant, she likened marriage to slavery, and the newspaper *The Voice*, which she produced with Archie Crawford, was an important disseminator of syndicalist ideas in the Transvaal. A generation on from Fitzgerald saw Communist Party aligned women trade unionists and activists such as Ray Alexander, Betty du Toit, and for a shorter period Pauline Podbrey, become important figures on the Trades & Labour Council's left. Alexander and Podbrey, both with Eastern European communist backgrounds, drew on a particular brand of international socialism which from the early twentieth century had started to have a defining influence on South Africa's trade unions. Their first commitment was to a racially inclusive trade union movement, but Alexander in particular was a champion of women's equality, mainly expressed through her work as head of the Food and Canning Workers Union. In her introduction to Alexander's autobiography, Iris Berger argues that Alexander was committed to "raising the status of women ... an issue that her socialist

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<sup>4</sup> Iris Berger "Generations of struggle: Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930-60" in *Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers. Women in South African History*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd., 2004) 186.

ideology shaped through the lens of working-class activity.”<sup>6</sup> However, Berger contends it was perhaps through Alexander’s own experience of childbirth and family that “she also became a pioneer in acknowledging the relationships between women’s personal and political lives.”<sup>7</sup> Of the same generation, but a different world, were Afrikaans trade unionists Anna Scheepers and Johanna and Hester Cornelius. Under the influence of communist and trade unionist Solly Sachs these women from humble, conservative farming communities became garment union leaders in their own right. Although they would never identify themselves as Communist, through Sachs’ influence came a theoretical commitment, perceived as radical at the time, to solidarity with black women workers. A class consciousness and labour activism based around the garment workers’ shared experiences and common heritage was established, which at certain moments also extended to include black women. The union became a bastion of resistance to Afrikaner fascism before and during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup>

Post World War II, as more black women entered the industry in the Transvaal, black garment workers Hettie du Preez and Lucy Mvubelo were voted in as general secretaries of the GWU’s coloured and African branches.<sup>9</sup> Mvubelo’s leadership of what was the largest African union at the time was often dogged by controversy. This was particularly so because of her union’s relationship to the GWU, aptly described as the ‘parent union’, as well as Mvubelo’s continued support of TUCSA. Mvubelo’s relationship to the GWU’s leadership, in particular Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius, and the corresponding relationship between their unions, was often dismissed as one characterised by paternalism and control - both by contemporary commentators and historians. This was especially so as the white membership of the GWU began to dwindle

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<sup>6</sup> Iris Berger, introduction to *All my life and all my strength*, by Ray Alexander-Simons, ed. Raymond Suttner (Johannesburg: STE, 2004) 9.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Berger, introduction to *All my life and all my strength*, by Ray Alexander-Simons, ed. Raymond Suttner (Johannesburg: STE, 2004) 9.

<sup>8</sup> That the union’s early years have perhaps received more sympathetic treatment by historians than is due has been noted in recent literature. This will be discussed in more depth in the chapters to come. See, for example, Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: labour and politics in South Africa, 1938-48* (Cape Town, David Phillip, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Sachs was criticised by trade unionists such as Ray Alexander for making the decision to split the union thus. Ray Alexander-Simons, *All my life and all my strength*, ed. Raymond Suttner (Johannesburg: STE, 2004)

and it began to take a less combative approach than it had been characterised by in its early years.<sup>10</sup> Mvubelo's role and the trajectory of the African garment workers can be contrasted, to a degree, with that of women leaders of the Food and Canning Workers. It is generally accepted that black women leaders such as Frances Baard and Liz Abrahams together with Ray Alexander established more equitable relationships within the FCWU. Although the union was forced by legislation to split into racially defined branches, it continued to function as a whole as far as it was possible. Significantly, the FCWU was the largest of the group of unions which formed the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) after the dissolution of the Trades and Labour Council in the mid-1950s. These issues, which have become important themes in South Africa's labour historiography, will be taken up in more detail during the course of the thesis.

Despite their different trajectories, the GWU and FCWU's strength lay in their ability to appeal to the issues important to the membership of newly urbanised white Afrikaner women, and black, rural seasonal women workers respectively. These unions aided many women workers in changing their way of seeing themselves in the world. Thus Cheryl Walker, in her history of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), has noted that trade unionists were disproportionately represented among the women activists who initially came together to form the organisation: all of those represented came from the GWU and the FCWU. Iris Berger similarly concluded that for both black and white women, "trade unions remained one of the most important arenas of women's collective organising from the 1930s to the 1960s." Her synopsis of the role of trade unions during this period is worth quoting at length:

Unions brought women into active public life, defying contemporary beliefs that they should accept their political and legal subordination without complaint. Through union activities, women were politicised, introduced to the pressing

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<sup>10</sup> Elected as vice-president for the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) for two years running, in 1957 Mvubelo disaffiliated her union from SACTU, apparently because of its open ties to the Congress movement. Instead she aligned her black garment workers with the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA). FOFATUSA was set up as an overt attempt by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and TUCSA to counter the influence of SACTU. In much of the historiography, the left remembers Mvubelo as an agent of white capitalism. She however argued that her close ties with TUCSA were in the interests of the thousands of black women workers that she represented.

issues of the time and to a new world of debate, organising and protest. These experiences transformed the women involved, as well as the groups they helped to launch and sustain. Within these new political spaces, some women challenged racist practices and institutions, struggling to interact with one another on a basis of relative equality; they also acquired the skills to launch new groups with gender-specific objectives. In all these ways, trade union activism changed women's personal and collective identities, helping to shape the contours of a later South African feminist agenda that would challenge not only the unions, but also political organisations such as the ANC, which continued to maintain that national liberation should precede gender equity.<sup>11</sup>

Malehoko Tshoaei points out that during the democratic unions' formative years in the 1970s, women played a disproportionate role as union leaders relative to their numbers in the workforce. In Durban, black women such as June-Rose Nala and Joyce Gumede were appointed General Secretaries of the emerging independent unions. Later in the 1970s, Emma Mashinini headed up the black branch of the National Union of Distributive Workers, while Maggie Magubane and Lydia Kompe played significant roles in the early years of their respective unions. However, Tshoaei makes the interesting argument that this was bound up with the perception of what it meant to be a General Secretary, president or an organiser of a union at the time. Drawing evidence from interviews, she suggests that the position of General Secretary was generally considered administrative, and was not one associated with political influence and power:

As unions were small organisations in their early formation years, everyone had a meaningful contribution to make in advancing the struggle of the workers ... It is in such an environment where occupational positions were not linked to power or any influence in the organisation, that women occupied positions such as general secretary and president.<sup>12</sup>

Post Wiehahn, as unions gained recognition and entered into collective bargaining agreements, men increasingly took on leadership positions in unions while women were relegated to behind the scenes positions in administration, a "redefinition of union

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<sup>11</sup> Iris Berger "Generations of struggle: Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930-60" in *Basus' iimbokodo, bawel' imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers. Women in South African History*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007) 204.

<sup>12</sup> Malehoko Tshoaei, "Women in the labour movement. Perceptions of gender democracy in South African trade unions," in *Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions. International Perspectives*, eds. Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith. (Routledge: London and New York, 2002) 205 – 231, 215.



officials' roles premised on societal gender role expectations.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Iris Berger's glowingly positive analysis of the role of women in trade unions, and the role of trade unions in women's lives, quoted at length above, is qualified with her sobering point that the majority of trade unions still remained largely indifferent to the badly paid women industrial workers. This was not only during the period she has in mind, but also for decades beyond. Tsoaedi similarly concludes that women workers in post-Apartheid South Africa still face many of the same obstacles:

... while the struggle produced immense results for the political rights of workers, gender issues are far from being successfully addressed. Women's presence in the unions is not reflected in their levels of union participation or in union leadership structures, nor are their interests reflected through collective bargaining in their terms and conditions at work.<sup>14</sup>

As implied above, much of the historiography on women in South Africa's labour movement is based on the period from 1930 to the mid-1950s, and is particularly concerned with the GWU and the FCWU. The contribution of TUCSA women trade unionists during the two decades which followed remains part of a broader gap in the historiography, detailed below. Harriet Bolton's involvement in trade unions spans both these periods, but it was only from the early 1960s that she became a public figure in Durban's trade union movement. Harriet's background and experience in and of trade unions was in many ways a completely different one to the Afrikaans women garment workers who would become important contemporaries of hers from the 1960s. The first point is that Harriet's class background was significantly different to theirs. She was introduced to trade unions not as a factory worker, but as a clerk. Her trade union 'education' came from her husband, who described himself as a British socialist. Jimmy was a skilled artisan and therefore occupied a particular position as a member of South Africa's elite white working class. He was also entrenched in local Natal politics when Harriet met him. Harriet herself claimed that she knew nothing more about socialism than what Jimmy had taught her; she said she did not ever "study" it. I would argue that

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<sup>13</sup> Malehoko Tshoaedi, "Women in the labour movement," in *Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions. International Perspectives*, eds. Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Malehoko Tshoaedi, "Women in the labour movement," in *Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions. International Perspectives*, eds. Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith, 205.

Harriet's approach to trade unionism was in some ways 'spontaneous', for want of a better term, compared to for instance Ray Alexander's more intellectually structured understanding of society and labour. Harriet described herself as a "reactor" who reacted to "my community ... the workers".<sup>15</sup> The Durban context was also significantly different from the women-dominated clothing unions in the Transvaal and the Cape. It was only in the 1960s that women started entering the Natal industry in any significant numbers. Indian women workers' experience of work and the union was, for various structural reasons related largely to their position in society, different to the white garment and coloured canning women workers.

Centring a woman as the subject of study, as this project does, makes it impossible to take gender for granted. Insights into the question of women's roles and contribution to the history of South Africa's labour movement are generated through gaining an understanding of Harriet's perspectives, not only as a white woman organiser but as one organising black trade unions. Coupled with this, but also reflecting on the domestic aspects of her life, is a comment she made to me about her more recent experience of living with women who spent their lives as "wives". For most of her life she worked alongside men and women who defined their lives not just in terms of domestic duties but their careers as well. This thesis investigates some of the complexities she experienced in negotiating her life between home and work, and its implications for a greater understanding of gender. In many ways Harriet can be seen as an example of an "exceptional woman", a "heroine who earns the right to represent by virtue of her example".<sup>16</sup> However, at certain moments Harriet's life could also be seen as characteristic of a generation of white women who went out to work during World War II. By contextualising her testimony from a labour and gendered perspective, a deeper insight into what it meant to be a working woman of her generation is gained.

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<sup>15</sup> Harriet Bolton, "Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton", *The Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Stansell, "Louise Bryant Grows Old" *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 161.

## **Situating Harriet Bolton in debates in South Africa's labour historiography**

Revisionist historians, variously influenced by a “rising tide of dependency theory, Marxist political economy, and French structuralist anthropology” had by the 1970s begun to reshape liberal South African historiography in radical ways.<sup>17</sup> The trade union renaissance in South Africa's 1970s provided fertile ground for reflections on questions of capital and the state. The era was marked by a flowering of “organisational history” by revisionist historians as well as activists outside of the academy, many of them intimately involved in the new trade unions, and focussed around pertinent debates of the time about the revolutionary, or otherwise, potential of trade unions. This intimate link, Jon Lewis argues, “proved a source of both strength and weakness.”<sup>18</sup> While the “circumscribed” form this history often took must be understood in its context, it is a trend which has tended to dominate labour histories of the period. On the other hand, Paul La Hausse argues that the new organisations also provided “an impetus for historians to move beyond political economy and to explore the relationships between class formation, political consciousness, and culture.”<sup>19</sup> This “history from below” was often fuelled by oral history methodologies, which valued individual testimonies as a powerful means of uncovering previously “hidden histories”. Hobsbawm, among others, has argued that the history of labour is not the history just of organisations, but also of the people who comprise these organisations and, as such, the tendency of labour historians to focus on the organisation rather than the people who participate in it must be resisted.<sup>20</sup> Influenced by historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman, scholars have produced works of great significance from the perspective of individual contributions to the history of the working class, however defined. This thesis aims to follow in this tradition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Paul la Hausse, “Oral History and South African Historians” *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990):347.

<sup>18</sup> Jon Lewis, “South African Labor History: A Historiographical Assessment” *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990): 213.

<sup>19</sup> Paul la Hausse, “Oral History and South African Historians,” *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990):347.

<sup>20</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm “Labour History and Ideology” *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974) 371-181.

<sup>21</sup> Paul la Hausse, “Oral History and South African Historians,” *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990):347.

Since the late 1980s, ‘Women’s History’ as well as Gender analysis has shaped much of South African History. However, labour history still reflects a distinctly male perspective.<sup>22</sup> Iris Berger argues that typical labour histories portray class and trade unions in terms of the male experience and this becomes the accepted representation of the working class. For example, in his history of Cape Town garment and tailor workers Martin Nicol fails to take the fact that the majority of workers were women into account. While Nicol does acknowledge this, other histories are not even this self-reflexive.<sup>23</sup> Extant writing about the ‘democratic unions’ of the 1970s and 1980s are especially blind to questions of gender and women’s experience and agency. Perhaps the most glaring example is how the 1973 strikes have been canonised. Apart from brief mention that women made up a large proportion of the textile workers out on strike, the strikes are overwhelmingly represented in terms of the male experience. That this was linked to women’s experiences of trade unions is illustrated by Pregs Govender in her autobiography *Love and Courage*.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1980s, in a vastly changed labour and political context, Govender and others worked to transform the GWIU into a more ‘progressive’ organisation, which would ultimately vote in favour of joining the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Govender maintained that even during this later period, many male union leaders were still blind to the issues affecting women garment workers. While she is wrong when she suggests that she was the first to initiate a campaign against strip searching at clothing factories, her point - that the union did not in any self-conscious way attempt to address issues which particularly affected women’s

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<sup>22</sup> There have been a number of important interventions into the history of women’s roles in South Africa’s labour movement. These include Helen Bradford’s history of the ICU, various sociological studies by Fatima Meer, Jacklyn Cock’s study of women’s working lives, *Maids and Madams*, as well as Iris Berger’s *Threads of Solidarity*. PhD and Masters theses have also started to address some of the gaps. Biographies and autobiographies meanwhile add vital perspective on the lives of women trade unionists. Among them are Emma Mashinini’s *Strikes have followed me all my life*, Ray Alexander-Simons’ *All my life and all my strength*, Pauline Podbrey’s *White Girl in Search of the Party* and Betty du Toit’s semi-autobiographical history of the textile workers, *Ukubamba Amandolo*. Pregs Govender’s *Love and Courage* addresses, in part, the later period of the 1980s while work by women such as Helen Joseph and Ellen Khuzwayo, although not directly tackling issues related to trade unions and labour, provide insight into the lives of South African women of their generation.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Nicol, “A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900-39,” (PhD. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> Pregs Govender, *Love and Courage. A Story of Insubordination* (South Africa: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2007)

lives - stands. Her comments, detailed below, would apply equally to industries other than clothing:

On top of poor wages and working conditions, women often had to endure sexual harassment and strip-searching and were still expected to be sweetly submissive ... For many women, a leader was a man whom they could look up to, not someone who looked like themselves. Although women formed the overwhelming majority of workers in the industry, they seldom elected other women into leadership positions, at factory, regional or national levels.<sup>25</sup>

In 1990, Lewis identified the workings and role of TUCSA “as a gap in our knowledge of trade union organization in the past”.<sup>26</sup> Articles, chapters and theses which take into account TUCSA’s past in varying ways have been written since then. But a comprehensive history of the organisation and of the people who comprise it has yet to be written. The reasons for this are perhaps obvious. TUCSA’s “truncated economism”, as David Lewis eloquently describes it, was not the focus of the historians and sociologists responsible for the outpouring of labour history in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>27</sup> A more urgent story to explore was that of the emerging trade union movement. TUCSA was presented as the polar opposite of the new movement – as a reactionary, destructive force, an example of everything that the independent unions were striving not to be. The result is a one-dimensional characterisation of the organisation in the literature. Over three decades on from the revitalization of the trade union movement, and in the context of a new dispensation, much of their analysis might still hold true. However, it is perhaps an obvious point that a considered and in-depth study of TUCSA would reveal a more complex organisation than has been allowed thus far. This thesis starts to open up new avenues of investigation into the role that TUCSA played, particularly during the crucial period of the early 1970s. It does this mostly through Harriet’s lens. As a woman in the male dominated TUCSA, as a long-serving member of the executive, and also as someone who became increasingly disillusioned by TUCSA and, later, alienated from the

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<sup>25</sup> Pregis Govender, *Love and Courage. A Story of Insubordination* (South Africa: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2007), 96.

<sup>26</sup> Jon Lewis, “South African Labor History: A Historiographical Assessment” *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990).

<sup>27</sup> David Lewis, “Black Workers and Trade Unions,” in *From Protest to Challenge: a Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa. 1882-1990. Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*, eds. G. Thomas and Gail M. Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), 189.

organisation, Harriet's perspectives both then and now offer a unique means of exploring TUCSA's history. Harriet's involvement with TUCSA likewise suggests apparent nuances and contradictions in her own actions; on the one hand an executive member of TUCSA, on the other a trade unionist who deplored their bureaucratic methods and who was later deeply involved with the emerging African unions. I have gained a vivid impression of Harriet as a forceful and unconventional woman who functioned within conventional structures in many aspects of her working life. This mix of 'conservative radicalism' is a theme which permeates Harriet's 'life story'. This thesis investigates Harriet's 'conservative radicalism', discussing how a key figure in TUCSA built out, pushed against and sought to redefine what this organisation could do. A focus on her life also by association offers some history of the GWIU, its role in Durban, and the people who comprised it.

### **Oral history, biography and writing Harriet Bolton's 'life story'**

This thesis was initially envisaged as an oral history project which would document Harriet's 'life history', primarily through the use of her personal narrative. As the project evolved, it took a different turn, so that it became part biography, part life story, and partly a history of the unions which Harriet both served and led.<sup>28</sup> The rich TUCSA archive and the contemporary press' avid interest in Harriet's activities as a trade unionist provided detailed contextualisation for the interviews and opportunity to gain some perspective on questions of memory and of Harriet's own relationship with history.

I conducted eleven 'formal', lengthy interviews with Harriet. These interviews generally spanned between one-and-a-half to three hours and in principle took the form of researched questions which I would pose to her. However, as many oral historians have noted, interview situations rarely retain a clear-cut question and answer format. Instead, our 'interviews' often became conversations. The term 'conversational narrative' is a

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<sup>28</sup> Although definitions are scarce, it seems 'life histories' can be defined apart from biography for the primacy that the former gives to personal narrative in "telling a life". See, for example, The Personal Narratives Group (ed.) *Interpreting Women's Lives. Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989)

useful one, in that it acknowledges the contribution of the author or interviewer to the interview process and the transcribed interview.<sup>29</sup> Organised interviews aside, I have had many more informal conversations with Harriet when I was not necessarily taking notes or recording. As Iris Berger also notes on her experience of interviewing Ray Alexander, it was often during these more relaxed interactions that Harriet would make mention of an issue or thought I would deem significant, but which had not been brought up by her during our more structured interviews.<sup>30</sup>

Using oral history as a source poses a number of methodological and theoretical concerns, long debated by historians. Firstly it is vital to note that the interview situation is an artificial one. The particular product that emerges is context specific. Marjorie Shostak, for example, emphasises that personal narratives do not exist outside of the shared process that created them. The researcher comes to a project with a set of assumptions or an agenda and this, and the way in which the life story is selected and edited, should be acknowledged and reflected on. Any other combination of researcher and interviewee will yield very different results.<sup>31</sup> This, as well as the primacy of context, was made clear to me through reflecting on two in-depth interviews which trade union activist David Hemson, who worked closely with Harriet in the early 1970s, conducted with Harriet and made available to me. He interviewed Harriet in 1974 and 1994 in a vastly different time period and political context.<sup>32</sup> Harriet's personal circumstances had also changed considerably by the time I first met her in 2005. Aside from this, Hemson was an 'insider'. The questions he asked and his intimate knowledge of detail means that

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Ronald J Grele. *Envelopes of Sound, The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing Inc., 1985, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Michael Frisch, "Oral history and Hard Times: a review essay" in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 29-37, Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", *History Workshop, a journal of socialist historians* 12 (1981): 96-107, Luise White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History", *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 39 (2000): 11-22, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Iris Berger, introduction to *All my life and all my strength*, by Ray Alexander-Simons.

<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Shostak "'What the Wind Won't Take Away' The Genesis of Nisa – The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman" in *Interpreting Women's Lives. Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, ed. The Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 228 – 240.

<sup>32</sup> Labour historian Luisa Passerini reflects on this issue, particularly focussing on the experience and the product of interviewing workers in and about different political contexts, as well as 'subjectivity' and oral sources. Luisa Passerini, "Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism", *History Workshop, a journal of socialist historians* 8 (1979): 84-92.

his transcribed interviews differ - sometimes considerably - in form and content to mine. Rob Lambert has reflected on this process in his thesis “Political Unionism”. He describes how, as a trade union activist himself, many of his interviews became lively discussions where theories and ideas were tested and challenged.<sup>33</sup> As an ‘outsider’ to the trade union movement I have not had this advantage. However I would argue that issues which an ‘insider’ would perhaps take for granted I would question, which hopefully gains more perspectives on Harriet’s attitudes and ideas. On the other hand, my interest is not only with political questions around the role of trade unions and the state, but also the politics of gender, of home and the family and their relationship to Harriet’s work in the trade union movement, and how she remembers her history.<sup>34</sup> I am also particularly interested in how South Africa’s current political context – over thirty years on from the rebirth of the democratic trade union movement, post-liberation and in the context of an apparent growing dissatisfaction, particularly among the poor, of the African National Congress’ performance and delivery – impacts on the way in which Harriet remembers the politics of her involvement in the trade union movement and how this influences the form that her narrative takes.

The use of personal narratives for writing history has long been regarded with suspicion for its subjectivity. Portelli, among others, has argued however that the credibility of oral sources is a different kind of credibility in that what might be the most important or revealing element in a personal narrative is a divergence from the ‘truth’. By understanding the conditions that shaped these narratives, or the context of the narrative as discussed above, the researcher can begin to comprehend what these ‘truths’ reveal

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<sup>33</sup> “Shared democratic hopes for the future of our land and a deep longing for a new social order freed from domination and violence united researcher and those being researched in a creative experience of past recall.” Robert Vincent Lambert, “Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965”, (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1988) 534 – 535.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, Joan Sangster argues that oral historians “must incorporate gender as a defining category of analysis, for women often remember the past in different ways in comparison with men. In particular, she pays attention to how women’s ‘embeddedness’ in the family shapes their recollections of the past. Joan Sangster, “Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history” in *The Oral History Reader*, Perks and Thomson (eds.), 87-100.



about the narrator.<sup>35</sup> Feminist historians in particular positively value the subjective element inherent in oral history:

The truths of personal narratives are the truths revealed from real positions in the world, through lived experience in social relationships, in the context of passionate beliefs and partisan stands. They recount efforts to grapple with the world in all of its confusion and complexity and with the normal lack of omniscience that characterizes the human condition. It is precisely because of their subjectivity – their rooted-ness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character – that we value them.<sup>36</sup>

Historians have noted that using oral history for “more history” alone does not exploit its full potential. Attention to language and its relationship to the construction of cultural meanings and social organisation offer the oral historian more insight into the ways that narratives are structured and subjectivity created. In particular it facilitates an understanding of the way that gender is shaped through available discourses. Belinda Bozzoli, for example, argues that *Women of Phokeng* would have failed as a project if its only aim was to mine new ‘facts’ from women whose voices were silent in the archive. Instead she took the life stories seriously as texts: “imperfectly reflecting lives, and more accurately revealing ‘cultural and psychological myth’, rather than as sources or ‘gobbets’ of useful answers to key questions...”<sup>37</sup> Bozzoli, however, points out that she did not give the texts complete primacy as texts alone. While accepting the value of literary methods of analysis, I would follow Joan Sangster in her argument that firmly locating the interviews within a social and economic context aids a better understanding of the composition of the narrative.<sup>38</sup> While this project is perhaps guilty in some places of using Harriet’s personal testimony simply as a means of garnering ‘more history’, I hope that through my awareness of the interview transcripts as texts, I am able to achieve some complexity of analysis.

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<sup>35</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History” *History Workshop, a journal of socialist historians* 12 (1981): 96-107.

<sup>36</sup> The Personal Narratives Group (ed.), *Interpreting Women’s Lives. Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 263-264.

<sup>37</sup> Belinda Bozzoli with Mmantho Nkotsoe, *The women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991)

<sup>38</sup> Joan Sangster, “Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history” in *The Oral History Reader* ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

Writing history involves re-presenting ‘the past’ in a narrative form, an historical discourse that it never existed in. The point already made is that the form that this narrative takes is highly contingent. As Susan Morgan puts it:

Twenty-plus years on from the first ‘shockwaves’ of poststructuralism, it is no longer possible to speak of ‘an unmediated, unconstructed, non-perspectival account of the past.’<sup>39</sup>

Biography as a form of history heightens broader questions about history as narrative and the theory of the narrative. Reflecting on the process of how biography is written, Pierre Bourdieu argues that autobiographical narrative is motivated by “a concern to give meaning, to rationalize, to show the inherent logic, both for the past and for the future, to make consistent and constant”, or, in other words to represent ‘a life’ as a directed journey. He argues that the biographer, or researcher, is complicit in this process and in fact reinforces the tendency to make a life coherent, and accept this “artificial creation of meaning.”<sup>40</sup> Related to this is the inclination of biographers to discard ambiguity, contradiction and nuance in favour of an ‘epic’ or ‘anti-epic’ plot. Christine Stansell argues in much the same vein that social historians are often unenthusiastic about considering the periods of their subjects’ lives when “the historical dynamics which endowed them with salience peter out and the one-time heroes and heroines become outmoded.”<sup>41</sup> However, she perhaps gives the biographer some clues as to how to negotiate this seemingly unavoidable search for purpose and trajectory in her argument for the consideration of the usefulness of “anomie, irrelevance, littleness, the indiscernible subject”.<sup>42</sup> Through its almost exclusive focus on Harriet’s life as a trade unionist, this thesis perhaps gives a rather one-dimensional perspective on a complex and multi-faceted life. Harriet’s identity was unarguably bound up with her work for the trade union movement for well over three decades. Yet, in several of our interviews Harriet

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Morgan, “Introduction: Writing feminist history: Theoretical debates and critical practices” in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Susan Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion”, trans. Yves Winkin and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies*, ed. R.J Parmentier and G. Urban, 14 (1987): 2.

<sup>41</sup> Christine Stansell, “Louise Bryant Grows Old” *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 160.

<sup>42</sup> Christine Stansell, “Louise Bryant Grows Old” *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 176.

asserted that in the decades which followed she was forced to “move on” in her efforts to support her family. However this, along with a more comprehensive history of the GWIU and its workers, is material for future research.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

Chapter One describes and contextualises Harriet’s childhood and Jimmy Bolton’s initial years in Durban. It covers the period roughly from the immediate pre-Depression years up until the late 1940s. The chapter contextualises the emergence and early history of the GWIU within a broader framework of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation of Indian and African workers, fragmentation of the job process and the emergence of South Africa’s first ‘non-racial’ industrial unions. Also central is a consideration of Jimmy Bolton’s ‘approach’ to trade unionism, or rather the traditions which he drew upon, and how this impacted on the GWIU’s trajectory. Harriet’s childhood on the Bluff, her formative influences and finally her first job at the Typographical Union give important context for a more in-depth understanding of her life. The chapter concludes with an account of Jimmy and Harriet’s marriage and early family life.

The Nationalists’ legislative onslaught made the 1950s a fraught decade for workers and their trade unions. The reverberations of the ‘decade of defiance’ were felt acutely by the trade union movement throughout South Africa, and the Natal garment and furniture unions were no exception. Chapter Two seeks to describe Harriet’s life within this context. Newly married and starting a family, Harriet continued her work at the trade union offices, and became more fully entrenched in the functioning of the unions. The particular 1950s ‘white’ Durban social milieu which Harriet was drawn into, mostly through Jimmy’s work on the city council, is also investigated. This is set against the background of the upheavals caused by the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, and the proposed changes to labour legislation. Central to this period, and an important component of this thesis, is an account of the formation of TUCSA and SACTU, and a consideration of their respective politics and trajectories. I argue that an understanding of the debates around the politics of the two organisations during this period is vital in order

to more fully comprehend Harriet's role in the trade union movement over the next two decades.

Chapter Three begins with an account of Jimmy Bolton's death, and investigates how Harriet survived as a single, working mother of six. Building on the context that the previous chapters have provided around Jimmy Bolton's trade unionism and politics, Chapter Three is concerned with the sometimes obvious, and sometimes more subtle, changes that were instituted in the garment union under Harriet's leadership. The shifts in political landscape and the altered position of Indian workers in South Africa are also an important component of this story. I argue that by the early 1970s Harriet had influenced some significant breaks with the GWIU's past history. An account of the 1971 Currie's Fountain strike and of Harriet's role in the strike, perhaps the GWIU's most 'radical' moment of solidarity, is an important component of this argument. At around this time, several students on the Durban campus of the University of Natal volunteered their services at the Bolton Hall. Over the next year the Durban labour scene saw unprecedented activity around Wage Board hearings, and the first attempts to reorganise African workers into independent, non-racial unions since SACTU's demise were piloted out of the Bolton Hall.

In 1973, South Africa was rocked by a wave of strikes of an unprecedented scale. Durban was at the centre of the activity. Chapter Four discusses the responses to the strikes from Harriet, the Bolton Hall unions, workers, the Durban press and public, as well as employers. It also discusses TUCSA and other trade unionists' responses, linking these to debates at the International Labour Organisation conference in 1973, as well as the TUCSA conference later the same year. A detailed account of Phillip Frame's dispute with Harriet's Textile Workers Industrial Union (TWIU) is given. Harriet's response to this and the implications of this both for her and TUCSA is discussed. The chapter also considers how Harriet addressed, presented herself and interacted with different audiences. She had emerged as a personality in Durban's white press from the late 1960s, and particularly as the hero of exploited Indian garment workers during the Currie's Fountain Strike in 1971. Thanks to close press coverage of the textile worker disputes in

the Frame complex throughout 1973, her image as a critical and authoritative voice on local labour matters was entrenched.

Chapter Five charts how Harriet's personality in South Africa's press developed in to "Durban's rebel trade unionist". The chapter begins with a detailed account of the banning of the "Bolton Hall Four" and its consequences. A consideration of the ensuing very public fall out between Harriet, the GWIU, and TUCSA forms the chapter's core. I examine how, in the context of an intensified crack-down by the state, Harriet continued to assist the fledgling unions, helping to lay vital foundations from which a strong, democratic trade union movement would emerge. The chapter deliberates the politics of Harriet's engagement with the new unions, and their contentious links to the KwaZulu government. Ultimately, Harriet's commitment to this work ostracised her from her TUCSA and GWIU colleagues. This, compounded by the state's harassment of her family, led to Harriet's decision to resign from the GWIU. Soon after, she decided to quit all her union posts and leave South Africa with her family. Reflecting on interview material, Chapter Five also considers how Harriet remembers this tumultuous period.

The thesis concludes that through a consideration of Harriet Bolton's life and work in South Africa's trade union movement, the historian gains new perspectives on some of the labour movement's most tumultuous and significant years. The complexity of Harriet's politics and her role as a white woman organising black workers 'within' TUCSA structures provides a unique lens through which to view the history of South Africa's trade union movement.

## **Chapter One: Formative years**

## Introduction: Growing up in South Africa's 1930s

The story begins in the small town of Makwassie, near Wolmaranstad in the south-western Transvaal. Wolmaranstad, along with Bloemhof and Schweizer-Reneke, formed three points of what Charles Van Onselen describes as a triangle of “hot dusty plains”, inhabited in the 1920s by poor white farmers and black sharecropping families, sometimes only barely able to eke out their survival and keep hold of the land. The proclamation of several farms in the area as open diggings in the early 1920s was soon followed by an influx of desperate people intent on making a living, but hopefully a fortune, out of the stony ground: “hundreds of ‘poor whites’ were joined by thousands of even poorer blacks ...”<sup>1</sup> Harriet Waters was born in Makwassie in January 1927. Why her parents moved to the area, and where they fit in the “robber economy” of the alluvial diamond mines, interested and confounded Harriet:

... I was born, amazingly, in Makwassie in Wolmaranstad. What they were doing there I can only guess! All these things I wish I had asked my father. But, later on I realised, that there were ... diamond mines and he was always interested in stones and mining. So I think he went there for that.<sup>2</sup>

Harriet thought her parents moved to the Makwassie area in 1926, but left soon after she was born, and before the diggings were pitched into sharp decline coupled with drought. The son of Cornish tin miners who immigrated to South Africa soon after the turn of the century, Harriet's father held a certificate in dynamiting and blasting, but at various points in his life he made a living as a builder, was a trained shipwright, blacksmith, shoe maker and also bound books. While he may well have been involved at the diamond fields around Wolmaranstad in a technical capacity, Harriet also believed that her father might have been there because of the attraction of illicit diamond buying and speculating.<sup>3</sup> His affection for the thrill of a gamble was illustrated in Harriet's account of one of his tongue-in-cheek requests to his family:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine. The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894 – 1985* (USA: Hill and Wang, 1997) 158.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 9, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet also points to the interest generated by the prophet Nicolaas Van Rensburg, who lived in Makwassie around this time period, and died shortly before she was born. Whether this explanation for her

... loved horses all his life. Liked the races, he wanted his ashes to be, he wanted to be cremated and his ashes thrown on Greyville Race Course winning post. My mother wouldn't do it! (laughs) She said it's sinful, she wouldn't do it! But we wanted her to.<sup>4</sup>

Harriet's parents had met in Knysna. Her mother, the daughter of farmers in the Ladismith area, was sent there to work in a friend's restaurant "to meet people, because on a farm you don't really meet people."<sup>5</sup> Harriet assumed that her father was employed as a bridge builder in that area when they met. Harriet's mother, like many white South African women of her generation, did not take up paid work outside the home until much later in life after her children were grown and her husband had died. However, she was an accomplished seamstress who would be employed by department stores in Durban in later years for her delicate smocking work, which she did from home.<sup>6</sup>

From Wolmaranstad the small Waters family moved to Pretoria, where they shared a house with Harriet's cousins. As the Great Depression took grip, the family moved to Greytown, and then later down Natal's south coast, where her father found employment on road and bridge construction. Understandably, Harriet's recollections of the Depression years are vague. She does, however, have some vivid memories of her family's itinerant lifestyle on the south coast:

I only remember that when we ... went by train to wherever we were sent and when we got there the whole contingent of about, there must have been about twenty ... ten or fifteen men and their wives you know, some wives and some single men and some kids, because I know my cousins and I were there. And we had to live in tents till prefab houses came by train. So obviously we were

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parents' presence in Makwassie points more towards Harriet's interest in the 'supernatural', or if her parents were really there to witness the 'siener' in action, is not clear.

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 9, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 9, 2005. Harriet has shown an interest in her South African origins and has traced both sides of her mother's family to the French Huguenots. She has traced the Joubert's passage to the Cape aboard the *Berg China* as early as 1688, while the Ellis's arrived in 1850.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Harriet at first asserted that her mother "never worked in her life". It was only in later interviews that she mentioned that her mother brought money in through working from home. Reflecting on oral history material from her research on the lives of wage-earning women in the United States, Joan Sangster commented that women's work in the informal economy was often undervalued, "remembered as an afterthought, indeed almost forgotten." Joan Sangster, "Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history" in *The Oral History Reader* ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 90.



moved to several places. And then, all the provisions, because obviously there were no supermarkets or anything, no butcher shops, no anything, all the provisions came from Morrison's Mail Order House ... So everything was sent, the men's cigarettes, the flour, the baking powder, yeast ... whatever, you know. They didn't have frozen vegetables ... I dunno what they did for vegetables. Meat, they shot buck. My father ... held a hunting license too. They shot buck and birds and fished.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the world slump was felt most acutely in South Africa after Britain abandoned the gold standard. Farmers, and particularly wool farmers, were the hardest hit, although the manufacturing sector was also compromised. Thousands of factory workers, the majority of them unskilled Africans, lost their jobs. William Beinart points to the Great Depression as a significant "break" in South African history; one of its major political consequences was the loss of a united Afrikaner front. Unable to maintain their grip on power, Hertzog's National Party compromised with a 'Fusion' coalition for the 1934 elections, and later amalgamation, with Smuts' South African Party. Some sections of the Afrikaner population were angered by this compromise, and significant energy was poured into the revival of the Broederbond. As far as the history of South Africa's garment workers goes, this was significant because of their repeated attempts to win over the Transvaal garment workers with appeals to an ethnic 'Afrikanerdom'. Once Hertzog had unwillingly removed South Africa from the gold standard, the economy recuperated faster than in many other countries. The recovery was driven by gold, the price of which continued to rise throughout the decade. While the lion's share of government funding was poured into reviving white commercial farming, manufacturing, also hard hit by the Depression, expanded more rapidly than agriculture during the 1930s. This was particularly true of the textile, clothing and food sectors, whose labour force grew faster than that of the mines.<sup>8</sup> Industrialists in the clothing industry found cheap labour on the Witwatersrand in the form of young white Afrikaans women, mostly pushed into work by the increasingly tenuous state of family farms, and in Natal, among rapidly urbanising men of Indian descent.

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<sup>7</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 9, 2005

<sup>8</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

With the worst of the Depression years behind them, the Waters family moved to Durban in 1933 and settled in on the Bluff. By the time Harriet started her education at a Wentworth primary school soon after, white authority in South Africa had been firmly entrenched after two tumultuous decades post-Union. White women had won the right to vote in 1930, and an unqualified franchise was extended to white men. The 1930s Durban of Harriet's youth was one where living spaces became increasingly segregated. From the early part of the decade, Durban authorities started clamping down and restricting the living spaces of urbanised Africans and Indians. In 1931, the city's boundaries were extended; bringing thousands of Indians, Africans and whites living on Durban's periphery under the control of the municipality. Interesting for our purposes is that swathes of land south of Durban, including the Bluff, were incorporated into the borough's boundaries. Much of the area had been earmarked for industrial development. Acting on the Slums Act of 1934, the city gradually began destroying informal housing which encroached on land now pinpointed for this development. Facing pressure from white ratepayers, city authorities also began clamping down on black people living more centrally. In 1937, the entire city was proclaimed into segregated areas. Under the new law all African people had to live in licensed or municipal premises.<sup>9</sup> As Maylam suggests, this was a sign of things to come:

These proclamations were an early manifestation of the Durban municipality's eagerness for urban segregation, foreshadowing the city council's later enthusiasm for group areas legislation.<sup>10</sup>

Authorities were perhaps reacting to what Paul Maylam has described as a marked pattern of "permanently urbanised" African men and women settling in Durban during this period. An indication of this was the ratio of men to women changing dramatically; in 1921, it stood at 6,6 to 1; by 1936 it was 3,4 to 1.<sup>11</sup> Paul Maylam cites rural

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Maylam suggests enforcement of segregation would have been more forceful if it was not required by the Act that before people were evicted, alternative accommodation had to be made available. Paul Maylam, "Introduction, The Struggle for Space in Twentieth-Century Durban" in *The People's City African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*, ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996) and Paul Maylam, "'The Black Belt': African squatters in Durban 1935 – 1950" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 17/3 Special Issue South Africa (1983): 413-428.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Maylam, "Introduction" in *The People's City*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Maylam, "Introduction" in *The People's City*, 15.

impoverishment, coupled with more tenants being pushed off the land as production intensified, as well as new job opportunities in Durban's nascent manufacturing industry as reasons for the growth in African urbanisation. Bill Freund meanwhile has shown that up until the 1940s, Natal's largely poor Indian population experienced "urbanisation and proletarianisation more thoroughly and rapidly than rural Africans". Indians had little access to education and also suffered high unemployment rates. For those who could find work, wages were low, and they suffered "prejudices on the part of whites that were in some respects more fierce than towards Africans."<sup>12</sup>

Intended as a white residential area, the Bluff of Harriet's youth was mostly working class and was, at least initially, relatively unregulated. For instance, Indian market gardeners had set up in the fertile soil of Bayhead and Kings Rest, while a fishing village was well established at Fynnlands. Paul la Hausse has described the "uneven policing" of these areas on the periphery of the city's boundaries, and loopholes in alcohol legislation which led to the flourishing of shebeens: "... hundreds of workers moved across the Borough boundary to drink at these shebeens every weekend."<sup>13</sup> Harriet's memories of her childhood on the Bluff are mostly of idyllic days spent on the Durban bay; fishing, canoeing on home-made boats, exploring the bush and camping on the beaches:

... we lived in the water especially in the school holidays. We used to swim near Garveys or Ansteys and there were no lifesavers, shark nets or swimming pools. We had great fun on the Bay in our little tin canoes. Nearly every child managed to scrounge the zinc, wood, tar and nails to make one.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Freund, "Confrontation and Social Change: Natal and the Forging of Apartheid 1949-72" in *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal Historical and Social Perspectives*, ed. Robert Morrell (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996) 134. According to a 1921 census, 21% of Natal Indians were urbanised, while by 1951 this had shot up to 74%. Over the same time period, the number of urbanised Africans rose from 5% to 16%. The demographics within the urbanised population also began to shift during the decade. Figures cited in Paul Maylam, "The Changing Political Economy of the Region 1920-1950" in *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal*, ed. Robert Morrell, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Paul la Hausse, "Drink and Cultural Innovation in Durban: The Origin of the Beerhall in South Africa 1902-16," in *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa*, ed. Charles Ambler and Jonathan Crush, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993) cited in Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Harriet Bolton, Unpublished transcript. Harriet Bolton's personal collection. (Undated) 46.

Harriet also clearly recalled their nanny taking the Waters children for walks “up near the mission station” on the Bluff, where women beer brewers sold beer and their nanny had a market for the dagga which she grew. Harriet said the children were sworn to secrecy on the location of the barrels of beer lest Mr Kick, the local policeman who rode around the Bluff on horseback, find out.

Harriet’s father found work as a builder in Durban North. She recalled that the Waters children would only see him on weekends because of the long commute to and from the Bluff. He later started his own small building business, working closer to home, and built a number of the houses which still stand on the Bluff today. Harriet started her schooling in Wentworth, but when a dual-medium school was built closer to home in Fynnlands, the Waters children were transferred there. Later, the Waters girls were sent to St Josephs’ convent on Smith Street, in the city. The family weren’t strongly religious, although Harriet was later confirmed in the Catholic Church. She regarded her parents’ views on religion as open-minded for the time, and said her interest in religion stemmed from their tolerant approach. She said she tried to encourage the same outlook in her children:

... I said to them ... they can be interested in any religion and all religions because it’s all God as far as I am concerned ...<sup>15</sup>

Harriet said the Waters children were brought up to be independent, resourceful and hard-working; traits which she puts great value in. Her anecdotes and stories are infused, sometimes obviously and sometimes more subtly, with her sense of herself as an independent, strong and capable woman who “speaks up” and fights for what she feels is right. Describing very different time periods in her life, our interviews had a common theme in that she seemed to be asserting, and also remembering, this particular image of herself.<sup>16</sup> Harriet admired and respected her father, who she described as a well-read man of “many talents”. It seems she regarded his values and outlook on life as being

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<sup>15</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> This is perhaps what Ronald Grele refers to as a “theme” in conversational narrative. Ronald J. Grele, “Movement without aim. Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2006)

formative in the way she lives, and has lived, her life and raised her children. For example, when asked about her political awareness when growing up, Harriet related slightly different versions of the same story in at least three interviews, always coming back to her father as the person who taught her to “see people as people”:

... my father had a building business and I mean, he was a very different sort of person, not a racist for one, but he was quite outspoken if he didn't like anyone he didn't like them no matter *who* they were but ... when they got the roof on they always had a celebration ... my mother used to always do some ... home-baked bread and buy the meat and do a salad and some baked potatoes and they'd have a braai but he had the whole staff I mean his foreman, was a Zulu, which was unheard of in those days ... and the other people were coloured bricklayers and so on ... and they had it always round the building because then the roof was on and my dad would come with the little van and take the stuff there and we would all go! You know so I had always seen like people getting together, I had never, known about, you know, racism until I went out into the world and then I discovered it. Although it wasn't as bad under the previous government as the Nationalists then made it ...<sup>17</sup>

... but my father did those things didn't make a fuss about it didn't say anything about it but he just did his own style. He said, to me, our people are not according to their, colour or their race but as I find them as people, and see we were brought up like that you know and I think it does stick with you, you know. Especially me who was the eldest, he did, you know drum that in to us ...<sup>18</sup>

I think ... eight or nine people he employed. But of all races, and his, the man in charge was “Shorty”, he was a black guy, he was a Zulu. So, and then, at the end when it was the roof, putting on the roof, you know when they always had a little “do”, they had a braai ... my mother used to bake scones and bread and stuff and make salad or vegetables ... and take the meat and they would all together have the braai ... So I, didn't see racism.<sup>19</sup>

Harriet's explanation that she did not “see” racism during her childhood should also be understood in the context of her upbringing, which was for all intents and purposes ‘white’, despite the Bluff being a relatively less segregated space than, for instance, white middle-class Durban. While she said in a number of interviews that it was her work in the trade union movement which conscientised her, both in records from the time and in our

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<sup>17</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 2, 2005.

interviews, she did not necessarily articulate this in terms of an ideological position. It was rather a spontaneous sense of right, wrong and injustice which informed her trade union work - an important part of which she ascribed to her father's influence as shown above and, later, to Jimmy Bolton. As Harriet explained in a 1974 interview with David Hemson: "I still will throw away everything to do what I feel is right".<sup>20</sup>

## **World War II, trade unions and South Africa's 1940s**

The years between South Africa's entrance into the war, determined by a narrow vote in the House of Assembly in September 1939, and the ascendance to power of the National Party in 1948 have often been characterised as a liberal interim. The war was a significant agent for change, as Saul Dubow puts it: "More than anything it was the war that shook up established certainties and lent the 1940s its remarkable sense of fluidity and flux."<sup>21</sup> A number of factors point towards this: pass laws were relaxed, and with around 186 000 white men away on service coupled with a boom in industry, African workers made up much of the slack and were allowed into jobs previously closely guarded by job reservation clauses. This was coupled with a trend towards mechanisation which opened up more semi-skilled positions. Secondly, as Nicoli Natrass has pointed out, following a 1934 recommendation from the Industrial Legislation Commission to up the wages of unskilled workers, the Wage Board's focus had shifted in favour of black workers. Between 1942 and 1946 African real wages in manufacturing rose and the wage gap between white and black workers narrowed. Thirdly, the climate enabled greater state intervention and South African authorities, mirroring trends internationally, were more systematic in their planning. Spending on African education increased, pensions were extended to all South Africans (although this was on an unequal basis) and various commissions recommended a more comprehensive social welfare system; in particular a health care system on a non-racial basis. These latter reforms were driven and supported by a group of politicians and administrators, intellectuals and servicemen and women whose position could be broadly defined as an anti-fascist "liberal or social-democratic

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<sup>20</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>21</sup> Saul Dubow, "Introduction: South Africa's 1940s" in *South Africa's 1940s. Worlds of Possibilities*, ed: Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005) 2-3.

South Africanism”.<sup>22</sup> Post war, some of these policy proposals and viewpoints would be articulated through the Torch Commando. However, Natrass makes the point that despite this period being characterised by the above “quintessentially social democratic concerns”, and despite debate over a possible amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act, ultimately the legal position of African workers did not change; they were still not recognised as ‘employees’.<sup>23</sup> The relative gains of black workers were short-lived; after the war white servicemen returned to take up their skilled positions and the Wage Board plotted a more cautious path, concerned about the impact their wage determinations would have on profitability. As Natrass sums up: “instruments of racial discrimination had been suspended for war-related expediency rather than unravelled for good.”<sup>24</sup>

For Harriet, who was in her teens, the war years were remembered mostly as an exciting interim because of the changes in the social calendar that the arrival of hundreds of young soldiers in Durban heralded:

*Jaaa* I remember, I remember a lot of it because we went to lots of dances. You know we had the (laughs) we had the troops ‘cause I was like seventeen and eighteen and nineteen we had the troops stationed at the Bluff and on the island, and at the Bluff too there was a big camp there and they used to have dances and we were allowed to go. I was allowed to go with my brother and my friends were allowed to go with their brothers, you know, and we *loved* the soldiers as you can imagine ...<sup>25</sup>

Harriet had by this stage moved on from the convent to Mitchell Commercial High where she matriculated, and then on to Durban Business College “to brush up” on her skills. She recalled that this was the ‘right thing to do’ for a young white woman of her age and class. While speaking in more general terms about the changing demographics of the Durban workforce during the war years, she also reflected on what her family saw as a ‘proper’ occupation for her at the time:

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<sup>22</sup> Saul Dubow, Introduction: South Africa’s 1940s, in *South Africa’s 1940s*, ed: Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Nicoli Natrass, “Economic Growth and Transformation in the 1940s” in *South Africa’s 1940s*, ed. Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Nicoli Natrass, “Economic Growth,” in *South Africa’s 1940s*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 23, 2006.

A kind of liberation was happening even in the homes, I mean Indian women years ago would *never* have worked in factories ... but the change came at that time because the whole world changed during that second World War, and people poured into the factories<sup>26</sup> and lots of coloured girls, went in and worked in departmental stores you know in Greenacres and the Hub, where it was all white girls at one time ... I mean even my family who were by *no means* you know, rich and by no means uh sort of um ... what can I say ... people of the, upper classes although my mother did always say “they’re not your class”, was her thing, would never have let us be shop girls (HK: Really?) Oh never! No, no shop girls were something else. I mean I don’t dare say that here because lots of my friends here were shop girls. (HK: Why? Explain that a bit more...) Yes ... you had better education and you, you took short-hand typing, or teaching or nursing those were the things we did ja ...<sup>27</sup>

Harriet was placed by the Durban Business College as a typist and minute taker at the Typographical Workers Union (TWU), which had offices in Caxton Hall, in 1944. She claimed she did not even know what a union was when she started work there. According to Harriet, her parents were initially “horrified” that she would be working for a union, and asked why she couldn’t get a “real job”. Harriet recalled that their concern was that she would be working with poor, working-class men.<sup>28</sup> In starting work at the TWU, Harriet became a part of the marked trend between 1936 and 1960 of white women taking up employment in clerical positions, while their numbers in service occupations rapidly diminished. The number of white women in production work also dropped off significantly during this period.<sup>29</sup> Harriet also caught the tail end of a period of intensified strike action and radicalization among black workers in Durban. According to a recent study by Peter Alexander, the war years were also more marked by the degree of

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<sup>26</sup> It was only in the 1960s that Indian women began to take up work in factories, particularly garment factories, in significant numbers. Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders, The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006. See also Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity. Women in South African Industry 1900-1980*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 155. Berger notes a trend of white women moving out of industrial production from as early as the mid-1930s to take up jobs in offices, shops and restaurants. This was only to become a “large-scale movement” after World War II, however.

<sup>28</sup> Grace Davie, “Making Poverty research political: Students ‘Wages Commissions’ in Durban, 1971-1973” (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, January 2003). It is also not clear if this was an initial response by Harriet’s parents, or a reaction which came later as her involvement with union politics and her public profile grew.

<sup>29</sup> Figures cited in Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*, 166.



cooperation between black and white workers than the historiography allows for.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the Wage Board's concessions pointed to above should also be understood in the context of a growth in black trade unions; Wage Board investigations were often launched only after strikes had focussed attention to the plight of workers in a particular industry. In Durban, communist and communist-aligned trade unionists poured considerable energy into organising several unions, including the sugar, sweet, laundry and textile unions, some of which were established in the 1930s. For the most part, these unions were non-racial and even those which were registered often had an 'unofficial' African membership.<sup>31</sup> Pauline Podbrey, a Durban CPSA member and secretary of the African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union in the early 1940s wrote of the atmosphere in her autobiography as "busy, exciting, exhilarating":

Overnight, it seemed, were born trade unions for cigar and tobacco workers, bus drivers, workers in the chemical, tin, shoe and leather, and rubber industries, jewellers and many more. An endless stream of workers, mainly Indian, came knocking on our doors, pleading to be organized, wanting to be unionized.<sup>32</sup>

Harriet's experience of clerical work in the white artisan dominated TWU would have been very different to that of Pauline Podbrey's, described above. However, Harriet said she had a growing awareness of the TWU's craft-style protectionist policies for white workers; this was especially in contrast to the majority black GWIU, which shared office space with the TWU at the Caxton Hall. Harriet considers her initial years in the trade union movement a life changing experience. While she had spoken of a fairly liberal upbringing, it was entering the union movement that, as she put it: "opened my eyes":

... in the Typographical Union, they had, first of all they were, all whites ... the tradesmen were all whites. Second-Grade workers, which, you know I learnt when I did the subs, I wrote up the subs ... only the Indian and Coloured people were all second and third-grade ... they ... couldn't serve an apprenticeship ...

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: labour and politics in South Africa, 1938-48*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 2000)

<sup>31</sup> Peter Alexander cites interviews with Pauline Podbrey, Ismael Meer and Ray Alexander on this point. Apparently the unions kept separate membership lists, for 'employees' and 'non-employees', "but all members belonged to a unitary organization." For Alexander this is important to note because it undermines, to an extent, the often used argument that registered unions were prevented from recruiting African members because of the Industrial Conciliation Act. Peter Alexander, *Workers, War*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Pauline Podbrey, *White Girl in Search of the Party* (Pietermaritzburg: Haded Books, 1993) 71.

And then I would see many people of other colours going next-door and when they had their (TWU) meetings it was mainly whites and a few Indians sitting at the back. When we had our meetings (GWIU), it was all mixed people, you know. And I sort of, I asked about that, you know, and they told me, well Betty who was a very good trade unionist, she said to me, well you know, they're not, they're not trade unionists, they've got a union but, it's just to look after their workers' wages ... they don't look after the people. You know they were very derogatory about them ... um, she said they're elitist you know. And ... I suppose that's because of their apprenticeship and their, the way their agreement was worded, only whites ... could be craftsmen.<sup>33</sup>

After a year working for the TWU, Harriet was offered a job with the GWIU. She recalled that she was excited about joining the garment union mostly because it was staffed by a group of younger "livelier" women who she had been sharing her lunch breaks with while working for the TWU. When Harriet first started work at the garment union, Jimmy Bolton, along with several union officials and members, was posted with troops in North Africa. In his absence, Betty Hannah, a senior clerk in the union, was put in charge as acting secretary.<sup>34</sup> Harriet recalled, with some humour, the first time she met Jimmy Bolton:

One day in walked this man in this uniform. Quite a handsome man, but much older than me and ... I was at the desk, the other two girls had gone somewhere and I was at the desk, and he said to me "who the hell are you?". You know so I said "well Harriet Waters and who the hell are you?" (laughs) being, being cheeky as I was. So he said "well, I am the secretary of this union" so I said "ooh sorry!" you know...

### **Jimmy Bolton and the industrial and trade union context of South Africa during the 1920s**

James Crossley Bolton, or Jimmy as he was more commonly known - a young, skilled furniture upholsterer and designer - immigrated to South Africa from Yorkshire in 1928. In our interviews Harriet suggested a number of explanations for his move to Durban. His union, the National Amalgamated Furniture Trades Association, took an active part in the

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<sup>33</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 2, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> During the war, women made up a significant number of the white 'emergency workers' in a number of sectors - a spin-off of which was a lower wage bill because women were paid less to do the same work.

1926 general strike in Britain, and Harriet said that because of his involvement, he battled to find work. He moved to France, where a South African furniture company saw some of his upholstery work on show, and offered him an airfare and a job. Jimmy also suffered from chronic asthma and may have made the move on doctor's orders. Details aside, what is clear is that he sought a better life and perhaps adventure, more than Britain in the "workless" inter-war years, coupled with wage cuts at the hands of the conservative government, could offer. In doing so, he joined a long tradition of artisan immigrants, who had from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century formed the core of southern Africa's skilled workforce on the mines and in associated industries.<sup>35</sup> With them they took the political and organisational traditions of their established trade unions, the legacy of which are still apparent in South Africa today. In order to better understand the industrial, legislative and political context which Jimmy, and later Harriet, entered in to through their work in the labour movement, more discussion of the history of organised labour in South Africa is required. It is to this that I shall now turn.

It was predominantly male British workers who immigrated to find work on the Transvaal's mines, and Roger Southall suggests the craft unions which British artisans established were "replicas" of those they had left behind, and in some cases were created as branches of the original union.<sup>36</sup> Gaining bargaining power through limiting access to the various skilled occupations which they represented, craft unions thus kept members' skills in demand. Both black and white workers were barred from the early craft unions in southern Africa if not apprentice trained, and as such the unions were nominally non-racial. However, as Jonathan Hyslop has pointed out in his discussion about the emergence of white labour protectionism in Cape union structures in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most of the non-unionised artisans in Cape Town were 'coloured' men, and coupled with the increasing influence of racial ideology at the time, "there was a

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<sup>35</sup> It is estimated that around 40 million workers left Europe in the century before the First World War, settling mostly in the United States and Canada, while lesser numbers moved to South America and Australia, and fewer still to southern Africa. Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist: JT Bain – A Scottish Rebel in Colonial South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2004) 7.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Southall, *Imperialism or solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions*. (Cape Town: UCT Press (Pty) Ltd, 1995)

steady slipping from the language of craft to the language of race.”<sup>37</sup> While Hyslop - through his study of the life of Scottish syndicalist J.T. Bain - convincingly shows that British unionism was unequivocally involved in the development and entrenchment of industrial segregation in South Africa, he also makes the point that the racial politics of the labour movement in South Africa were not unique, and must be understood as “part of a wider racism produced by the intersection of empire, migrancy and trade unionism.”<sup>38</sup> By the turn of the century a new tide of radical young workers, mostly from Europe and North America, inspired by theorists such as Marx, had begun to influence the labour movements there, and through the close intercontinental links between organised labour within the British empire, in the colonies too. Industrial unions in Britain started wielding more influence, with leaders challenging the more cautious policies of the craft unions. On the eve of the outbreak of World War I, “the social order of the industrialised countries was under challenge from the revolutionary trade unionism of the syndicalist movement and the electoral success of labour and socialist parties.”<sup>39</sup> The reverberations were felt in the colonies through the close intercontinental links of organised labour within the British Empire. However, Hyslop argues that throughout the Empire social radicalism did not necessarily equate to condemnation of all forms of inequality. The language of Empire was frequently one of race, and the dominant racial attitudes of the time were not often challenged. For example, in Australia the “fiercely egalitarian” labour party entrenched white protectionism into the constitution in 1901. Formed in 1909, the South African Labour Party’s socialism was mostly concerned with white labour, while organised labour in Britain also supported white protectionist policies:

Throughout the empire there were movements of labour fighting for their members to be recognised as ‘white.’ Whiteness was not so much imposed from above as demanded from below. The imperial working class did not ‘become white’: it *made itself* ‘white’<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, 82.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, “The Imperial Working Class Makes Itself ‘White’: White Labourism in Britain, Australia, and South Africa before the First World War” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12/4 (December 1999): 418.

The consequences of this in South Africa, coupled with legislation post-Union designed to create a compliant supply of cheap, migrant African labour, were to shape the politics of the trade union movement for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition, a significant section of South Africa's organised labour movement, in the form of first the TLC, and later TUCSA, was to maintain its close links with British organised labour, not least through British members – such as Jimmy Bolton - who had emigrated. Even in the vastly changed context of the 1970s and under pressure from the Anti Apartheid Movement (AAM), Britain's Trade Union Congress (TUC) was reluctant to cut ties with TUCSA, who, as Southall puts it, was considered “the TUC transplanted overseas”.<sup>41</sup>

While historians have argued that the crushing of the 1922 Rand rebellion and the subsequent enactment of the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act heralded both lower wages for miners and, vitally, the downfall of white working class militancy, as Beinart puts it: “If this was a defeat, it was hardly a devastating one.”<sup>42</sup> This is particularly when one considers that, despite the presence and influence of syndicalist leaders and socialists such as Bill Andrews among the mine workers, the main concerns of the majority of white workers were job and wage security. As a direct response to the 1922 Rand strike and uprising, so brutally suppressed by Smuts, the legislation made provision for the ‘incorporation’ of trade unions via structures for collective bargaining through industrial councils, jointly established by trade unions and employers’ associations. Agreements were legally enforceable and strikes, without prior negotiation through the council, were made illegal. Vitally, unions that represented African men were barred from registering under the Act. The definition of ‘employee’ specifically excluded ‘pass-bearing

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<sup>41</sup> Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity?*, 117.

<sup>42</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 84. See also Keith Breckenridge, “Fighting for a White South Africa: White Working-Class Racism and the 1922 Rand Revolt,” *South African Historical Journal* 57 (2007), 228-243. Lewis argues, however, that not all white labour was “co-opted” by the Labour-Nationalist Pact, and that not all white labour was integrated into the conciliation machinery. Indeed, the new provisions made for bargaining initially only worked in the favour of unions if they were well organised, as is so patently shown by the case of the Western Province garment union, discussed below. Jon Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-55. The rise and fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

natives'.<sup>43</sup> Sampie Terreblanche sums up the combined impact of the strike and the Act as “disastrous” for African mineworkers, although this could be extended to African workers generally.<sup>44</sup> Although unions with African male membership were in theory not outlawed, they were barred from registration, and hence excluded from bargaining machinery and legal protection. In practice, attempts made by Africans to organise into unions with any autonomy were met with crushing repression from the state, ably aided by capital. This is illustrated, for example, by the fate of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and later, by the state’s attempts to trounce the emerging democratic unions in the early 1970s. Registration rights under the Industrial Conciliation Act were, however, granted to Indian and coloured workers. At the same time that this legislation was passed, provisions were made for the establishment of ‘Wage Boards’, which would set wages for areas not covered by Industrial Councils, in theory taking into account the input of both employers and workers. Coupled with the Pact government’s entrenchment of the colour bar, their ‘civilized labour’ policy and a further barrage of repressive legislation, Beinart concludes:

The compromises made by white workers in the mining industry were relatively insignificant, given the scale of protection elsewhere. Afrikaners, in particular, gained favoured access to employment in state-run enterprises such as the railways on a scale far greater than before and were paid at higher rates than blacks.<sup>45</sup>

When Jimmy moved to Durban in 1928, the garment, furniture and leather industries in South Africa were well along in the process of being transformed from home-based enterprises to larger scale factory outfits. This growth in secondary industry was mostly the result of protective tariffs established during the First World War, and importantly the Pact government’s 1925 Tariff Act, which provided a major boost for manufacturers. Relatively low start-up costs for industrialists in the clothing sector also contributed to the growth in clothing manufacture. The consequent deskilling process in most industries

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<sup>43</sup> Sonia Bendix. *Industrial Relations in South Africa*. (Lansdowne: Juta and Co, Ltd., 2004). The same did not apply to African women, however, as they were not required to carry passes, a point that the Transvaal garment workers successfully made use of in 1946.

<sup>44</sup> Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*. (South Africa: University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing Company Pty Ltd, 2002), 271.

<sup>45</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 85.

and employers' search for cheaper labour heralded the first broadly 'non-racial' industrial unions. Lewis argues that the growth of secondary industry and attendant changes in the work process in both the pre and post-Depression years forced many unions to embrace the concept of open trade unionism and sign up all workers – irrespective of sex or colour. They often remained unregistered in order to do this. This class alliance across racial structures was, however, only “spasmodically and very imperfectly realised” over the next three decades.<sup>46</sup>

The formation of the South African Trade Union Council in 1924, under the leadership of Communist Party stalwart W. H. Andrews, further aided the development of a more 'open' tradition of industrial unionism. The influence of the left on the Council was significant from its outset: indeed, many craft unions refused to join or later resigned in protest of left wing control and the absence of a colour bar. The left were often synonymous with the emerging non-racial industrial unions during the 1920s. The Communist Party, after renouncing their prioritization of white workers, were briefly associated with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), before all CP members were expelled from the ICU in 1926. They then focussed their energies on forming and growing a number of African industrial unions, some of which were parallels of registered unions. These unions were involved in several strikes prior to the Depression, mostly related to worker victimisation, or the refusal of employers to pay the minimum wage laid down by the Wage Board. However, a combination of the effects of the Depression and the curtailment of the movement and civil rights of Africans led to their premature demise. Lewis also suggests that the unions were too closely linked to the CP to survive its internal conflicts and damaging leadership purges after committing itself to a 'Native Republic' in 1928. In 1930, the Cape Federation of Labour Unions, representing a number of craft unions, and the TUC joined to establish the South African Trades & Labour Council (TLC).<sup>47</sup> The TLC was formed on a non-racial basis. At its first conference, it called for the amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act to allow

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<sup>46</sup> Jon Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa*.

<sup>47</sup> However, despite affiliating to the TLC, the CFLU still refused to disband and only finally acquiesced in 1954, when they participated in forming the South African Trade Union Council (SATUC) – later renamed TUCSA.

African trade unions recognition. Conferences after this called for the organisation of all workers along industrial lines. However, little action materialised out of these resolutions, in much the same way that its successor TUCSA's rhetoric generally remained just that.

It was in this complex context that Jimmy Bolton began his work as an upholsterer and furniture designer in Durban. Fresh from the well-organised furniture union in Britain, Harriet said that Jimmy assumed the furniture workers in Durban were unionised, and before he picked up his tools he asked to be signed up:

... when he got there first he said "well I first have to join the union" they said "no there isn't one" so he said "well I am first going to form a union", and he said "that's one of my conditions, that I only work in union shops" ...<sup>48</sup>

Harriet described her husband's politics and approach to trade union organisation as "old socialist", and explained it was through Jimmy and other ex-British trade unionists involved in South Africa's labour movement that she learnt about socialism: "I mean I didn't know anything more about socialism than, I heard from him ..."<sup>49</sup> In our interviews, Harriet consistently maintained that she learnt her trade unionism from her husband. If we are to take seriously Harriet's assertion, a deeper understanding of Jimmy's trade unionism is required. The members of the British working class who took part in the 1926 general strike cannot be depicted, Hobsbawm has argued, as revolutionary in their aims. They were not trying to overthrow the government; they were simply supporting the coal miners in their attempt to get a better deal:

The politically conscious elite of militants constantly regretted that the ambitions of the masses were not greater, their interest in ideology not more pronounced; even though the great mass of the militants themselves, the activists in union and Labour Party, were not revolutionary enough for a generally Marxist fringe which has, ever since the rediscovery of socialism in the 1880s, operated on its left; usually with greater influence in the trade unions than in electoral politics.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 2, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 192.



Hobsbawm characterises “the masses” of British workers as having a strong sense of their “separateness” as manual labourers, and “an unformulated but powerful moral code based on solidarity, ‘fairness’, mutual aid and cooperation, and the readiness to fight for just treatment.”<sup>51</sup> This is perhaps where we can locate Jimmy Bolton; certainly not the Marxist fringe, or even perhaps the “politically conscious elite of militants” that Hobsbawm describes.

Jimmy Bolton was, in the early days of organising the Durban furniture union, involved in efforts to protect white furniture workers’ jobs, according to Freund a strategy “typical of the South African industrial scene of the 1920s”.<sup>52</sup> However, as the inexorable march to mechanisation and consequent deskilling continued, his furniture union - along with many former craft unions as described above - accepted the inevitable and began to organise along more ‘open’ industrial lines. Jimmy Bolton was anti-communist, espoused “no politics” in the trade union movement, and took a pragmatic approach when it came to dealing with employers. A brief biography in Ivan Walker and Ben Weinbren’s *2000 Casualties* describes his approach thus:

He is a believer in negotiation and conciliation rather than direct action and by these means he has secured considerable improvements in workers’ conditions over a period of 20 years.<sup>53</sup>

However, their next sentence asserts: “At no time has Jimmy Bolton been chained to orthodox trade union methods”<sup>54</sup> As will be discussed in more depth, Jimmy’s anti-communism and pragmatic trade unionism brought him into direct conflict with left-aligned trade unionists, active in Durban particularly during the World War II period, and earned him their loathing both at the time, and in the histories written about the period. By the time of his death in 1964, he had been involved in setting up and organising at least seven unions, including the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union (TWIU), which was

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<sup>51</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor*, 191.

<sup>52</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ivan L. Walker and Ben Weinbren, *2000 Casualties. A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa*. (Johannesburg: The South African Trade Union Council, 1961), 306.

<sup>54</sup> Ivan L. Walker and Ben Weinbren, *2000 Casualties*, 306.

to play a pivotal role in the 1970s. Apart from his involvement in trade unionism, he was elected to the Durban City Council in 1949 and for twelve years was involved in local politics as a Durban councillor. For various periods he was an independent candidate, and for interludes represented the Federal and later Progressive parties. Not one to shy away from controversy, at one stage Jimmy was associated politically with the maverick Norwegian trade unionist and ship owner S.M Petterson, who in 1929 was Durban's first Communist Party representative on the local council, and was later a National Party senator.<sup>55</sup>

### **A history of the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), c. 1934 – 1945**

It is within the context of brisk industrial expansion and shifting demographics in the industrial labour force, post-Depression, that one can locate the emergence of the Garment Workers Industrial Union.<sup>56</sup> There were around one-thousand people employed in the Natal clothing industry in the early 1930s, and while at the time Jimmy Bolton described wages as “below the bread line”, at least half of the workforce was getting paid less than even this prescribed minimum.<sup>57</sup> According to various brochure histories of the union, a group of Indian workers asked Jimmy to assist them in forming the union. Harriet recalled that the workers who approached Jimmy were relatives of those employed in the furniture industry. The GWIU was officially launched in August 1934, “after exhaustive work and many setbacks”<sup>58</sup>. Around 300 garment workers attended the union's inaugural meeting in a rented hall in Durban's West Street. Jimmy's furniture union initially provided them with office space and some financial support, and Jimmy is

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<sup>55</sup> Jack and Ray Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950*, (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1983). Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> The Natal union had several forerunners: A craft union, the Journeymen Tailors' Association, was formed before 1910, and catered solely for white artisans, who excluded their trade from skilled Indian and coloured workers. From 1915, a group of radical Indian workers associated with the International Socialist League started organising amongst Indian garment workers. The Durban and District Garment Workers Union was formed in the early 1920s, led by Duncan Burnside, who later became a Labour Party MP. B. Madari, “A Historical Investigation Into the Garment Industry in Natal with Specific Reference to the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal),” (Honours diss, University of Durban-Westville, 1986)

<sup>57</sup> Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), “Official Opening James Bolton Hall 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1974” (Durban, 1974), Harriet Bolton's personal collection.

<sup>58</sup> “Official Opening James Bolton Hall”, Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection.

said to have paid rent out of his own pocket.<sup>59</sup> Nearly half of the union's first executive committee were white women, while Indian men comprised the rest of the committee, reflecting the demographics of garment workers in Durban at that stage.<sup>60</sup> The union's formative years were some of their most combative, with several lightning strikes recorded from 1933 to 1935. These were also years fraught with tension; union members and shop-stewards were victimised at work because of their involvement.<sup>61</sup>

From 1932, wages in the garment industry had been controlled by "Wage Determination No. 42", which set rates of pay and learnership conditions somewhat less favourably than the agreement the Transvaal garment union had negotiated with employers in their area. However, the Determination was declared invalid in 1934. Taking advantage of this, clothing factories in Natal competed for the business of merchants by slashing wages until, according to a Wage Board investigation into the industry the following year: "employees received wages insufficient to provide even the barest necessities of life."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, I would argue that it was partly in response to these wage cuts that the union was organised. One of the newly formed GWIU's first battles was coordinating a fair wage label campaign: those employers who still observed the Determination could include a label in each article produced stating the clothing was made under fair working conditions. This "tab" system only functioned effectively for around a year before working conditions again began to slide.

At the time the GWIU held their inaugural meeting in Durban, their Transvaal counterpart was already a well established union with a history of bitter and sometimes violent struggle. As Martin Nicol has shown, the southern Cape garment union was in contrast to the Transvaal entirely unorganised, and a union on paper only for periods during the 1930s. Over the next thirty years, the different garment unions' relationship to

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<sup>59</sup> B Madari, *A Historical Investigation Into the Garment Industry*, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), "Official Opening James Bolton Hall", Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection.

<sup>61</sup> Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), "Golden Jubilee Souvenir Brochure" (Durban, 1984), Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection, 23.

<sup>62</sup> M.Muller to E.S. Sachs and A.T. Wanless, December 29, 1950, Garment Workers Union 1950-1954, Correspondence and Papers. Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP): AH 1092. Cba 1.2 File 3.

one another was at times marked by animosity, although records seem to suggest that the Cape and Natal unions were on reasonable terms. From the 1960s, however, the unions initiated a more cooperative relationship, which eventually incorporated the textile union too. A brief consideration of the early histories of the Transvaal and Cape garment unions and how they interacted with the Natal union is fitting, not least because it gives us greater insight into Jimmy Bolton as a trade unionist.

Significant attention has been paid to Transvaal Garment Workers' Union (GWU) leader Solly Sachs and the role of Afrikaner women in the union, particularly during the GWU's formative years in the 1930s.<sup>63</sup> Historians have shown how the union, through organised social and political activities, aided young, newly urbanised Afrikaner women to develop a "militant, collective identity that changed their way of seeing the world".<sup>64</sup> Sachs, a Jewish immigrant and communist, whose trade unionism drew on a particular brand of international socialism, was integral to this process. Nicol points out that the union was something of an anomaly: it was one of the first successful industrial unions, it organised mostly women during a period when the majority industrial workforce was male, and coupled with its sometimes intense struggles against Afrikaner nationalism it was therefore "set apart" from other trade unions of the time.<sup>65</sup> Most of the literature makes much of the GWU committing itself to a non-racial policy during the late 1920s and 1930s. However, Leslie Witz has shown that the union had an ambivalent relationship with African workers in the industry. The union found "solidarity" through splitting into separate branches a more pragmatic strategy than trying to build alliance between white and black workers. This was justified because it was felt that the "racist white workers

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<sup>63</sup> The Cape garment union, and to an even greater degree its Natal counterpart, their membership and leadership, have attracted much less attention from researchers. In the case of the Natal union, an added hindrance to researchers is the lack of available material; comprehensive union records have proved elusive.

<sup>64</sup> Leslie Witz, "Separation for Unity: The Garment Workers Union and the South African Clothing Workers Union 1928 to 1936," *Social Dynamics* 14 (1) (1988): 43. Iris Berger. "Generations of struggle: Trade unions and the roots of feminism, 1930-60" in *Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/ They remove boulders and cross rivers*. ed. Nomboniso Gasa (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007) 189.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Nicol, "'Joh'burg Hotheads' and the 'Gullible Children of Cape Town': The Transvaal Garment Workers' Union's Assault on the Low Wages in the Cape Town Clothing Industry, 1930-1931," in *Class, Community and Conflict. South African Perspectives*. History Workshop 3. ed. Belinda Bozzoli. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987) 209 – 234.

would never allow blacks into their ranks”.<sup>66</sup> Three young Afrikaner women, Anna Scheepers and sisters Johanna and Hester Cornelius, (Johanna was only 15 years old when she was first arrested for her involvement in a strike), began their lives as garment workers in Johannesburg after being forced to take up employment to help support their families on farms stricken by the combined effect of drought and the Depression. They began their careers well over a decade before Harriet, and spent a number of years working in garment factories, initially under hugely exploitative conditions, before taking up administrative positions in the union. Scheepers in particular was to become a significant contemporary of Harriet’s and, at one stage, a good friend.

Belinda Bozzoli offers some insightful analysis on the question of what young Afrikaner women found appealing and meaningful about Sachs’ union, particularly during a period when a more generally acceptable and powerful ethnic ‘Afrikanerdom’ was making strides. She suggests it resonated because it appealed to more than just their class position; it spoke to their aspirations and guaranteed “to lend dignity, legitimacy and economic clout to their cause”.<sup>67</sup> Bozzoli’s call for a more nuanced understanding of ‘class consciousness’ as not necessarily inherent in people’s material lives is worth quoting at length:

Trade unions may, because of our intellectual training, seem to us to be good examples of class consciousness. But to the Zulu-speaking migrant workers, the single Afrikaner women, the Jewish Eastern European immigrants, and the many other kinds of people who join them, trade unions may represent something more or something different. Perhaps they represent a combination of complex social, ideological and economic meanings too intricate to reduce to the simple polarities or ideal-types of class/ethnicity or class/community. To one group the union may represent powerful, macho, Zuluness; to another dedicated, respectable, idealistic Afrikaner womanhood; to a third, committed, all-embracing, internationalist Yiddishness. Non-class elements can be and often are a part of class

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<sup>66</sup> Leslie Witz. “Separation for Unity” *Social Dynamics*, 43. Iris Berger. “Generations of struggle” in *Women in South African History*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa.

<sup>67</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, “Class, Community and Ideology in the Evolution of South African Society” in *Class, Community and Conflict*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli. For example, Scheepers said what initially impressed her about the union, and convinced her to join in 1934, was the promise of subsidised medical care. Irene Strydom, “Labouring for a Better Life: The Struggle of Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo for Better Labour Conditions, 1960-1980”, (MA diss, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 2007) 3.

consciousness, and are often the force which gives it its appeal, its ability to move social groups.”<sup>68</sup>

Drawing on Bozzoli’s work, Berger argues that intellectuals – in her example Sachs and Ray Alexander, both from Eastern European communist backgrounds and working from relatively structured ideological positions - played an important role in shaping the attitudes of members of their respective organisations. Berger stresses that association or a sense of connection with others needs “to be constructed conceptually, emotionally, and historically to have any meaning.”<sup>69</sup> And while one cannot entirely place the basis for the different unions’ trajectories on the leadership alone, certainly Berger’s point has obvious implications for the way we understand the history of the Natal garment union.

The Transvaal union’s early history stands in stark contrast to the Cape union. The “boss bought” Garment Workers Union – Cape Peninsula (GWU-CP) consisted mostly of coloured men, and later women, but interestingly never split African and coloured workers into different branches, as its Transvaal counterpart did. Wages in coastal areas were substantially lower than in the Transvaal, which undermined the standard hard fought for by Sachs’ union. As a result, between 1930 and 1950 the GWU Transvaal was involved in a series of battles, which even involved calling several strikes, to take control of the Cape union. On no less than five occasions they set up offices in Cape Town and initiated major organising campaigns. None of them were successful, however. The weak Cape union had the support of factory owners and management; it suited them to bargain with a largely unorganised union and they, with the help of the Cape Federation of Labour Union’s Bob Stuart, resisted the GWU. Nicol suggests that these battles were also indicative of a broader divide in labour organisation in South Africa. For although the Cape Federation of Labour Unions was involved in establishing the Trades and Labour Council (TLC) in 1930, it refused to disband to create a single coordinating body.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, “Class, Community and Ideology”, in *Class, Community and Conflict*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*, 11. Berger drives her point home with the example of the Cape union, where what Sachs offered seemed to have little appeal for workers there.

<sup>70</sup> Luli Callinicos, *Working Life 1886-1940. Factories, Townships, and Popular Culture on the Rand. A People’s History of South Africa*, Volume Two. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 143-144.

There was no such overt attempt to wrest control of the Natal union, perhaps indicating that at the start of the decade, certainly, despite low wages the relative size of the garment and textile industry in Natal meant that it did not yet pose a major threat to Transvaal's standards. However from 1935, correspondence between Jimmy Bolton and Solly Sachs indicated a growing acrimony over wages. At stake was the issue of the benefits of local Industrial Councils versus a national wage determination for garment workers. In May 1934, Sachs offered assistance to Jimmy in raising funds to launch the GWIU, and requested details on the working conditions in Natal. A year later, he proposed a visit to the Natal union, evidently to assist with organising. The tone of both of these letters was fairly convivial. However, by September 1935 this tone had cooled significantly. This was perhaps because of Jimmy's refusal to sanction a strike by Natal's textile workers in support of the month-long Transvaal textile workers strike.<sup>71</sup> Also, at this point Sachs was lobbying for a Wage Board determination for the entire industry, while Jimmy preferred an Industrial Council agreement at local level. The Wage Board had investigated the garment industry from the end of 1934, and in July 1935 recommended vastly improved wages and shorter learnership periods for the entire industry. However later that year, after meetings with factory owners, the labour minister declined to make the recommendations law, saying the increases would threaten the viability of the industry, and put pressure particularly on coastal factories. Jimmy did not support the ensuing campaign by the Transvaal union to "force the hand" of the labour minister into signing the recommendations into law. Instead, after a meeting with the Labour Minister, the GWIU concluded an agreement through the newly set up clothing Industrial Council, at rates lower than the Wage Board recommendations. Jimmy said he went this route because in the Natal union's experience Wage Board determinations were difficult to enforce, and the IC agreement would be easier to police. Sachs was clearly not pleased by

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<sup>71</sup> In their battle to gain control of Jimmy's textile union, Betty du Toit and Eddie Roux tried to sway the Durban membership by informing them of a pamphlet which he had apparently distributed which urged the public "not to buy furniture made by "Orientals". Bettie du Toit, *Ukubamba Amadolo. Workers' Struggles in the South African Textile Industry*. (London: Onyx Press Ltd., 1978) 26. A decision was made to "remove" Jimmy Bolton at a subsequent meeting of the textile workers. Post strike, a national union, the Textile Workers Industrial Union (SA) was formed, and textile workers in Natal were invited to join up. Jimmy Bolton tried to counter by registering the garment and textile workers as one union, but was refused permission. It was only in 1989 that clothing and textile workers eventually joined forces to form the COSATU affiliated South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU).

the Natal union's decision, and was scathing of their discussions with the Labour Minister. He went on to state that the Transvaal and Cape unions would continue to press for the Wage Board's recommendations to be gazetted:

I realise that your agreement offers improvements to the workers but as I stated in my previous letters I am fighting for a new standard altogether for the 14, 000 garment workers of South Africa, a standard entirely different to the gutter standard which prevails in the coastal areas at present. Once you fix a level of wages and conditions by agreement you will find it extremely difficult to alter it to the advantage of the workers.<sup>72</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no record in the archive of Jimmy's replies to Sachs, but what is clear is that this initial exchange did nothing to endear Jimmy to the Trades & Labour Council's left, of which Sachs' union was an important constituent.

Along with the GWU, Ray Alexander's Food and Canning Workers Union was also an influential force in the TLC. Unions in the sweet, distributive, tobacco and textile industries were formed in the 1930s and 1940s, further reinforcing the left wing's influence. Up until the 1950s, in "uneasy alliance" with the craft unions, the left were able to sway the vote of the TLC in favour of 'non-racial' policies. Lewis sees this "uneasy alliance" as possible largely due to the craft unions' pragmatic attitude to the colour bar.<sup>73</sup> Skilled positions were fiercely protected from both black and white unskilled workers by rigorous apprenticeship rules and rates of pay. Until at least 1945, craft unions affiliated to the TLC generally did not pursue overt strategies of racial exclusion. In Durban, a group of young Indian radicals found a political home in the Communist Party, and worked hard to establish several unions, which had as their ideal non-racialism. The same group, referred to by Pauline Podbrey as quoted above, and also known as the Nationalist bloc, were later involved in overthrowing the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress. The Durban branch of the Laundry Cleaning and Dyeing Workers Union, the unregistered Natal Iron and Steel Workers' Union (NISWU) and the Natal Rubber Workers' Industrial Union (NRWIU), formed in the 1930s, were core unions in

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<sup>72</sup> E.S Sachs to J.C. Bolton, September 23, 1935. Garment Workers Union. Organisation in the clothing industry. Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), 1934-1941, HP, AH 1092. Cba 1.2 File 1.

<sup>73</sup> Jon Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation*, 67.



this tradition. As Freund puts it: “Their own radicalism found an echo in the situation where Indian workers felt squeezed between the exclusiveness of whites and the growing demand for jobs and space in the city on the part of Africans.”<sup>74</sup> The years 1937 and 1941/2 were marked by the high incidence of strike action by both African and Indian workers, sometimes in solidarity with each other. However, Freund remarks that the strikes that African workers were involved in “were not sustained in an effective comparable movement.”<sup>75</sup> Nuttall tells us that these moments of African worker action should also be understood as contingent and not necessarily due to an intensifying proletarianisation: “The two strike waves occurred at particular junctures of grievance, mobilisation and opportunity.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore, Freund asserts that for a brief period from the mid-1930s, and particularly in the early 1940s, Indian workers in Durban were regarded as among the most militant in the country.<sup>77</sup> However, by the mid-1950s, the majority of Indian workers were signed up to registered TUCSA unions, not least among them Jimmy Bolton’s GWIU and FWIU, nearly two decades of militancy and organising along non-racial lines with African workers apparently forgotten. Padayachee et al, through an in-depth survey of the constitutions of a sample of Durban unions with Indian membership, find the reasons for this trend in the “undemocratic” structure of the unions, often entrenched in the unions’ constitutions:

... the absence of clear democratic procedures militated against the independent class organisation and activity of this nascent working class movement and often subsumed its very capacity to act under organisational and political precepts generally unrepresentative of the objective demands of this class.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Bill Freund, “Confrontation and Social Change: Natal and the Forging of Apartheid 1949-72” in *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal Historical and Social Perspectives*, ed. Robert Morrell. (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996) 134.

<sup>75</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Tim Nuttall, “The Leaves in the Trees are Proclaiming our Slavery: African Trade-Union Organisation, 1937-1949” in *The People’s City. African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*. ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996) 179.

<sup>77</sup> Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 50.

<sup>78</sup> Vishnu Padayachee, Shahid Vawda and Paul Tichman, *Indian Workers and Trade Unions in Durban: 1930-1950*, Report no.20, (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1985) 82. It is interesting to note here that the authors found Jimmy Bolton’s unions, namely the Furniture, Garment and Match workers, to have “a much more sophisticated constitution” than the other unions that they considered. One example of this is that they were the only unions in Padayachee et al’s sample whose constitutions made provisions for shop stewards. However, the authors make the point that this did not necessarily mean ‘better’ democratic practise. Padayachee et al conclude of their sample that: “a broad based, diffused leadership structure extending from the shop floor into the union, responding to

Freund offers more compelling reasons for these developments, arguing that this period of worker activism should be understood not only in terms of “a striving for non-racial working-class unity” but should rather be “associated closely with assertions of ethnicity, both by and against Indian workers.”<sup>79</sup> This was particularly with reference to Indian workers seeking to maintain their relative work privileges, as well as their ongoing struggles for living space, and trading and investment rights in the city.<sup>80</sup> Freund suggests that the majority of these workers were not, in the end, prepared to relinquish these privileges and follow the political vanguard into significantly redressing inequalities in the name of working-class unity. He cites as examples a number of unsuccessful strikes, supported by both Indian and African workers, as being experiences which disillusioned workers and illustrated the difficulties of maintaining unity. Among these, David Hemson describes the strike at Dunlop in 1942 as a “watershed” which altered the course of working class organisation. He argues that the strike, which erupted in response to the company’s victimization of members of the non-racial Rubber Workers’ Union, was “decisive in undermining radical leadership in registered trade unions and in causing distrust and hostility between Indian and African workers.”<sup>81</sup> The strike was effectively quashed by the company, which brought in busloads of African workers from the reserves. Hemson argues that a significant aspect of the strike was its influence on Indian activists’ move away from their focus on organising workers to “political action in defence of the Indian community.”<sup>82</sup> Freund also sees the bloody 1949 race riots as adding to the difficulties of maintaining inter-racial solidarity. ‘Political’ stay-aways called by the Congress-Alliance in the early 1950s were the nail in the coffin for the possibilities of support for non-racial trade unionism from Indian workers, hundreds of

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worker interests and with a refined sense of accountability to its full membership was, in most cases, entirely absent.” Padayachee et al, *Indian Workers*, 72.

<sup>79</sup> Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 53

<sup>80</sup> This was particularly in connection with the so-called ‘Pegging’ Acts of 1942 and 1943. See also David Hemson, “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock workers of Durban” (Ph.D. diss., University of Warwick, 1979). As mentioned above, Indian and coloured workers enjoyed significantly privileged positions as workers, relative to Africans. Theirs was the right to strike, and to join registered unions. There were also major differences in terms of wage scales, which by the early 1950s were balanced heavily in favour of Indian workers.

<sup>81</sup> David Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 337.

<sup>82</sup> David Hemson, “Class Consciousness,” 339.

whom were arrested, lost their jobs and were forcibly removed from their rented accommodation in the city.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the initial wave of strikes at Natal garment factories between 1933 and 1935, under Jimmy's guidance the GWIU generally charted a moderate course and in this respect differed from the burgeoning 'radical' unions described above.<sup>84</sup> Freund sums up the influence of the garment union thus:

The union initiated struggles in the 1930s which significantly improved the situation of Indian workers in the industry in Durban, while still allowing for labour costs that would look profitable compared to those in Transvaal factories. Honestly run, gradually promoting Indian, Coloured and female officials, and offering genuine benefits, the GWIU was to be a central force in the reconstruction of the Indian working class away from the desperate conditions that prevailed in the militant era of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>85</sup>

Apart from Jimmy's garment and furniture unions, Freund points to other unions, for example unions which organised municipal workers and sugar refinery workers, as also being "significant" forces in helping to shape a particular tradition of unionism very different to the 'radicals' considered above.<sup>86</sup>

The high level of war-time mobilisation throughout South Africa, which included a significant strike initiated and won by the Transvaal garment workers almost independently of their union, did not seem to have much affected the Natal garment

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<sup>83</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*.

<sup>84</sup> A 'parallel' African union was set up by the GWIU in 1948. Unwilling to compromise their registration, a number of unions set up 'parallel' or 'number two' unions in order to cater for African workers (and sometimes coloured or Indian workers) entering industry. These unions, while often paying lip service to the ideal of one integrated worker body, argued that through parallel organisations African workers would at least have some say in negotiations with employers. The reality was often different. The need to negotiate through the registered union created a dependent relationship from the outset. The registered union's interests lay in controlling the bargaining process in order to prevent undercutting by African workers. The Garment Workers' Anna Scheepers, for instance, gained a reputation for her tight control of the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW), the largest African parallel union in the Trade Union Council of South Africa fold. Well into the 1970s, and despite employers' willingness to negotiate directly with the union, Scheepers insisted that African unionists were "not ready" for the responsibility, and continued to negotiate on their behalf. Scheepers' example was not an anomaly. Indeed, much of TUCSA's history is bound up with their controlling relationship of African parallel unions.

<sup>85</sup> Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 83.

<sup>86</sup> Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*.

union. By contrast, the war years were relatively quiet for the garment workers in Natal, with no work stoppages reported. Some gains were made by the union, however. A sliding scale related to the cost of living was introduced, and in a precursor to what would later become a more comprehensive welfare system, an unemployment fund was established. Through a new agreement with the industrial council in 1944, the working week was shortened to 45 hours. Paid holidays were extended from one week to two, and payment was negotiated for public holidays – including the internationally recognised workers’ day – May Day.<sup>87</sup> Union membership stood at just under 2 600 workers in 1943.<sup>88</sup> Judging from newspaper articles detailing Jimmy’s bids to be voted in as an independent candidate to the city council, he was intermittently back in Durban from 1944. He was on compassionate leave from the army; his first marriage had broken down and he was in the process of getting a separation and, later, divorce from his wife.

Harriet meanwhile was becoming more fully integrated into the functioning of the unions at Caxton Hall. Apart from taking minutes and doing other office work, she began to assist with organising the Distributive Workers’ Union, as well as the women workers at Durban’s match factory:

You know, it became more and more and more interesting and then I used to go around with Floe Metzger from the Distributive Workers, that was the shop workers, to help her because she was alone here and she had to run her office and, so you know I used to go with her and distribute pamphlets to Greenacres ‘cos was all white girls in those places and ... Greenacres, Payne Brothers, Stuttafords, John Orr’s um, you know I helped her with giving things to all those workers and, telling that there were meetings and where the meeting hall would be and so on and telling them why they should come you know so, that was quite interesting ja.<sup>89</sup>

Despite their age difference of over 25 years, and their rather hostile initial exchange, Harriet and Jimmy struck up a friendship, and fell in love:

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<sup>87</sup> B. Madari, “A Historical Investigation Into the Garment Industry”.

<sup>88</sup> The Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), “Official Opening”, Harriet Bolton’s personal collection.

<sup>89</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 20, 2006.

I lived out on the Bluff and he used to take me home 'cos he lived at Rosburgh, he used to take me home and drop me, and met my parents and then we got more friendly.

Jimmy proposed two years after they met. Harriet recalled that her parents were not initially in favour of their marriage, both because of the age difference and because Jimmy had been married before and had two teenage daughters:

... my parents were quite shocked because he was the same age as my father ... but he was a very sort of young person and he and my father got on very well together. And ... you know they were worried about the age difference. They didn't say it to me ... but um I mean they liked him very much ... and then also he was divorced, which was in our family was like *shock horror* you know ...<sup>90</sup>

Harriet and Jimmy were married at Durban's magistrate's court and held their reception, a luncheon party, at the unions' hall. Harriet described her marriage of twenty years to Jimmy Bolton as "very happy". Judging from the interviews I have done with Harriet, much of their married life together revolved around the work they did for the unions. This shared commitment, coupled with a seemingly similar irreverence to authority and fierce independence, were all themes which Harriet returned to when discussing her relationship with Jimmy. Harriet portrayed her husband as a hard worker, and in our interviews spent a significant amount of time detailing the work that he did for the trade union movement in Durban, as well as his work as a city councillor, which she stressed he was not paid for: "they never got a salary in *those days!*"<sup>91</sup> She often seemed concerned to play her own role down, and referred back to Jimmy Bolton, insistent that he was the one who deserved recognition. I would argue that this is related to the damning treatment he has received in the historiography. Harriet is invested in re-remembering Jimmy's role: "he did a lot with his life ... He did a good job."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 23, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 23, 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006.

## Conclusion

The importance of context, both past and present, has been highlighted by the Personal Narratives Group, who stress acknowledging its “centrality and complexity” when interpreting women’s life histories. They argue this is vital in order to better understand women’s “ways of navigating the weave of relationships and structures which constitute their worlds.”<sup>93</sup> This chapter has discussed Harriet’s childhood and formative influences, with Durban’s post-Depression and war years as backdrop. I have shown that Harriet’s first job as a clerk at the TWU was typical in many ways of white women of her generation and class. The years between 1936 and 1960 were marked by a trend of white women taking up employment in clerical positions, while their numbers in service occupations rapidly diminished. Within the first few years of her employment, however, Harriet’s work had already changed from a purely clerical role to one where she was becoming actively involved with the more hands-on union business of organising workers. Chapter Two will build on the foundation this chapter has provided with a discussion of Harriet’s life as a mother, wife and trade unionist during the turbulent 1950s. Jimmy Bolton’s grounding in a particular tradition of British trade unionism, transplanted to South Africa, had an important influence on the trade unions which he was involved with. Harriet also maintains that, in turn, her trade unionism was powerfully influenced by Jimmy. This chapter has sought to situate Jimmy Bolton’s trade unionism within a broader historical context of trade unionism in South Africa and its links to British organised labour. A brief overview of the GWIU’s first ten years of existence has been provided, and the chapter has situated the union within South Africa’s trade union landscape during this period. I have argued that the GWIU and its workers, which were to become Harriet’s self-described “community” for thirty years, were typical in some ways of burgeoning industrial unions in South Africa’s post-Depression years. In other ways the union’s politics differed markedly from several Durban trade unions, often also with a majority Indian membership, on the TLC’s ‘left’. All of this provides us with vital

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<sup>93</sup> The Personal Narratives Group ed. *Interpreting Women’s Lives. Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 19.

context to better understand Harriet Bolton's life, her work in the trade union movement and the trajectory that this was to take. The following chapter will expand on several of these themes.

**Chapter Two: “In those days I must’ve been quite strong”: Harriet and Jimmy Bolton and Durban’s “decade of defiance”.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December 2005.



## Introduction

The Nationalists' legislative onslaught made the 1950s a fraught decade for workers and their trade unions. While revisionist historians are at pains to stress the continuities between the reign of the United Party and Malan's Nationalist's, Alexander convincingly argues that although this might hold true for African workers, for Indian, coloured and white workers the result of the 1948 election mattered more than the historiography allows.<sup>1</sup> The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, the impending overhauls of the Industrial Conciliation Act and the consequent dissolution of the South African Trades & Labour Council (TLC) decisively concluded an era in South African labour history. As white South Africans with no links to the Communist Party, Jimmy and Harriet Bolton's civil liberties were not compromised. However, the reverberations of the "decade of defiance" were felt acutely by the trade union movement throughout South Africa, and the Natal garment and furniture unions were no exception.

This chapter sets out to do a number of things. Firstly, it seeks to describe and contextualise Harriet's life at this point. Newly married, and starting a family, Harriet continued her work at the trade union offices, and became more fully entrenched in the functioning of the unions. The particular 1950s 'white' Durban social milieu that Harriet was drawn into, mostly through Jimmy's work on the city council, is also investigated. This is set against a background context of South Africa's labour movement, but in particular the upheavals caused by the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, and the later changes to labour legislation. Here, Jimmy Bolton's role is fore-grounded, although Harriet's memories of the period provide important clues to locating and understanding the particular position of the garment and, to a lesser extent, furniture unions. Central to this period, and an important component of this chapter and indeed the thesis as a whole, is an account of the formation of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and a consideration of their respective politics and trajectories. An understanding of the debates around the politics of the two organisations, both at the time of their formation and in the historiography, is

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: labour and politics in South Africa, 1938-48* (Cape Town, David Phillip, 2000).

vital in order to more fully comprehend Harriet's role in the trade union movement in the decades which followed.

The National Party lost no time in entrenching apartheid into the statute books following their narrow victory in 1948: a barrage of legislation, obsessed with preventing 'miscegenation' and controlling the space and movement of African men and women was passed within the first few years of their rule. Beinart points out that segregationist policies over previous decades in South Africa, while perhaps more stringent than in other colonies and the United States, were not exceptional. However, "Apartheid was a more intense system and increasingly jarred in an era of decolonisation and majority rule."<sup>2</sup> The Nationalists' legislative onslaught was met with fierce resistance, both through organised political channels and more spontaneous action leading to the period earning the moniker "the decade of defiance". As Tom Lodge points out, the 1950s were also marked by the vigorous and unparalleled action of African women.<sup>3</sup> Many Durban workers living in Cato Manor, often in the vanguard of these struggles, would remember the 1950s as "a period of hope."<sup>4</sup> Economically, the decade represented a half-way point in South Africa's long economic boom phase, which started with the dropping of the gold standard in 1934, and ended with the global decline in 1973. Despite a brief down-turn in 1959 which, if the garment and furniture unions' *Bulletin* publication of that year is anything to go by, seemed to be acutely felt by these industries, followed by the political crisis of 1960, the South African economy continued to grow. This in itself created a dilemma for apartheid planners. During the 1950s, the number of Africans employed in manufacturing exceeded the total figure for mining. While the mining monopoly continued to benefit from a cheap migrant labour system, key industrialists often favoured a more settled workforce. However, the urban centres where industry was clustered were precisely the areas where government hoped to check further African urbanisation. Beinart concludes that while early apartheid policy was intended to

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<sup>2</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001)144.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945*. (Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1983) 139.

<sup>4</sup> Ari Sitas, "The Sweat was Black. Working for Dunlop" in *The People's City. African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*, ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards, (Heinemann/ University of Natal Press: Pietermaritzburg, 1996) 234.

maintain African workers as migrants, economic realities tended to work against this and labour struggles became more and more identified with urban contexts.<sup>5</sup>

### **Harriet Bolton's work and the 1950s**

... working in the trade union movement you realised you were helping to better people's *lives* you know, and also amalgamate them in something which was going to benefit all of them, you know join them together in a movement ...<sup>6</sup>

The previous chapter briefly considered how Harriet regarded her work as significant in shaping her political awareness. While she described her position in the union as “very junior”, the experience of working in the offices of the garment and furniture unions during the 1950s would undoubtedly have led to her participation in important debates and would have deepened this awareness, particularly because Jimmy Bolton was involved in national discussions around the state's proposed labour legislation. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Harriet continued to work after her marriage. Speaking specifically about post World War II Europe, Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser remarked that middle class women often regarded their work as a temporary phase. Many women felt that their work outside the home should be subordinated to the demands and needs of their families.<sup>7</sup> The observations made by Anderson and Zinsser could be applied equally to South Africa. During and post World War II many white working-class and middle-class women chose to quit their jobs. Unmarried women left to get married, and in the case of those who were already married, their husbands' relatively high military wages meant pressures for additional income were alleviated. As Iris Berger puts it: “As the war progressed, women's actions continued to indicate that they valued marriage more than their jobs.”<sup>8</sup> Whether or not Harriet's decision to continue working was a financial one is not clear. Jimmy, however, had not accepted a salary from the GWIU for the first ten years of its existence. From the end of the war until the 1950s he

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<sup>5</sup> Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*.

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present vol. II*. (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 223.

<sup>8</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity. Women in South African Industry 1900-1980*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) 155.

had accepted only a “token” sum.<sup>9</sup> Harriet attributed her decision both to her enjoyment of her work and because her husband was “a different type of person”.<sup>10</sup> What is clear is that by this stage she was well trained in her job, and particularly because several clerks resigned in the immediate post-war years, she was valuable to the union.

The Boltons’ first child, Vivian, was born in 1949, and Harriet continued her work at the union part-time despite five pregnancies in relatively close succession. (Her sixth and last child, David, was born over a decade later.) Like many white South African women, her domestic burden was lightened by employing domestic workers and it was largely due to their work that she was able to persist with her career at the union. This was a point that Harriet acknowledged in a number of interviews. At one stage two African women worked for her. One was a ‘nanny’ to the children while the family employed another woman to help with housework:

I worked out how I could work half days when the children were little and when they were small, small babies or my husband was away I would take them in with the nanny, and they as I say grew up in the boardroom (laughs) ...<sup>11</sup>

Interview and union sources suggest that the 1950s was a challenging decade for both the Boltons. The combination of caring for her children, working, and supporting her husband’s political career was particularly demanding for Harriet, and at times Jimmy’s ill-health added to the pressure. In 1954, just days before she was due to give birth to her fourth child, Jimmy was admitted to hospital seriously ill. At the time he was a Federal Party candidate for the Durban Central area in the provincial election, and his election campaign was due to get underway when he got sick. He was still in hospital when Harriet came home with their new baby, but she was determined that his campaign should continue. With Peter just one week old, Harriet worked full days at the union

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<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that Jimmy was paid by the Furniture union for his work, as during this period he did not receive a salary from his position as a city counsellor either.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006. Harriet referred only to her children’s nanny as “Anna” in this particular interview. However, in later interviews she referred to both the Dlamini and the Gumede families as having a long association with the Boltons. Joyce Gumede, the daughter of one of Harriet’s domestic workers, would later join the trade union movement. Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

office in Jimmy's place, and with the help of friends canvassed for him during the evenings, apparently to the "horror" of her doctor, who had to remind her that her baby was only a week old.<sup>12</sup> Harriet's recollections of this period in interviews, despite her acknowledgement of difficulty, again emphasise a 'narrative theme' of robust independence:

I came out, the child was three days old, my son Peter when I came out of the hospital ... in about a month he (Jimmy) was out of hospital, in about six weeks he was able to get around ... It was very tough ja. But amazing what you can survive I mean, I couldn't do it now, but in those days I must've been quite strong you know. And I see my children are.<sup>13</sup>

Feminist authors have long noted wives' 'incorporation' into their husbands' work, or "the hidden investment of female knowledge, labour and capital in apparently male-only enterprises."<sup>14</sup> While the majority of research in this area has focussed on the experience of housewives, it has been argued that for those women who are employed, the 'three jobs syndrome' often applies. That is, on top of paid and domestic work, the woman also contributes labour to her husband's career. This is generally within a socially and culturally constructed "hierarchy of priorities" of work-family-work where, in a number of ways, the needs of the husband's work are given priority, next is children, and finally the wife's own paid work a poor third.<sup>15</sup> Harriet's 'incorporation' into Jimmy's public and political life has been noted and will be discussed further with particular reference to the Durban city council. Harriet's work at the unions certainly predated her marriage to Jimmy, and she was also paid for her work. However, I would suggest that in much the same way that wives have been shown to participate in a 'two-person single career' - both in concrete ways and in terms of identification - so too Harriet became a part of Jimmy's career.<sup>16</sup> After her husband's death, while undoubtedly forming a new identity

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<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, "She stepped into her husband's shoes", *Living & Loving*, May 24, 1972, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History" in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) 80.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Finch, *Married to the Job: Wives' Incorporation in Men's Work*, (United Kingdom: George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd, 1983)

<sup>16</sup> Janet Finch, *Married to the Job*, 7.

for the Bolton Hall unions, Harriet was also invested in maintaining Jimmy Bolton's legacy; a legacy which she had helped to establish.

In a revealing message in a GWIU souvenir brochure, published in 1959 to celebrate the union's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, union organiser Maggie Bowers paid special tribute to Harriet who, she said, had "played her part behind the scenes":

... for it was her sacrifice that her husband had to leave home so often to deal with the Unions (sic) problems. She had to be Father and Mother to her family. A great deal has been done by Mrs. Bolton, and I am sure that all members generally won't forget her love, patience and readiness to help wherever possible.<sup>17</sup>

When she was asked specifically about the above extract, Harriet agreed that she took more of the responsibility for her children. However, she also made it clear that she felt Jimmy was available as a father:

... I think my husband was a good father ... but he was a very hard worker, I mean he always, you know, he was a person just dedicated to work, he enjoyed working. I suppose I did have to spend more time, not so much with my children but organising them ... I used to take them to the office and, I used to make their lunches and their bottles when they were little and I had Anna who was with me for twenty-five years, and she looked after them and I only worked half-day anyway, and sometimes went in the evening to a function or something. But then the children were asleep and Anna would sit with them ... but by and large I think he spent quite a lot of time being a father. He used to take the boys fishing sometimes in the weekends and so on, he did spend a lot of time working, and I did as well, but you know then children also have their own activities...<sup>18</sup>

By the 1950s Harriet's work at the furniture and garment unions had developed beyond her role as typist. Despite working part-time and still being "very junior", as she put it, she began to help with some organising work; initially for the Natal branch of the National Union of Distributive Workers and for workers at Durban's match factory. Her major role, however, continued to be in a 'behind the scenes' administrative capacity. It

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<sup>17</sup> Garment Workers Industrial Union, Garment Workers Industrial Union Silver Jubilee Brochure, (GWIU, Durban, 1959), Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection.

<sup>18</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 13, 2006.

was in this role that she helped to organise the purchase of a building for the furniture and garment unions. Harriet commented on Jimmy Bolton's aversion to owning property in a number of interviews; for instance when they were married it was only at her insistence that they bought a house rather than rented one. Similarly, she was the one to suggest that the garment and furniture unions pool their saved money to buy their own building. The unions gave the go-ahead, and in 1950 moved into new premises in Albert Street. The building was refurbished to include offices, a meeting hall, co-operative shops and a health clinic:

... I was trying to get that Nichol's Square building which I think my husband unveiled in 1951 was it ... so in those days I was you know ... looking at properties and so on. You know my husband couldn't be bothered to do that, I mean he'd never even owned a house when I married him, he'd always just rented. You know he didn't believe in owning property. But the unions had this ten thousand each, the garment workers and the furniture workers, and all he did was organise other, you know, unions and help them. Like the textile and the lamp-shade workers and the, oh God knows what, all the fiddly little unions the sweet workers and, so on because the Communist Party was getting in and organising, so he was helping to organise. And then we got an African organiser to organise the Africans ... who were coming into the clothing industry in those days, and so all that took a lot of time and training ...<sup>19</sup>

The co-operative stores did not materialise due to Group Areas restrictions on the unions' 'mixed' membership. However, a sick fund clinic was established with a dental unit, X-Ray machines, a dispensary and consulting rooms; the funding came from an agreement with the clothing industrial council. A family planning clinic was later included in the services. Harriet recalled that although "a lot of the men didn't like it", women workers "used to steal in to it when they could".<sup>20</sup> While a number of South African unions provided discounted medical care for members, at this stage the garment and furniture unions seem to have been in the vanguard regarding comprehensive welfare. That Harriet and Jimmy thought these facilities were a significant achievement is demonstrated both by contemporary union histories, newspaper articles and later interviews with Harriet. She suggested the services were of particular value to black members who did not have

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<sup>19</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December, 2005.

easy access to specialised medical care, and in many cases could not afford it. “We look after our members from the cradle to the grave,” Harriet proudly told a reporter in 1968.<sup>21</sup> Facilities aside, over the next two decades the Bolton Hall would also become an important social and political meeting space. Important to note here also is that the hall was named after Jimmy Bolton, in appreciation for the work that he had done in establishing the union.

### **Situating the ‘left’: Jimmy Bolton and Durban’s trade unions**

As already indicated, communist and communist-aligned trade unionists were a powerful presence on Durban’s labour scene during the 1940s. Jimmy tried to counter their influence by attempting to sway worker opinion against the leadership of already established unions. Ironically, this was a tactic often used by communist party aligned trade unionists, and one which the GWIU executive had to contend with until well into the 1960s, as Muriel Horrell notes:<sup>22</sup>

There are vocal left-wing minorities within some of the mixed unions ... for example the Natal Garment Workers’ Industrial Union, the National Union of Leather Workers and others, although at present these members are over-ruled if matters are put to the vote.<sup>23</sup>

.Jimmy’s struggle with the left for control over the Textile Workers Industrial Union was also fraught with intrigue and tension and spanned nearly twenty years, and at least two court cases. Rob Lambert suggests that Jimmy split and gained control of the laundry as well as the sweet workers’ unions, but when he tried to do the same with the textile union through the support of a group of workers at the Phillip Frame owned Wentex mill, the Natal branch secretary, Alec Wanless, mounted a campaign against him. Correspondence between Wanless, the secretary of the TWIU (SA) Mike Muller, Solly Sachs and Anna

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<sup>21</sup> Sjoerd Meijer, “A day in the life of ... Busiest woman in Durban?”, October 2, 1968, Harriet Bolton’s Personal Collection.

<sup>22</sup> In her autobiography *All my Life and all my Strength*, Ray Alexander commented that instructions from the Red International of Labour Unions were not to “break unions” but rather to work within in them and “replace reactionary leaders”. Ray Alexander Simons, *All my Life and all my Strength*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Muriel Horrell, *South African Trade Unionism*, (Johannesburg: S.A Institute of Race Relations, 1961), 56.



Scheepers from the GWU, Bettie du Toit from the laundry workers and Haydee Le Roux from the sweet workers suggests that Wanless' campaign received the support of these unions at the 1950 TLC conference. A series of pamphlets were circulated which claimed, among other things, that Jimmy Bolton was a racist who was "siding with the Nationalists in their campaign against the trade union movement".<sup>24</sup> They also claimed he wanted lower wages for the Natal garment workers, and that Jimmy and the union's president Tommy Peters had voted "for racial discrimination" at a TLC conference:

QUESTION: "If a trade union secretary flagrantly votes for a policy of racial discrimination against the interest of his members, are they entitled to dismiss him from office or – put more bluntly in workers' language – 'kick him out'?"

ANSWER: Naturally, if that is their wish. Already very many workers in Durban are ready to scream – 'Mr. Bolton, you are a racist!'<sup>25</sup>

The group were also apparently against the garment union's building project and tried to persuade membership to vote against it. Jimmy sued for damages, but in the end settled for a withdrawal of the statements and an apology. Of particular interest is the involvement in the 'campaign' of the leadership of the Transvaal GWU. As already discussed, Sachs had long disagreed with Jimmy Bolton over how best to resolve wage disparities between Transvaal and Natal although he had never yet tried to gain control of the union, as he did in the Cape. Letters from union president Anna Scheepers, however, suggest the executive of the GWU, along with the sweet and laundry unions, felt their financial support for the campaign would only be warranted if it was a "continuous campaign ... in the case of the Garment Workers, for instance, that the workers should advocate for a National Union of Garment Workers."<sup>26</sup>

Much of the literature, mostly penned by left-aligned trade unionists who had dealings with him, characterises Jimmy Bolton as a racist, more interested in pleasing bosses than

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Vincent Lambert, "Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965" (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1988), 301.

<sup>25</sup> In the Supreme Court of South Africa Durban and Coast Local Division, In the matter between James Crossley Bolton, and Textile Workers' Industrial Union (SA) and the Durban Printing Company, Durban, October 23, 1950, Garment Workers Industrial Union 1950 – 1954, Correspondence and Papers, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP), AH 1092, Cba 1.2., File 3.

<sup>26</sup> A. Scheepers to A. Wanless, August 23, 1950, Garment Workers Industrial Union 1950 – 1954, Correspondence and Papers, HP, AH 1092, Cba 1.2., File 3.

bettering the lives of workers.<sup>27</sup> For Betty du Toit, general secretary of the Laundry Cleaning and Dyeing Workers Union, the reason why Jimmy Bolton was opposed to CPSA members getting involved with organising unions was unequivocal: “he ... was violently opposed to any communist who organised a trade union because the communists were consistent in their propaganda against racial discrimination.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly, for Du Toit, Jimmy Bolton’s preferred methods of negotiation and conciliation, and the garment union’s sometimes good relationship with clothing employers were anathema. His relative social capital as a white British male when negotiating with employers and government bureaucrats also cannot be underestimated; particularly so in contrast to the majority of Natal communist-aligned unions which were led by black secretaries. Because of his position as a city councillor, he was probably even further perceived as a part of the establishment. Post World War II, the CPSA had made a clear break from its destructive early 1930s, and was by this stage aligned with the ANC.<sup>29</sup> Its ultimate aim remained the establishment of a socialist South Africa, in which workers would be the leading ‘revolutionary force’. Hence there was often more willingness among CPSA trade union leaders to resort to strikes, and often an implicit rejection of methods of conciliation and negotiation with employers. An important point here is that where African workers were concerned, the latter methods were generally not an option in the first place.

A strike by the Durban branch of Du Toit’s laundry workers in the 1940s illustrates the ways Jimmy’s approach differed from that of the trade union left. The prolonged and

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example: Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organise ... or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1980), Bettie du Toit, *Ukubamba Amadolo. Workers’ Struggles in the South African Textile Industry*, (London: Onyx Press Ltd., 1978), Jack and Ray Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950*, (South Africa: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1983)

<sup>28</sup> Bettie du Toit, *Ukubamba Amadolo. Workers’ Struggles in the South African Textile Industry*, (London: Onyx Press Ltd., 1978) 27.

<sup>29</sup> Then, tighter Comintern control and a closer adherence, and mimicking, of the Soviet Party’s rhetoric coupled with purges effectively reduced the Party to a membership of 150. Committing itself to ‘revolutionary’ campaigns, trade unionists who used ‘class collaboration legislation’ were labelled reformists and social democrats and were summarily expelled. Sachs, Bunting, Andrews and Weinbren were among those expelled for making use of the Industrial Conciliation Act in their trade unionism. See Martin Nicol, “‘Joh’burg Hotheads’ and the ‘Gullible Children of Cape Town’: The Transvaal Garment Workers’ Union’s Assault on the Low Wages in the Cape Town Clothing Industry, 1930-1931,” in *Class, Community and Conflict. South African Perspectives*. History Workshop 3. ed. Belinda Bozzoli. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 219.

bitter strike, over wages and conditions of work, continued for three months from 1945 and in to 1946. As the Durban TLC representative, Jimmy assisted with negotiations to try and resolve the dispute, but these were not successful. Ultimately most of the laundry workers lost their jobs, and the union was effectively shattered. Surprisingly, since Jimmy had given the strike his support, he attacked the laundry union's leadership at the 1946 TLC conference and said the strike was "wrong" and "criminal":

Bolton argued that the strike should not have been called because finances were not available and the union was divided. He accused the trade union leaders of 'handling and working the strike on political lines', instead of 'on trade union principles.'<sup>30</sup>

While individual members of the Natal Indian Congress and the SACP helped to organize and manage the strike, Padayachee et al find no evidence to support Jimmy's claim that the strike was worked "on political lines".<sup>31</sup> For Jimmy, it seemed that Du Toit's association with the CPSA, and her willingness to continue with the protest despite apparently not having strike funds, was enough to make the strike 'political'.

Harriet's explanation for Jimmy's hostility differed to Du Toit's: "my husband wasn't unsympathetic, you know, to them as communists it was just that they wanted to seize our union".<sup>32</sup>

They were very scathing about my husband I think ... you know they were strongly over leftist, communist, and he wasn't he was a socialist you know ... he did agree with their basic principles, but he was an older man and he just felt that was *not* the way to take the workers. Take them on a softer route you know, slower, and ... I mean he was in the trade union movement in England he was part of that big march in England, and I mean he knew the trade union movement he was *never* on the employers' side. But that's who you've got to negotiate with unfortunately, I mean that's where your jobs are. You can't actually *fight* with the

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<sup>30</sup> Vishnu Padayachee, Shahid Vawda and Paul Tichman, *Indian Workers and Trade Unions in Durban: 1930-1950*, Report no.20, (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1985), 127.

<sup>31</sup> Padayachee et al, *Indian workers and Trade Unions*.

<sup>32</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December, 2005.

whole, structure because then where will you earn your living? You know, and I mean you can't live otherwise, we've all got to work...<sup>33</sup>

Certainly, Jimmy's antipathy was echoed in the labour movement both locally and internationally. The break up of the World Federation of Trade Unions and the formation of the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) was "mirrored locally in the rapid growth of anti-communism in the unions."<sup>34</sup> The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, and its subsequent amendment, was devastating for the possibility of a united non-racial movement. The CPSA voted to disband and over a period of five years 56 trade union officials who were deemed 'communist' by government were barred from holding office.<sup>35</sup> Nine of the twenty-six member executive of the TLC were amongst them; some of South Africa's most effective trade union leaders. Lewis sees the failure of the TLC to oppose the Suppression of Communism Act as a united force as a demonstration of "the penetration of anti-communism and the political bankruptcy of the council ..."<sup>36</sup> No less than ten Durban unions became defunct during this period, while others, mirroring trends nationally, were taken over by more 'moderate' leadership. Padayachee et al make the point that long before the Act was passed, police were already taking action against prominent Durban CPSA members and trade union leaders. Their homes and offices were searched, and documents were confiscated.<sup>37</sup> Those who escaped the onslaught continued to work underground when the party was re-launched as the SACP in 1953.

Rife anti-communist sentiment also had dire consequences for trade union unity in the form of the TLC. Towards the end of 1949, Jimmy withdrew the Natal furniture and match unions from the federation, "complaining that the TLC was communist controlled."<sup>38</sup> Jimmy's move was not an isolated one; earlier in the same year the typographical union had disaffiliated, also due to the "political complexion" of the

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<sup>33</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> After drawn-out debates over the positions of the international bodies, the TLC executive eventually decided to end its affiliation to the WFTU. However, they did not join the ICFTU.

<sup>35</sup> Muriel Horrell, *South African Trade Unionism*, (Johannesburg: S.A Institute of Race Relations, 1961) 19.

<sup>36</sup> Jon Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924-1955. The rise and fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 168.

<sup>37</sup> Padayachee et al. *Indian Workers and Trade Unions*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> Jon Lewis. *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation*, 168.

national executive committee. Two years before that, five unions, led by the Iron and Steel Trades Association, had disaffiliated. The latter unions, which claimed a membership of 30 000, joined 'Christian national' unions to form the right wing Co-ordinating Council of South African Trade Unions. Their split from the TLC was for different reasons: it came after their proposal to exclude African unions from affiliation to the TLC was defeated in a vote at the 1947 annual conference.<sup>39</sup> A further blow came in 1950, when a number of powerful craft unions left the TLC fold and formed the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). The mining and municipal unions, as well as the boiler makers, typographical union, woodworkers and Cape and Natal furniture unions joined forces with SAFTU.<sup>40</sup> The SAFTU had a mixed membership but was opposed to any attempts to involve African workers in the bargaining process. However, the federation's increasingly cosy relationship with government during the early 1950s and in particular its response to the proposed changes to the Industrial Conciliation Act led to a number of unions, including the Natal furniture workers, absconding.

For Jon Lewis, the roots of the break-up of the TLC lay in craft unions' responses to the increasingly fragmented job process and the entrance into industry of large numbers of black workers during the 1940s. Unions that had in the past relied on their monopoly of skills to protect positions now instituted colour bars to shield white workers as 'skilled' increasingly became an obsolete category. Thus, the TLC's "tenuous" non-racial alliance maintained for over twenty years between the traditionally conservative craft unions and more open industrial unions, crumbled. However, Lewis adds that the reasons for the final disintegration of the co-ordinating body in October, 1954, were not entirely structurally determined. He suggests that political divisions within the council "took on a life of their own" from the mid 1940s.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ivan L. Walker and Ben Weinbren, *2000 Casualties. A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg: The South African Trade Union Council, 1961) 234.

<sup>40</sup> Muriel Horrell, *South African Trade Unionism*.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Alexander, however, argues that Lewis is wrong to see the fissures in the TLC as being along purely industrial and craft union lines, at least up until the 1948 elections. For example, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), a craft union and one of the TLC's largest affiliates supported the 'left' and continued to vote in favour of allowing affiliation of African unions to the council. Alexander rather sees the splits in the TLC being between a minority of unions who were broadly in favour of the Nationalists, and those who were not. Importantly, his argument rests on a rejection of Lewis' use of the 'mechanisation'

## Situating Jimmy Bolton's 'party politics'

Now that Jimmy Bolton's trade union politics have been established, it is also important to consider his involvement in 'party politics' through his short-lived association with the Federal Party. This will both help gain further insight into his public figure, and importantly the unique political context of Natal. It will also help to describe the particular social context of Harriet's life at this point. The 1951 Separate Representation of Voters Act, which removed 50 000 coloured people from the common roll, provoked mass protest from blacks and whites. However, white protest probably had more to do with government's perceived disregard for the constitution than genuine solidarity with coloured voters. Many of those opposed to the bill were ex-servicemen who had fought for democracy in the war; they organised themselves into the War Veteran's Torch Commando, which organised dramatic torch-lit marches and rallies in 1951: "Even if their version of democracy for blacks was etiolated, they saw the 'rule of law' and constitutionalism as part of a civilised heritage."<sup>42</sup> For example, in Natal a group which called itself the 'Defenders of the Constitution' drafted a "Covenant of Faith" which pledged commitment to defend the constitution. Harriet recalled that Edgar Dean, then general secretary of the Cape furniture union, one of few coloured city councillors and a good friend of Jimmy and Harriet's, was the "first name" on the petition that was sent to government. She said Jimmy was also actively involved in opposing the legislation. It was challenged in court and nullified, but was ultimately passed by Prime Minister Strydom in 1956.

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thesis. He instead argues that despite the economic boom in the 1940s and expansion of industry, levels of mechanisation were minimal: "the development of capitalism was profoundly *uneven*." While more labour was employed, relatively few Africans were absorbed into semi-skilled jobs. And where they were, it generally did not mean white workers' jobs were threatened: "Whilst competition between workers of different 'races' could be a precursor to inter-racial unity – rather than, as many writers presume, the inevitable cause of racial hostility – at least in the 1940s the character of capitalist development militated against race-based job rivalry. Relations between black labour and white labour were marked by widespread disinterest and frequent cooperation, but cases of animosity were rare." Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid*, 118, 124. Alexander claims there is sparse evidence for the thesis that white workers felt threatened by their black counterparts, adding ammunition to his argument that it was not their votes which helped put the National Party into power in 1948.

<sup>42</sup> William Beinart, *20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*, 150.

The Federal Party was launched in 1953, ostensibly as a political extension of the Torch Commando, although the latter organisation was divided on the issue of support for the FP and disbanded soon afterwards. The FP incorporated the Torch Commando's tradition of opposition to the Separate Representation of Voters Act with anti-republicanism and a hefty dose of imperialism in the form of the 'Natal Stand' which asserted the right of Natal "to reconsider her position in the Union" if government refused to respect the Act of Union. Broadly, the FP advocated the economic integration of black people, although they supported segregation of living spaces, and promoted limited representation in parliament, based on a qualified franchise. Such policies earned the party a 'liberal' tag. However, party members' growing obsession with the idea that Natal should secede alienated Jimmy Bolton from the party, despite being the FP's frontrunner in Durban. In December 1954 he resigned after two party members attempted to take their hopes of Natal's secession to "the world stage" when they appealed to Commonwealth prime ministers to take a stand against the Nationalist government and their plans for a republic. Jimmy was apparently disgusted by the two leaders' "un-South African" act.<sup>43</sup> The Federal Party did not gain much support outside of Natal, and disbanded in 1960. Harriet said Jimmy later stood for election as a Progressive Party candidate, formed after a liberal faction split from the UP in 1959; however his real political passion remained the work he did as a city councillor. Harriet maintained that, trade unionism aside, it was also through this latter role that he became a "great hero" of Indian workers. Her assertion is difficult, and perhaps not vital, to establish. However, records do show that Jimmy was consistent in his opposition to re-zoning Durban under Group Areas legislation, so keenly taken up by the Durban City Council in the 1950s.<sup>44</sup>

It was mostly in Jimmy's capacity as a city councillor that Harriet was drawn into the world of white local government circles. Apart from attending official social functions with Jimmy, Harriet said she "had to be seen" participating in organisations such as the Housewives' League and the Women's Institute, as part of his public campaign. This, she

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<sup>43</sup> P.S. Thompson, *Natalians First. Separatism in South Africa 1909 – 1961*, (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers (Pty) Ltd, 1990), 154.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton Southworth III, "Strangling South Africa's Cities: Resistance to Group Areas in Durban during the 1950s, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 24, no 1 (1991): 20.

said, was something that “all councillors’ wives did”. She also added that “most women” were members of a Women’s Institute in their area:

I’ll find that picture of me at the Women’s Institute somewhere ... Umlazi Women’s Institute as I say, with my hat on. You know we never used to go out without stockings high-heeled shoes hats, and gloves you know [HK: In midsummer Durban?] (laughs) I know! Wouldn’t be seen dead! I was once reported by one of my organisers because I went to a factory without my hat on, and my gloves ... that’s the 1940s, amazing hey how times have changed!<sup>45</sup>

Documentary sources on the Durban Housewives’ League are few. The League, which had branches in Johannesburg and Cape Town, was formed to protest the post-war food shortages and rations. Cheryl Walker suggests there was a degree of cooperation across race and class barriers; working and middle-class ‘wives’ were all affected by the long queues for food. There is also evidence that the Durban Housewives’ League worked with the Cape Town based Women’s Food Committee for a while. The latter organisation had a core of CPSA leaders and became an important hotbed for women’s political organisation in the 1950s.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear if the Housewives’ Leagues had anything of the same impact, although in 1969 Harriet commented to a newspaper that the Durban branch, which continued to take up issues relating to food security, was “militant” and had power to make changes.<sup>47</sup> She made similar assertions in our interviews:

Old Helen Gibling was on the council ... she was the Housewives’ League and you know it was a lot of women they used to have *huge* meetings in the City Hall, very powerful then because you know the *butter* was short and blah blah blah ... and she was ... the Chairman of the Housewives’ League, and because my husband was on the council and she was on the council I had to go and support it, and also a lot of the women were members of the Women’s Institute, and as my husband was on the council you know I had to be seen at all these things ...<sup>48</sup>

Harriet and her younger sister Heather were members of the Umlazi Women’s Institute, which met on the Bluff. Harriet was at one stage secretary for the organisation, although

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<sup>45</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1991)

<sup>47</sup> Sjoerd Meijer, “A day in the life of ... Busiest woman in Durban?”, October 2, 1968, Harriet Bolton’s Personal Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.



she described it as one which was “really for housewives ... in those days housewives stayed at home, and had nothing to do when their kids were at school”.<sup>49</sup> She also assisted on the parents-teachers association for Brighton Beach School, and was involved with various rate-payers associations. Despite ascribing her involvement in such organisations to supporting her husband’s public profile, Harriet’s participation in such “public spirited” organisations, as she put it, was certainly not limited to the years in which Jimmy was a city councillor.

### **The Apartheid state cracks down: the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act and its aftermath**

The Nationalist government’s attempts to implement apartheid in trade unions added to the troubles of an already fragmented labour movement. The Industrial Conciliation Act forced unions with a ‘mixed’ membership to split into separate branches, or entirely separate unions. Unions which had branches were now required to hold separate meetings for black and white members, and the executive committees had to be entirely white. No new unions with a mixed membership were allowed to register after the Act was passed.<sup>50</sup> A later amendment (1959) prohibited mixed meetings of shop stewards and mixed congresses or conferences were also prohibited. Those unions which remained mixed were not allowed to extend their membership or areas of operation, unless this was limited to one racial group. Importantly, the term ‘employee’ was now redefined to exclude all Africans. The Act also made far-reaching provisions for job reservation.

As already discussed, serious divisions had emerged in the TLC in the post-war years and hence it was a deeply divided labour movement that was jolted into action after the first rumours of government’s proposed legislation began circulating in 1953. It was agreed that the best way to challenge the Act was with a united front; and a series of discussions

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<sup>49</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Provisions were made for exemptions only on the basis that there were so few white or black workers that if the union was split it would not be able to function. However, there was the ever-present threat of this exemption being withdrawn. Both the FWIU and the GWIU were granted exemptions. They continued to function as one union with a mixed membership and mixed executive. It is interesting to note that the FWIU was the only furniture union in South Africa which made the decision not to split into separate branches.

and “unity conferences” ensued. As already indicated, at the first of these conferences in Cape Town Jimmy Bolton’s furniture union, along with several others, split with the SAFTU in response to the federation’s reported cooperation with government on the Bill. At a second conference in October 1954, representatives from sixty-one unions affiliated to the TLC, SAFTU and the Co-ordinating Council of South African Trade Unions, as well as independent unions, met again and after days of agonised debate formed a new federation, the South African Trade Union Council (SATUC); renamed the Trade Union Council of South Africa in 1962.<sup>51</sup> Right wing unions insisted that Africans be excluded from membership of the federation and this was accepted, ostensibly in the name of unity. The day after TUCSA was formed, those unions which remained affiliated to the TLC voted to disband the council. Not all unions were happy with this compromise, however. A core of left-aligned TLC unions merged with the remaining Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) unions to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). SACTU was explicitly non-racial in character, took an active role in organising African workers and as its name suggests, it had strong links with the Congress movement. In order for us to better understand the context and constraints that both Jimmy and Harriet worked under in the trade union movement, and importantly the debates which continued to rage through the 1960s and well in to the 1970s, some discussion of both SACTU and TUCSA is required. It is to this that we shall now turn.

### **Situating SACTU and TUCSA**

In some ways the unions that formed SACTU sought continuities with the TLC (for example the constitution was closely based on the TLC constitution, and there was a strong lobby to keep the name), but in other ways theirs was also a self-conscious break with the past. SACTU’s decision to create formal links with the Congress movement was based on their argument that the struggle for a living wage and working conditions was inherently political and would inevitably involve conflict with the state. Lodge suggests, however, that co-ordination with political parties was already a “well established tradition”. He cites as examples CNETU relying on alliances with the CPSA and the

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<sup>51</sup> For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to the organization as TUCSA from here on.

ANC in calling general stay-aways during the 1940s, and unions such as the FCWU which, under Ray Alexander's leadership, from its inception had an organising strategy whose focus was broader than wages and working conditions.<sup>52</sup> SACTU's decision to make links with Congress more structured, however, certainly marked a break with the past. Secondly, while SACTU was explicitly non-racial, it was decided that organising the largely neglected African workforce should be the priority. In the context of repressive measures by the state, and keeping the failures of the past in mind, a new approach to organising was devised through the use of semi-clandestine factory committees. In Natal, for example, this was done by first raising awareness among factory workers about the Congress of the People and the Charter: factory committees were then formed out of the interest that this generated. Indeed, the COP experience encouraged Natal workers to develop a newfound commitment to the politics of the Congress Alliance. Lambert argues that:

It was to prove a sound base from which to build and extend in the factories in the forthcoming years. Workers who had participated became the mainstay of SACTU's programmes in the years to come.<sup>53</sup>

Thirdly, SACTU emphasised the importance of worker education and of politicising workers. The Communist Party, while forced to operate underground, was essentially the intellectual influence behind SACTU and most union officials were party members. South African society was understood in terms of the 'internal colonialism' thesis and a two-stage theory of revolution to attain a socialist state was propagated.

The combination of the political crisis in 1960 and the mass detentions and bannings which followed, as well as the ANC's decision to prioritise armed struggle and sabotage through Umkhonto weSizwe, meant SACTU's influence dwindled significantly. By 1965, SACTU was virtually non-existent in South Africa, with leadership incarcerated, working underground for MK, or in exile. However, the organisation continued with an active presence in exile and was controversially recognised by the ILO as South Africa's

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<sup>52</sup> Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa*.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Lambert, "Political Unionism in South Africa", (PhD diss.), 139.

legitimate worker representatives until well into the 1970s. Some of the literature has characterised SACTU as favouring nationalist politics over day-to-day worker grievances and problems on the factory floor. Robert Lambert, among others, has gone some way to challenge this understanding of the organisation.<sup>54</sup> However, for the burgeoning trade union movement in the early 1970s, SACTU's demise was seen as a 'lesson from the past' which should be heeded. While David Lewis claims the new unions of the early 1970s were "certainly not apolitical", a combination of very real fears of hostility from the state and a commitment to independent working class organisation, which should not be subsumed to a multi-class nationalism, meant the independent unions, as their name suggested, kept a low political profile.<sup>55</sup> This debate continued, reaching fever pitch in the late 1970s and again with the formation of COSATU, with the merits of 'economistic' versus 'populist' tendencies at stake. It again took centre stage during discussions over the role of the trade union movement in the new dispensation. Currently, in 2009, political parties' involvement with trade unions is still a matter of contention.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Lambert, "Political Unionism in South Africa," (PhD diss.). Lambert characterises the 'political unionism' of SACTU as an entirely unique approach. He argues that it is also important to note that there were vast regional differences in terms of leadership style and organisation. For example, the factory committee system did not take off in the Western Province or the Transvaal, where the two dominant unions, the FCWU and the LCDWU, respectively, were registered and had long used the state's collective bargaining machinery to negotiate agreements. Lambert characterises these unions, as well the Natal branch of the textile union, as 'orthodox' tendencies within SACTU. Similarly, the understanding of SACTU as purely a populist movement should be qualified. To be sure, just as there were more 'orthodox' currents, populist tendencies did exist, particularly in the Transvaal where Congress politics often took precedence over shop floor issues. However, Lambert has convincingly shown that sections of leadership were deeply invested in the day-to-day slog of building strong democratic structures at factory level. This was particularly so in Natal, through the work of leaders such as Billy Nair, Moses Mabhida and William Khanyile, who built on the foundation laid in the 1940s by CPSA trade unionists such as Harry Gwala, George Ponnin, HA Naidoo and Errol Shanley. As already discussed, Durban unions had been hard hit by the state crackdown of the early 1950s. The leadership of many of the unregistered unions was all but devastated by the Suppression of Communism Act, creating a situation where Billy Nair was secretary for all the Durban SACTU unions at the organisation's inception. Figures for the unions also indicate that Durban SACTU unions were among the smallest and weakest. By 1960 these unions had transformed, making the Natal region one of SACTU's strongholds. General stay-aways and strikes called by the alliance, what Lambert terms 'political strikes', also tended to be best supported in Durban. This, Lambert argues, was due to the success of the very particular method of organising in Natal, coupled with a convergence of local urban and rural popular uprisings.

<sup>55</sup> David Lewis, "Black Workers and Trade Unions" in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), 208.

<sup>56</sup> While commentators have long pointed to the contradictions of COSATU being party to the ruling party alliance, the issue has perhaps become most obvious following the breakaway of the Congress of the People party from the ANC. Ex-COSATU president Willie Madisha commented to the *Mail & Guardian*: "The need for an independent labour movement has become a necessity because a politically aligned union or federation fails to address the needs of workers across industries, both in private and public sectors".

Lodge makes the point that SACTU's achievements are difficult to quantify. While there were certainly instances of workers winning benefits, more often disputes ended in dismissals and arrests. He cautiously suggests that pressure from SACTU unions might have played a role in the general rise in wages in the last part of the 1950s. However, he sums up that:

whether or not SACTU was effective in terms of a narrow conventional perspective of trade unionism is scarcely the point. For SACTU's original purpose was to link economic struggles with political assertions of working class consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

While government would accuse TUCSA of harbouring 'leftist' agendas, SACTU characterized the organisation as right wing and in collusion with the 'fascist' state. TUCSA, however, saw itself as a force for "moderate, non-racial unionism"<sup>58</sup>. Certainly, as far as South Africa's labour landscape went, TUCSA was firmly central, particularly in contrast to the Co-ordinating Council and its successor, the SA Confederation of Labour (SACLA), whose pro-apartheid unions demanded that government tighten colour bars and place more curbs on African unions. Most labour histories characterise TUCSA as racist, reactionary and obsessed with maintaining the privileges of white workers. While parts of their analysis do hold true, particularly so for the latter years of TUCSA's existence, dismissing the organisation as such has arguably resulted in limited analysis of its role. A thorough history of TUCSA remains a major gap in the historiography.<sup>59</sup> A brief consideration of TUCSA's history and particularly its relationship with African workers is appropriate here. This is because an analysis of Harriet's changing relationship with the organisation, mostly over the issue of African unions, will be a core theme in the next three chapters.

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"Madisha announces new trade union launch", March 19, 2009, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-03-19-madisha-announces-new-trade-union-launch>. Accessed: March 19, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa*, 193.

<sup>58</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987) 73.

<sup>59</sup> David Lewis, "Black Workers and Trade Unions" in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997). See also Jon Lewis, "South African Labor History: A Historiographical Assessment", *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990): 213-235.

Above all issues, the question of African workers and their organisation obsessed TUCSA. From its inception in 1954 its policy was marked by ambivalence. The council vacillated over allowing African unions to affiliate after their initial decision to bar unregistered unions (shorthand for African unions) was taken in 1954. Five years later, and under international pressure from the ICFTU, who feared the inroads that the 'communist' SACTU was making, they launched the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA), a separate federation for African unions, which was associated with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). However, little effort was made to organise and recruit and hence FOFATUSA was not particularly successful in attracting African unions; even TUCSA's sympathetic official history admits that links between TUCSA and FOFATUSA were far from fruitful.<sup>60</sup> FOFATUSA was not a representative or effective body, and it folded in 1965. At its dissolution, the remaining affiliated unions were encouraged to join TUCSA, which had re-opened its ranks to African workers in 1962. By 1967, however, only nine African unions were affiliated to TUCSA. The majority of these were parallels to registered TUCSA unions, the largest of which was the ex-SACTU affiliate, the Clothing Workers Union of South Africa, led by Lucy Mvubelo. At the 1967 conference, the question of African affiliation was again raised. The government had repeatedly attacked TUCSA over their policy of allowing African membership, as well as their links to international trade union organisations. Ironically, the organisation in question was the staunchly anti-communist ICFTU. In 1966, one of TUCSA's largest affiliates, the 17 000-strong all white AEU, had left in protest at TUCSA's 'open door' policy. By 1969, 14 unions representing 90 000 members had disaffiliated from TUCSA, and more unions were threatening to do so. A resolution to amend the constitution to exclude Africans from TUCSA membership was passed at the 1969 annual conference. TUCSA secretary, Arthur Grobbelaar, stated then that unless they took this course of action, TUCSA's demise would be "imminent":

I fail to see that this organisation could be held together in anything of the nature of an effective force. It would slowly and gradually, but definitely, disintegrate.

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<sup>60</sup> Ruth Imrie, *A Wealth of People. The Story of the Trade Union Council of South Africa*. (Cape Town: Trade Union Council of South Africa, 1979).

Even if it did not disintegrate, its status, its prestige, its degree of influence would be of such a minor nature that it would fail to exercise any power, or do anything of worth...<sup>61</sup>

One of the major arguments at the formation of TUCSA was that some sort of unity was better than a divided trade union movement; the irony being that this meant barring a significant proportion of the workforce from affiliation. In 1969, TUCSA's decision to exclude Africans from membership was based on the same argument they had used in 1954. As Friedman puts it: "TUCSA's defence was that its existence was threatened by the exodus of the craft unions ... it instead had chosen to survive to carry on the fight for 'true trade union principles.'"<sup>62</sup> Harriet remembered the debates around this in detail:

... there were many people in ... TUCSA who didn't agree with all of TUCSA's principles but they came in because we had to have a united movement. I mean I didn't agree with all of them but, you know, I was very junior. My husband certainly didn't and ... the National Union of Distributive Workers [Ray Altman] their national secretary, wonderful man, he also spoke very much against a lot of their policies. And then the Boiler Makers, Tommy Murray, he was very outspoken you know but as he said "we've got to hold the thing together", you know there were a lot of people who had that sort of feeling, you know "we've got to hold it together, we can't withdraw, we can't leave we've got to keep it together, but we've got to speak out against the things we don't agree with".<sup>63</sup>

She stressed that:

It gave us some unity and some platform you know ... and I mean people came to the conferences, they were always well attended and people expressed themselves from a gamut of expression ... from criticism to agreement, you know, so it wasn't a passive organisation by any chance, the members weren't passive. The members stuck to it because they wanted to change the law. Like the Textile Workers for instance, Norman Daniels, his brother was on Robben Island you know ... and there were lots of people like that and ... the other person was Edgar Dean, he was annoyed about the coloureds being taken off the voters' roll so, I know my husband helped to draft it, they got a got up a petition and the coloureds signed it but Edgar was the first signature on it you know he was like, the person who handed it in ... and of course he then got a lot of unwelcome attention from

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<sup>61</sup> Ruth M. Imrie, *A Wealth of People. The Story of the Trade Union Council of South Africa*. (Cape Town: Trade Union Council of South Africa, 1979) 69.

<sup>62</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*. 74

<sup>63</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, 2005.

the government. But those sorts of people were very brave, you know, Edgar was also the secretary of the union. He had been a city councillor and then of course he'd been removed. There were a lot of very brave people ... there was Dulcie Hartwell was very brave, she talked up, various people were wonderful.<sup>64</sup>

In 1974, the TUCSA constitution was again amended and a resolution was passed to allow membership of all 'bona fide' unions. For the next ten years, TUCSA had limited success in organising the increasing number of African workers entering industry. The emergence of independent and democratic trade unions was fast rendering their particular brand of trade unionism anachronistic. The council eventually disbanded in 1986.

At various points in its history, TUCSA's constitution therefore barred unregistered unions from membership. However, the constitution's preamble committed the organisation to advancing "the dignity, rights, socio-economic and cultural well-being of all South African workers of all races, through responsible and recognised collective bargaining and free negotiation".<sup>65</sup> From the outset, TUCSA was vociferous in its opposition to government's amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act, and in particular the clauses which threatened to split unions with a 'mixed' membership. They were also consistent in their calls for the recognition of African workers as 'employees' under the Industrial Conciliation Act. This was more to do with pragmatic self-interest rather than a genuine desire for a class-based solidarity with African workers, however. TUCSA's concern was in trying to defend industries where African workers could potentially undercut organised workers. TUCSA officials openly promoted this position; calling their policy one of "enlightened self-interest."<sup>66</sup> While some TUCSA unions had made efforts to organise African workers into parallel unions in their respective industries, generally the parallel union was controlled and dictated to by the aptly named 'parent' union. By contrast, those SACTU unions which remained registered and formed

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<sup>64</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December, 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings, Special Conference 1969, Durban, August, 25-27 (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1969), 153, TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.18.

<sup>66</sup> Ravi Joshi, "Background paper on TUCSA for TUACC Council Meeting, prior to going to TUCSA conference," August, 1975, HP, Federation of South African Trade Unions, AH 1999 1312.2.1.



parallel unions were generally more egalitarian in their administration, and separate unions in name only.

The TUCSA constitution also committed the organisation to “opposing Communism vigorously in all its forms”, to “resisting actively all attempts by any political party to stifle or exploit the trade union movement for political ends”, as well as “promoting actively the free trade union movement in the knowledge that it encourages efficacious management-labour relations to the general benefit of the South African economy”.<sup>67</sup> This was clearly anathema to SACTU, who emphasised the link between apartheid and capitalism. Nevertheless, the point that SACTU was not a homogenous organisation has already been made. The same argument could also be made for TUCSA, to an extent. Even a brief consideration of minutes from the organisation’s annual conferences reveals that resolutions were often passionately debated and dissenting opinion, and practice, existed. Attitudes of paternalism abounded and a number of union leaders at the conferences seemed to agree with government that African people were not ‘developed’ enough for ‘responsible’ trade unionism. These kinds of attitudes were common well into the 1970s. Many TUCSA unionists saw their role as a moderating force. If they didn’t do something about it, unorganised African workers would fall in to communist hands. However, Lewis has made the point that some unions within the TUCSA fold demanded a less indecisive role from the federation, and supported a more liberal political stance. As with the TLC, this was often, but not always, divided along the boundary of industrial and craft unions. Unions with a majority black membership, in particular, were often held to a more ‘progressive’ line by their membership: changes to the IC Act, for example, were potentially much more compromising for unions with a mixed or largely black membership. At TUCSA conferences, Jimmy Bolton argued vociferously for African workers’ right to recognition. He also linked the struggle for trade unions with larger political questions; a link that was not often made by TUCSA. During the 1959 TUCSA conference Jimmy, at the time a member of the executive, moved a resolution which called for the recognition of all workers to organise and participate in collective

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<sup>67</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings, Special Conference 1969, Durban, August, 25-27 (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1969), 153, TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.18.

bargaining. It also confirmed TUCSA's opposition to all provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act – and called on affiliates to undertake to organise unorganised workers. The resolution also instructed the conference to initiate a committee to organise all workers into trade unions, whether able to register, or not. This was to become FOFATUSA.<sup>68</sup>

The white worker had been a plutocrat in the past and had grasped the opportunity of living like their employers on the backs of the underpaid labourers who happened to be non-White. This flagrant exploitation had to stop. This Government – as well as previous Governments – had systematically taken away the rights of the great majority of workers. While there was no legislation prohibiting their organisation, they were not allowed freedom of association. They did the most menial tasks and received a meagre pittance in return. Rapid development was taking place all around our borders on the African continent and if the country was to survive, it must accord the Natives the right of freedom of association and the right to negotiate. If we did not do that, others, in a Communistic way, which was contrary to the principles of the free trade union movement, would. The native workers were deprived of the vote, of free speech, or representation, of collective bargaining, of free association and of the right to live where they chose and even of the right to work in an occupation of their choice. Unless we vigorously oppose the policy instead of meekly accepting it, our standards would go down to the level of the lowest paid worker and the legislators ... pursuing a policy of divide and rule, would eventually wipe the trade unions out of existence. Conference should resolve to do something concrete to create a decent state of society in South Africa.<sup>69</sup>

In 1961, Jimmy criticised the organisation for passing “just another pious resolution”. At stake was the issue of job reservation, which he felt was so critical that the council needed to take a much firmer stance. He argued that the resolution would become “another letter that the labour minister would note” and called for a national campaign to end job reservation. In 1962 he again opposed conference “passing the buck” during a debate over whether to amend TUCSA's constitution to allow unregistered (African) unions to affiliate with the Council:

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<sup>68</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings 5th Annual Conference, Durban, 1959, (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1959), TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.6.

<sup>69</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings 5th Annual Conference, Durban, 1959, (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1959), TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.6.

The African community urgently needed help, and what was the Council doing about the problem? It was only passing resolutions. The question of whether the Council was registered or not was irrelevant because there was no value in the registration anyway ... in his opinion Conference should have no hesitation in adopting it and so put an end to the exploitation of African workers.<sup>70</sup>

The above speech extracts give us a perspective on Jimmy Bolton which is somewhat at odds with his characterisation in extant literature. There are also significant parallels with some of the issues that Harriet highlighted and discussed so stridently a decade later. This was particularly so with regards to TUCSA passing resolutions, but not taking any action on them. Arguably, final judgement about TUCSA's politics and achievements must be based on its actions, and not on the level of debate within its ranks. However, it is nonetheless important to have noted that such spaces did exist. If nothing else, as Lever has noted, "[its] racially mixed conferences remained a relatively unusual feature of public life in the country".<sup>71</sup> Importantly, some of the unions which demanded a firmer stance from TUCSA, not least among them the GWIU and the FWIU, were to play vital roles from the late 1960s in providing resources and support for emerging African unions.

### **Natal's Indian garment workers and the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act**

The new legislation therefore played an important part in prompting major shifts in the structure of South Africa's national trade union movement. It also heralded a huge shake-up at individual trade union level. Despite the opposition to the legislation, after much debate and a number of minor amendments the Industrial Conciliation Act was passed in 1956, and unions were given a year to comply with it. This was particularly disruptive for unions with a mixed membership. The Natal furniture and garment unions, for example, faced the prospect of splitting into separate branches. From around 1954, a group of left-aligned Natal garment workers who styled themselves as the "Defend the Constitution Group" made sustained attempts to sway the majority of garment workers to vote Jimmy

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<sup>70</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings 8th Annual Conference, 1962 (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1962), TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.9.

<sup>71</sup> J.T. Lever, "South African Trade Unionism in an era of Racial Exclusion" (DLitt et Phil, University of South Africa, 1992) cited in Peter Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid*, 125.

Bolton and the garment union executive out. They felt the leadership was not doing enough to resist the legislation and, as their name suggests, were concerned that the constitution would be altered and the union split into separate branches under an all-white executive. When the union held a five-thousand strong meeting in Durban's City Hall in 1954 to discuss the way forward, it was nearly broken up by the group, who smashed chairs and tried to take the microphone. Harriet recalled that the women garment workers took their shoes off and used them as weapons to chase the group out:

... my husband used to get up and fight (laughs) used to get up and shout at them and ... I remember once we had a meeting in the City Hall and ... my husband wanted every single, worker to be there and we booked the City Hall and ... they jumped on the stage and they grabbed the mic ... and tried to address the workers, and whew! The meeting broke up in a riot I tell you they were hounded out of the meeting and then we closed the doors and settled down and had the rest of the meeting. But they made a lot of bother those people ...<sup>72</sup>

A year later, Jimmy, union president Tommy Peters and S. Shadrach, the vice-president, all tendered their resignations and were only convinced to stay when a petition was circulated and signed by workers. A later court case also led to Tommy Peters losing his position. However, he was voted back in as president in the same week that he was forced to step down. According to the union's official history, for the next few years it was "impossible" to call a meeting without a police presence because workers were concerned about their safety. Several union members were assaulted and members of the executive intimidated. Illustrative of this was a meeting held in 1957 to discuss job reservation in the industry. During the meeting a union member requested that the Special Branch police leave. However, he was shouted down by women workers who said they felt safer with the police there. "We want the police to be present,' the girls cried."<sup>73</sup> In response to the claims of the 'Defend the Constitution Group' the author of the union's Silver Jubilee history, most probably Jimmy himself, remarked defensively that since the union's inception Jimmy Bolton and Tommy Peters had "always" protected the interests of black workers. The evidence that both men gave at the Wage Board hearing of 1934

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<sup>72</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Golden City Post Reporter, "Garment Workers' Union Chief says: 'I accuse Johanna'", *Golden City Post*, December 1, 1957.

was cited as an example of this commitment, while the complete exemption from the provisions of the new legislation that the GWIU was granted was also seen as a vindication. This exemption allowed the GWIU to continue with a 'mixed' membership and executive. The furniture union, however, was not as lucky; while a 'mixed executive' was allowed, the union's meetings had to be divided according to race, and held separately. It was, however, the only furniture union which did not split into separate branches. Jimmy Bolton's role in securing the exemptions was made much of, particularly his appeals to the "highest" government officials.

While clauses to extend job reservation for all industries were incorporated in the legislation, the clothing industry was the first to feel its effects, with an industrial tribunal investigation launched in 1957. Initially it was recommended that certain grades of work be reserved for white workers only, but this was challenged and invalidated in court first by the Cape and later by the Transvaal unions. In 1960, white workers only accounted for around five percent of the entire clothing workforce; and for the most part were engaged in supervisory positions.<sup>74</sup> Figures for 1955 show that Coloured and Indian workers made up 89 percent of the clothing industry's work force.<sup>75</sup> Government then introduced job reservation for the clothing industry on a quota system. The GWIU called a meeting in 1957 (mentioned above) to discuss job reservation in the industry. In yet another display of acrimony between the Natal and Transvaal garment unions, the *Golden City Post* reported that Jimmy Bolton accused the GWU's Johanna Cornelius of instigating the job reservation clauses. He claimed she wrote a letter to the labour minister detailing her concerns about the job security of white workers in the industry. Jimmy also apparently criticised the "stay at home" strike by the Transvaal garment workers in response to job reservation; he pointed out the strike had only lasted two days while it had been planned for a week. He also called for calm; "There's nothing to panic about. Your union is not a pauper organisation."<sup>76</sup> In later correspondence, Jimmy denied the 'attack' on Johanna,

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<sup>74</sup> Fatima Meer et al, *Black, Woman, Worker*, (Madiba Publishers for The Institute for Black Research: Durban, 1990)

<sup>75</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 79.

<sup>76</sup> Golden City Post Reporter, "Garment Workers' Union Chief says: 'I accuse Johanna'", *Golden City Post*, December 1, 1957.

and simply stated that he had “dealt fully with the position arising from the Job Reservation Determination”.<sup>77</sup>

Threats to their unity and job security aside, thousands of Indian workers also faced the implementation of forced removals from 1957. Despite being a UP stronghold, the Durban city council had long been in favour of urban segregation and as Maylam points out, the Group Areas legislation of 1950 was mostly welcomed by the Durban municipality.<sup>78</sup> Over the next three decades, tens of thousands of Indian, coloured and African people were moved from their homes and dumped into newly formed townships on the outskirts of the city. Beinart estimates that 600 000 Indian and coloured people were affected in South Africa.<sup>79</sup> During the same period, 120 000 Africans were forcibly removed from Cato Manor. Migrant workers were also moved from hostels located close to the city centre and harbour to KwaMashu under the terms of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act. For women workers in particular the consequences were devastating. Between 1957 and 1963 alone, 80 000 Durban Indians were forced to move, often from long established communities. Indian residents staged three mass protest meetings in Durban in as many weeks in the face of the impending removals. However, this campaign did not develop beyond the level of verbal protest, unlike the resistance mounted by Cato Manor residents over forced removals in 1959.

As far as the state was concerned, Group Areas was both an attempt to restructure cities as ‘white’, as well as a modernising project concerned with order and hygiene. Freund characterises Indian response as divided. On the one hand, the forced removals were reviled and resisted, particularly by those who owned their property; this included those with substantial land in majority white areas as well as those who had invested in and extended their shacks. However, others felt relieved that they would no longer be exploited by extortionist landlords and looked forward to services such as electricity and

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<sup>77</sup> J. Bolton to The General Secretary, February 20, 1958, Garment Workers’ Industrial Union 1955-1959, AH 1092 GWU Cba 1.2 file 4.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Maylam, “The Struggle for Space in Twentieth-Century Durban” in *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*, ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996)

<sup>79</sup> Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 153.

running water. Freund notes, however, that the attitude of the majority lay in ambivalence somewhere between these poles. What is clear, however, is that forced removals and the vastly changed living circumstances in the newly built townships on Durban's outskirts had a radical effect on Indian family life. Freund argues that Durban's Indian working class were able to use the city's "project of modernisation of economic forms, of life-style and of manners" to their advantage in important ways: "In return, however, their own way of life was changed in significant ways. They became both insiders and outsiders in the new era."<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the trade union movement's turbulent post-war decade, providing legislative, industrial and political context, and locating the lives of Harriet and Jimmy Bolton within this. The politics of Durban's trade union movement have also been established, with a focus on the unions which the Boltons worked with and their relationship to Durban's trade union 'left'. Harriet's location in a particular 'white' Durban social and political milieu has been discussed, with reference to Jimmy Bolton's role as a city councillor and Federal Party candidate. Her role as a mother and wife, working outside of the home, has also been considered. With these important themes established, we are now able to turn to a discussion of Harriet's role as head of both the furniture and garment unions with a deepened appreciation of her particular location in South Africa's trade union movement, and sympathy for the challenges that both she and Durban's Indian working class faced. By the time Harriet took the reins of the garment and furniture unions in the mid-1960s, the position of Durban's Indian working class had shifted, to an extent, away from what Freund describes as their "desperate conditions" during the union's early years.<sup>81</sup> Coupled with the entrance of large numbers of Indian women into the industry, as well as a changed political and legislative context, Harriet and the union took on a different set of challenges to the ones that Jimmy Bolton faced during the pre and post World War II years.

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<sup>80</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 83.

**Chapter Three: “How Harriet sewed up the Rag Trade”: Harriet Bolton’s role as head of the Garment Workers Industrial Union.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Post Reporter, “How Harriet Sewed up the Rag Trade”, *Golden City Post*, undated, Harriet Bolton’s Personal Collection.



## **Introduction:**

In the early hours of a June morning in 1964, Harriet received an urgent telegram from Yorkshire with the news that Jimmy, who was in England attending a conference of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) and visiting relatives, was critically ill. Leaving her children in the care of friends and her family, Harriet flew to England to be with him. Jimmy died soon after she arrived.

The doctor said to me, “I don’t know how your husband has seen the night through. I think he was only waiting because he knew you were coming” ... That’s in the afternoon when I got there. And he died that night.<sup>2</sup>

Jimmy Bolton was buried in Yorkshire, and Harriet returned to South Africa facing not only life without her partner of 18 years, but also the prospect of supporting and bringing her six children up by herself. She is now able to recall with a dry chuckle one of the last things Jimmy said to her while on his deathbed. At the time that he said it, however, she remembered it “was not funny at all”:

I always tell this as a joke, you know because it was actually ... I thought it was not funny at the time but when I thought about it later it was very funny. He didn’t say to me, “how are you gonna manage your six children?” ‘Cause, you know, we only had the house we lived in, we didn’t have any money, you know, he wasn’t a believer, he was a socialist. He never owned a house till he married me, I made him buy a house ... Instead of saying “how will you manage with your six children you know, and going to have to work, you know ... long hours”, he said to me, “you’ve got to promise me that you’ll move the Garment and Furniture workers out of the old Bolton Hall in Albert Street”. Because the Group Areas had frozen it and we had the Industrial Council there and it was getting too small for all of us, and he said, “and the Council must never move away from us because then we can’t control them ... he said “you’ve got to move them into another building.” Not how will I manage to look after the children and what will I do for a living! ... And so ... “will you promise me?” so I said, “yes, I promise you!”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June, 2005.

This chapter is in some ways an extended unpacking of Harriet's memory of her last conversation with Jimmy, quoted above. It investigates how she survived, bringing up six children by herself and working long hours. It also explores how, in many ways, Harriet "stepped into her husband's shoes" as secretary of the garment and furniture unions, and kept her promise to him to move the unions in to a new building. Drawing on the context that the previous chapters have provided around Jimmy Bolton's trade unionism and politics, this chapter is also concerned with the sometimes obvious, and sometimes more subtle, changes that were instituted in the garment union under Harriet's leadership. By the 1970s she was respected as an influential trade unionist both in Durban and as a national representative of TUCSA. Generally hailed as "Jimmy Bolton's widow" both in the press and trade union circles, and herself always quick to allude to his legacy, I would argue that by the early 1970s Harriet had influenced some significant breaks with the GWIU's and Jimmy's past history. It is my contention, however, that this cannot be understood solely as a product of Harriet's agency, but also of the changed structural and material context of the 1960s. An account of the 1971 Currie's Fountain strike, perhaps the GWIU's most 'radical' moment of solidarity, provides further detail for this argument. At around this time, students on the Durban campus of the University of Natal volunteered their services at the Bolton Hall. Over the next year the Durban labour scene saw unprecedented activity around Wage Board hearings, and some of the first attempts to reorganise African workers into independent unions since SACTU's demise were piloted out of the Bolton Hall.

Economically, our period falls in to the final decade of Hobsbawm's "Golden Age".<sup>4</sup> Post the political crisis of 1960, the South African economy's growth rates continued to be impressive, and for white South Africans it was "the best of times" materially.<sup>5</sup> Politically, the 1960s have long been regarded as a decade where 'grand apartheid' successfully quashed the different forms of resistance that have come to define the 1950s. The 1960s can also be characterised as the trade union movement's nadir. While SACTU remained an active presence at the turn of the decade and mobilised large numbers to

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (Great Britain: Abacus, 1994)

<sup>5</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171.

protest the banning of the ANC, from at least 1964 the organisation was virtually non-existent with most of its leadership either banned or in exile. It is a testament to the FCWU that it, alone among SACTU unions, survived the 1960s, albeit in a compromised form. At the turn of the decade conditions of work and wages for most African workers were controlled by Wage Boards, employers and registered unions, who sometimes negotiated through industrial councils on their behalf. As already discussed, even TUCSA felt some of the brunt of state pressure during this period; it was consistently attacked in public by government for its incorporation of African unions as members. But as David Lewis points out, the “ineffectual and schizophrenic” organisation became, during the 1960s, one of the only broadly anti-apartheid groupings in the union movement:

The history of the pre-1973 period mirrors the 1950s in one sense: it is a tale of resisting police harassment, opposing blatant discrimination, and striving for unity in circumstances where historical conditions were anything but propitious. But in another sense the period stands in marked contrast to the 1950s. For while in the earlier period union organization had been an important part of heightened social conflict and organization, by the late 1960s the unions stood virtually alone in their exposure to the National Party juggernaut.<sup>6</sup>

In as much as it attempted to separate the lives of Indian, coloured, African and white people Bill Freund concludes that apartheid “worked” to an extent in the 1950s, but particularly so in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> This was despite contradictions caused by the growth in industry, which reached an all-time high in the early part of the decade, and required an ever-expanding and less migrant African labour force.

1960 marked an important turning point for Indian South Africans. Until then, the Nationalist government had labelled Indians as aliens and had encouraged ‘repatriation’. Freund describes the changes in policy that took place post 1960 as “dramatic”.<sup>8</sup> Finally

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<sup>6</sup> David Lewis, “Black Workers and Trade Unions” in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997) 196.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Freund, “Confrontation and Social Change: Natal and the Forging of Apartheid, 1949-72” in *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal, Historical and Social Perspectives*, ed. Robert Morrell (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996) 119-140.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 84.

accepting that Indian people formed a permanent part of South Africa's population, government started to invest in education and housing (albeit on a segregated basis). Rapid economic growth opened up some skilled, formerly 'white' positions for Indian workers and training for this work was provided through technical colleges. The simultaneous growth of an Indian capitalist class shall be discussed in more detail below. By the 1970s, skilled Indian workers were "significant" in number, although the majority were still employed in semi-skilled, low wage production. However, the widespread unemployment which had plagued urban families in the 1950s had by this stage been decisively redressed. Freund estimates that the garment industry employed as much as 20 percent of the Indian workforce by the 1970s, and sees the GWIU as an important force in the shift away from the "desperate conditions" which had characterised the lives of the Indian working class in the 1930s and '40s.<sup>9</sup>

### **"She stepped into her husband's shoes":<sup>10</sup> Harriet's role as head of the GWIU and FWIU**

The garment and furniture union officials were, Harriet recalled, "a bit miffed" with her for holding Jimmy's funeral overseas. In later interviews, however, Harriet said that although Jimmy had loved South Africa, his identity had been primarily a "Yorkshire man", and she felt justified in burying him there. Once she was back in South Africa, the garment and furniture unions held a memorial service for Jimmy in the Durban City Hall. In interviews, Harriet remarked that the Council did not charge her for the hall because of Jimmy's long history of service to the city. Durban's mayor paid tribute to Jimmy as a "doughty fighter", and newspaper reports commented particularly on the number of black mourners at the service:

Europeans formed a small proportion of the gathering, which was attended by about 2 000 Coloureds and Indians. People of all three races paid tribute to Mr. Bolton as a man who had worked 'almost fanatically,' to establish and defend the rights of the workers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, "She stepped into her husband's shoes", *Living & Loving*, May 24, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Mercury Reporter, "Doughty fighter, says Mayor", *The Natal Mercury*, July 7, 1964.

The furniture and garment union executives asked Harriet if she would take Jimmy's place as secretary of both unions. She accepted, but on condition of a trial period for a year. She explained later that she was concerned they might have been motivated to make the offer more by pity than by their faith in her ability, or because "they felt they should do so for Jimmy's sake".<sup>12</sup> Harriet was not asked to stand down, and her accomplishment in negotiating agreements coupled with an increasingly public profile in Durban and at TUCSA conferences over the next decade were testament to her growing confidence and success as leader of the two unions.

In "stepping into her husband's shoes", Harriet followed in a long tradition of women who have assumed leadership positions either when their husbands, or in some cases fathers or brothers, died or were imprisoned. While much of the literature on the topic is related to political leadership, some broad parallels can be drawn.<sup>13</sup> This is particularly so in the investment, both by the widow and the relevant institution, of the maintenance of the legacy of the late male leader. Theorising "the widow effect" with regard to the US Congress, Solowiej and Brunell point out that a widow is seen as an 'extension' of her husband; indeed, some widows were instated on the basis of the perceived influence of 'name recognition' alone.<sup>14</sup> An interesting comment in a women's magazine feature which described Harriet's "triumph over widowhood" is worth quoting, specifically with reference to comments about the 'incorporated wife' in the preceding chapter:

Always eager to believe that everything happens for some purpose, she would be the first to admit that being a widow has enabled her to give more of herself to the cause for which she works. And, because the job she has was once part of Jimmy's life, she has in a sense remained married to him.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, "She stepped into her husband's shoes", *Living & Loving*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Lisa Solowiej and Thomas L. Brunell, "The Entrance of Women to the U.S. Congress: The Widow Effect", *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 56, No. 3 (2003) 283-292, Diane D. Kincaid, "Over His Dead Body: A Positive Perspective on Widows in the U. S. Congress" *The Western Political Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 1 (1978) 96-104, Linda K. Richter, "Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (1990-1991) 524-540.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Solowiej and Thomas L. Brunell. "The Widow Effect", *Political Research Quarterly*.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, "She stepped into her husband's shoes", *Living & Loving*.

In this and subsequent chapters I elaborate an argument already introduced in Chapter Two: that Harriet initiated and drove important breaks with past practices of the GWIU.

### **Harriet's relationship with TUCSA trade unionists**

An important and early break with the GWIU's past history was the largely untroubled working relationship Harriet forged with the GWU (SA) and the Cape union. During Jimmy's period of leadership, the unions had cooperated by sharing information on wage negotiations, protesting the Industrial Conciliation Act, job reservation in the industry as well as the escalating number of factories in unregulated 'border' areas. This despite, as Jimmy Bolton put it, the disagreements over policy that the Transvaal and Natal unions had had in the past.<sup>16</sup> Harriet was able to consolidate this cooperation into an easy and fraternal working relationship. The formation of the Garment Workers Consultative Committee (GWCC) in 1968 made official the links established between the three unions over a decade earlier.<sup>17</sup> Considered alongside the National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDW), the garment and textile unions - generally made up of large numbers of low paid, unskilled black women workers - constituted a more progressive grouping within TUCSA. While never seeming to have the strength to sway TUCSA opinion over policy, as the craft unions successfully did, they became a significant force towards the end of the 1960s due to their numbers. However, this was generally only spelt out by the discussions at TUCSA conferences and the number, and nature, of resolutions put forward by these unions. Harriet certainly felt that the TUCSA leadership, as members of a 'labour aristocracy', were far removed from the everyday reality of garment and textile workers:

TUCSA people like Arthur Grobbelaar and ... [Tommy] Murray ... Arthur in particular ... I think he'd been a boilermaker or something but, he was a white collar type you know he had risen up, and they had *no* idea ... what ordinary labouring workers' conditions were or how they managed you know they, they just did not know ... and people like Arthur and so on, I mean they still belonged to that old school, you remember that, in the 1924 [1922] was it strikes of the

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<sup>16</sup> Garment Workers Industrial Union, Garment Workers Industrial Union Silver Jubilee Brochure, (GWIU, Durban, 1959), Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection.

<sup>17</sup> At their March 1973 meeting it was resolved to change the name to the Textile and Garment Workers Consultative Committee to officially include the TWIU (SA).

mine workers? The white workers, it was anti-black ... well I feel they'd only progressed a short step from there. They were just one generation further along ... you know Arthur was like that ... he was basically a very nice man and I got on quite well with him, but we did not see eye to eye about ordinary workers, and about our methods ...<sup>18</sup>

That Anna Scheepers shared Harriet's sentiment is borne out in their correspondence. As Anna wrote to Harriet a few years later (1972) about the lack of action on TUCSA's part over the issue of inadequate housing for black workers: "... these people are so far divorced from the real life of the worker, apart from the highly paid artisan."<sup>19</sup>

In 1966, Harriet was voted on to the TUCSA executive, a clear indication that in the two years since Jimmy's death, she had succeeded in establishing herself as a respected and reliable member of the labour movement. The correspondence between Harriet and Anna, and to a lesser extent Johanna Cornelius, also suggests the development of a relatively close and supportive professional relationship and friendship. Official correspondence between the women included advice and assistance over union matters, accompanied by baking recipes, tips for carpet cleaning and references to help with "personal problems". In Anna and Johanna, Harriet had 'outspoken' comrades who, along with other women leaders such as Dulcie Hartwell and Hester Cornelius, had long held their own in the male-dominated TLC and, later, TUCSA. Correspondence between Harriet and TUCSA secretary Arthur Grobbelaar also suggests that for at least the first few years that Harriet held a position on the TUCSA executive committee, they too had a good working relationship. This chapter will chart how Harriet's relationship with TUCSA leadership evolved. As tensions escalated within TUCSA over the issue of African workers in the early 1970s, so Harriet's relationship with Grobbelaar began to sour.

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<sup>18</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Scheepers to Harriet Bolton, May 2, 1972, Garment Workers Union Records, Clothing Industry, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP), AH 1092. Cba 1.2, File 6.

## Indian women workers, Durban's clothing industry and the GWIU

As already indicated, by the time Harriet was instated as general secretary for the GWIU, the demographics of the union had begun to shift. Indian women started to enter the industry in significant numbers from 1960 while the number of Indian men employed in clothing factories, until then in the majority, started to decline. In 1965, membership of the GWIU was made up of 6648 male workers and 6715 female workers. By 1967 this had grown to 7582 female workers, while the number of males dropped to 6420. Indian workers made up just over 79% of workers in the industry.<sup>20</sup> Historians have long noted the particularly repressive familial strictures within which South African Indian women lived. Cheryl Walker, for example, states that Indian women were among “the most subjected group of women in South Africa”. She put this down largely to religious norms which rooted deeply “an extreme form of submission and passivity among women”.<sup>21</sup> Walker sees such social pressures as instrumental in dictating that few Indian women worked outside of the home or family-run business up until at least the 1960s. Freund, however, argues that the lack of Indian working class women in waged employment was directly related to strategies of family survival and accumulation in which women's labour was an integral part.<sup>22</sup> Often living in large extended family networks on the periphery of the city, relatively independent of the city's controls, Indian families were able to supplement their income through fishing and growing food. From the Twentieth Century, working class Natal Indian women toiled at a host of activities ‘within’ the family. While framed as an extension of the ‘domestic’ Freund emphasises that their work was market related and essential to the economic survival of the family. Market gardening, for instance, was ubiquitous. Indian women who lived more centrally were

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal) Application for Membership’, TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, AB4.2.41.

<sup>21</sup> Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1991), 106.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Freund, “Indian women and the changing character of the working class Indian household in Natal, 1860 -1990” *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol 17, Issue 3 (1991) and Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 80.



generally involved in a number of money generating activities loosely defined as ‘casual labour’; as above associated with the domestic, but essential for family survival.<sup>23</sup>

Freund sees Indian women’s entrance into waged labour as mostly to do with the effects of the relocation of Indians from the mid-1950s to outlying townships. Maintaining agricultural production, or easy access to the city and the associated casual labour options, became more difficult. Constrained living spaces also meant the break-up of the extended family unit in favour of a more nuclear arrangement. With rent and services to pay, women’s wages became indispensable. Freund does acknowledge that slowly improving levels of education and proficiency in English aided the trend towards Indian women taking up waged work, but argues that generally it was “a family strategy governed by fathers and husbands, rather than by the women themselves”.<sup>24</sup> Expanding on this, he also states that the link between “militancy, independence and employment” should be complicated. In the case of Natal Indian women, Freund argues that “very often women workers are not easily able to turn their power to earn wages into any substantially different sense of themselves in the world.”<sup>25</sup>

Fatima Meer’s in-depth survey of nearly 1 000 African, coloured and Indian women workers in the Durban and Pinetown region, while conducted twenty years on from Freund’s period, comes to much the same conclusion: “According to the results of the Durban study, the thesis that the work situation liberates and conscientises women and integrates them into the fraternity of class seems doubtful.”<sup>26</sup> Meer instead emphasises the patriarchal controls that bound women workers to home and family and their identification with this as their ‘proper’ role. Some of her findings are borne out by oral evidence from Margaret Rajbally, a shop-stewardess who worked in a Durban clothing factory for twenty years before joining the GWIU as an organiser:

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<sup>23</sup> Bill Freund, “Indian women and the changing character of the working class Indian household in Natal, 1860 -1990” *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol 17, Issue 3 (1991).

<sup>24</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Fatima Meer et al, *Black, Woman, Worker*, (Madiba Publishers for The Institute for Black Research: Durban, 1990) 41.

at that time (1960s) ... our parents ... mothers were in the industry ... they would not think about a union. Even if you went to them and said look, you have a union you must take advantage of the union, you have a problem bring it to the union and we'll do this and that for you. We'll take up your grievance, but they would not. They feared losing their jobs and they always said that if we bring complaints to you we might be victimised, we might be dismissed etc. ... in those days you just cannot make the workers talk, they will not talk, no matter what you go and say. They worshipped their employers and they also felt that no, we will do anything for our boss because he has given us a job and we're getting paid on a Friday.<sup>27</sup>

There are two important points to make at this juncture. The first is that implicit in both Freund and Meer's analysis is an acceptance that trade unions are the "appropriate means of expressing class power and consciousness".<sup>28</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate this matter in much more depth, I think it is important to indicate here that an acceptance of this both ignores other forms of association around the family and endorses the view of the domestic as essentially 'private', and hence non-political. Cheryl Walker, for example, through her discussion of the politics of the Federation of South African Women rejects the tendency to characterise women's politics constructed around the family as inherently conservative:

Women invest in motherhood (and the family) and this needs to be recognised and understood – understood not simply as the product of their socialisation or patriarchal ideology but as something mediated by their own experience of this role.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of asking why so few women get involved with trade unions, Iris Berger finds it more useful to ask why trade unions are so irrelevant to "much of women's lives". She makes the point that typical labour histories portray class and trade unions in terms of the male experience and this becomes the accepted representation of 'the working class'. Instead of suggesting that women are "remiss" because of their inconsistency when it comes to trade unions, she argues that often unions are "too narrowly conceived around

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret Rajbally, interviewed by Jean Fairbairn, May 14, 1990. Killie Campbell Collections, SACTWU History Project.

<sup>28</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992) 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, xxi – xxii.

particular male-defined economic and political issues to adequately reflect women's concerns.<sup>30</sup>

The second point is what do we then make of the instances where Durban Indian women *did*, for example, take up wage demands 'militantly' and seem to identify with a class-based solidarity? For example, David Hemson stresses that it was Indian women who led the drive for recognition at Smith and Nephew in 1974, celebrated as the first recognition agreement signed between a 'non-racial' unregistered union, and management. Again, an Indian woman headed up the organisation of workers at Prilla Mills in Pietermaritzburg in 1973. This was in the face of huge, and sometimes violent, pressure from management. Accounting for well over half of the 26 000 strong GWIU workforce, Indian women supported the 1971 Currie's Fountain strike, and later 37 women Indian workers at a garment factory were fired after a walk-out in support of their shop steward (the details of this will be discussed in more depth over the course of this chapter).

For Berger the question of what made the difference in cases where trade unions were successful in recruiting women, and in instances where women aggressively took the initiative, has particular resonance for South Africa. As she points out, there are a number of cases where women are credited with behaving more fearlessly than men. Drawing on insights that the cultural approach to women's history allows, Berger suggests that unions which self-consciously organised around the particular concerns of women and their relationships with each-other, were the most successful in this respect.<sup>31</sup> The early years of the GWU, and the FCWU can be seen as important unions in this tradition. Scarce union records make it difficult to make the same argument for the GWIU, but certainly despite its track-record as a 'welfare union', it did not seem to mobilise women on the same issues that the FCWU or its counterpart in Johannesburg did. With such a large female membership, however, the GWIU could hardly afford to ignore problems particular to women workers. In this regard, issues such as overtime, transport and childcare became vital lobbying points when negotiating agreements. For her part,

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<sup>30</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*.

Harriet maintained in retrospect that organising and mobilising women clothing workers was “easier” than men:

I think it was easier to organise women, actually. Because you know they were more used to dealing with hardship I think, and also they weren't always given a voice ... and there [in the union] they were. They were more sensible about you know *why* we did things ... and quicker to see what was to their benefit, I think and especially if you were women organisers ...<sup>32</sup>

In a 1989 interview with Iris Berger, Harriet commented particularly on how attitudes towards the union were often dictated by generation difference between Indian women, a point which shop steward Margaret Rajbally (quoted above) also made:

The women have always been very active and, as shop stewardesses, mainly coloured women and young Indian girls. ... The coloured women were the most marvellous trade unionists, quite fearless, and quick to understand the principles of it, as were the African women when they came in. The older Indian women were more diplomatic and tactful and a bit more placid. They would stand by you, but they would be afraid.<sup>33</sup>

While the wage gap between black and white workers in South African industry has long been noted and studied at length, less explored is the wage gap between male and female workers. TUCSA's mantra “the rate for the job” made reference to an equal rate of pay for Indian, coloured, white and, theoretically, African *male* workers doing the same job. That women got paid less for the same work seemed to be unquestioned. The GWIU's agreement had therefore set the ‘rate for the job’, but had different wage scales for women and men doing the same job. Harriet began taking this issue up seriously from the early 1970s. At this stage, women workers made up around one third of workers in textile factories nationally while Indian women workers formed 75 percent of the 25 000 garment workers.<sup>34</sup> With a majority female workforce in the garment industry, one would have thought the issue would have been tabled earlier by the GWCC. The first time it was brought up, however, was during a meeting in 1973, where Harriet suggested

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<sup>32</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*, 287.

<sup>34</sup> Woman Reporter, “Men's work, but not pay”, *The Natal Mercury*, April 20, 1973. 75 percent of the workforce translates to 19 500 out of 26 000 workers.

eliminating the different wage rates for men and women doing the same work. She added that during the Natal union's latest negotiations, they had brought the wages of males and females, in the categories of cutters and Grade II employees, on a par.<sup>35</sup> Johanna Cornelius, who was in the chair, remarked defensively that the Natal union was fortunate to have so few categories in its agreement, as this made it much easier to negotiate the rate for the job. However, she concurred that efforts should be made to stop the practice of paying lower wages to women workers.

A few weeks later, Harriet again brought up the issue of pay disparities between men and women. Speaking at a meeting of the Durban branch of the National Council of Women, she was frank in admitting that unions had supported "the delusion of employers that women are inferior workers and secondary earners" but said research indicated that many women were the sole breadwinners:<sup>36</sup>

Women are afraid to ask for more money for fear of being replaced ... They are regarded by employers as nuisances, for they ask for time off to see to their children (although the time is unpaid), and months off to have babies ... statistics show many women are the sole supporters of their families and should earn the wages of breadwinners. They no longer work for 'extra' money but work out of necessity.<sup>37</sup>

While acknowledging the double, and sometimes triple, burden of women workers, and their right to equal pay, Harriet certainly did not regard herself as a feminist, or more accurately in the language of the time, as a proponent of 'Women's Lib'. In recent interviews as well as newspaper reports and interviews from 40 years ago Harriet did not speak self-consciously of her role as a woman, unless asked specifically to reflect on it:<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers' Unions' Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg, March 6, 1973. Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, Garment Workers Unions' Coordinating Committee, Folder 66.

<sup>36</sup> Woman Reporter, "Men's work, but not pay", *The Natal Mercury*, April 20, 1973.

<sup>37</sup> Woman Reporter, "Men's work, but not pay", *The Natal Mercury*, April 20, 1973.

<sup>38</sup> Cheryl Walker has challenged historians to ask 'feminist' questions of their material, regardless of whether the women or women's organisations under scrutiny identified themselves and their actions thus. This, she argues, is not the same as imposing answers "in the sense of insisting on a feminist consciousness where there is not one." Rather, an investigation which is sensitive to gender and takes seriously women's history and their "understandings of their roles and priorities" will aid us to better understand women's experiences historically. Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, xxiv.

Asked whether she considered herself at a disadvantage being a woman in the traditionally male union world, she replied with characteristic candour that she'd never really thought about it and went on to say: "I would say it is an advantage. Women are more resilient, more persistent and longer lasting. After all, negotiating is really a kind of nagging and aren't we women good at that?"<sup>39</sup>

Having a career doesn't make me a career woman ... I think all this talk about liberating women is a lot of nonsense. A woman is just as free as she feels, whether she is working at home or has a career. Freedom comes from within, and we create our own prisons in our minds.<sup>40</sup>

It is tempting to interpret many of Harriet's statements, and the way in which she related her stories during interviews, as testimony of her confrontation with patriarchal structures and her assertion of herself as an independent woman – as a feminist. As shown by her above comments, however, such a description would not necessarily conform strongly with her own idea of herself as a working woman, a mother or a bread winner.<sup>41</sup>

### **Harriet Bolton's 'public' figure and the GWIU**

Tracing Harriet's career through the press, and particularly the Durban press, in which by the early 1970s she had become a 'household name', has proved a valuable exercise. At times, Harriet used newspapers to meet her own ends. She also attracted prolific coverage. Generally lauded by the press as independent, sassy and outspoken, articles often described her physically, for example: "a petite dark haired dynamo", in relation to her family "mother of six and 30 000" or, most regularly, as Jimmy Bolton's widow, continuing the work he had started, and his legacy. I would argue that Harriet was deeply invested in the latter association. From 1973 her public profile grew hugely, but a perfunctory 1966 *Natal Mercury* report on Durban parliament's debating society was the first sign of the increasingly vocal public figure that was to come. At the debate, Harriet

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<sup>39</sup> Daily News Reporter, *Daily News*, March 22, 1972, Harriet Bolton's Personal Collection.

<sup>40</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, "She stepped into her husband's shoes", *Living & Loving*, May 24, 1972.

<sup>41</sup> Folklore historian Katherine Borland has highlighted the conundrum posed by exactly this; interpreting an informant's narrative in ways which may differ from the narrator's intention. She has stressed the importance of a sense of responsibility to "our living sources." Katherine Borland, "That's not what I said' Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research" in *the Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 329.

had argued in favour of changing labour legislation to recognise African unions under the Industrial Conciliation Act:

It is evident that a radical change has come about – the emergence as an Industrial Worker of the African ... Such a change calls for change of the legislation, not half-hearted paternal supervision as with the Bantu labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, but a recognition of the emergence of a whole class of workers as wage earners doing jobs which Job Reservation has not been able to keep ‘white’ ...<sup>42</sup>

Harriet sent the transcript of her presentation and a newspaper clipping to Arthur Grobbelaar, along with a note, which clearly demonstrated their affable relationship at the time:

I thought that you and Steve (Scheepers) and Tom Murray might be interested in the enclosed seeing that so many points used were thoughts pinched from the three of you, or should I say learned from you three ... I was warned that the ... Durban Parliament never manage to carry a ‘liberal’ motion so I should not hope but in spite of this we did because the others were demolished by their lack of knowledge of the legislation.<sup>43</sup>

Despite Harriet’s claim that her ideas were informed by those of TUCSA leaders, I would argue that her opinions, specifically on the issue of trade union rights for African workers, were already presented in terms less pragmatic than the official TUCSA line. This would also be borne out by the next two agreements which Harriet negotiated for garment workers. Discussed in more detail below, the negotiations were marked by a more uncompromising approach to employers than previously had been the case. This also differed from the majority of TUCSA affiliated unions, with their ideally conciliatory relationship with employers. However, Harriet’s endorsement of TUCSA policy was clearly spelt out in the GWIU’s annual report for 1967/68:

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<sup>42</sup> Letter to Arthur Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, n/d. TUCSA Records, Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), HP, ‘Correspondence with Secretaries’, AH1426, AB4.2.41 and Staff Reporter, “Give Bantu Own Trade Unions Plea”, *The Natal Mercury*, September 20, 1966.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to Arthur Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, n/d. TUCSA Records, Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), HP, AH1426, AB4.2.41.

TUCSA does an extremely efficient job as the mouthpiece of the workers, and the good public relations and promotion work done by the Officials at Head Office have brought the questions affecting workers to the ears of our Government Officialdom.<sup>44</sup>

Harriet concluded her first wage agreement for the industry in her capacity as secretary of the GWIU in 1967. *The Leader* newspaper reported on a mass meeting of clothing workers held at the Currie's Fountain sports ground in late April. In pouring rain on a Saturday morning, around eight-thousand members of the GWIU converged on the stadium to give their mandate on the two percent wage increases on offer from employers. According to an article in *The Leader*, Harriet delivered a "rousing" speech:

"Ninety percent of workers here," she claimed "were warned to come to work this morning. Employers will now see how strong you are" ... If talks with employers proved unsatisfactory workers had no alternative but to strike.<sup>45</sup>

However the union did not have to resort to strike action. Negotiations were concluded soon after this meeting. In an interview with David Hemson seven years on, Harriet charted the lead-up to the GWIU's mass strike meeting at Currie's Fountain in 1971, to the wage negotiations and meeting in 1967. She recalled that she wasn't satisfied with the agreement that the union finally reached with employers:

I didn't feel I had done as well as I could. The workers were happy, the committee were *very* happy, because I was inexperienced and they kind of felt they had to take a larger share of the responsibility than they had to take before. They were all mutually patting each other on the back, but I was unhappy. I didn't feel that we'd had enough contact with the workers.<sup>46</sup>

This sense of dissatisfaction was conveyed in a letter to Anna Scheepers soon after the agreement was concluded. "... I was not satisfied but we could not squeeze out another cent ... we know how hard we tried, but there were a number of factors against us and

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<sup>44</sup> Letter to Arthur Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, n/d. TUCSA Records, Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), HP, AH1426, AB4.2.41.

<sup>45</sup> Leader Reporter, "More Pay Demands to Employers: Garment Workers Talk of Strike Action", *The Leader*, May 5, 1967.

<sup>46</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.



you know how employers use every point.”<sup>47</sup> The distinctiveness of the 1967 meeting is attested to in the GWIU’s annual 1967/1968 report where the decision to call the meeting was described as a “momentous” occasion in the union’s history. This was qualified by the sobering comment: “The increases obtained are not magnificent but they were hard earned, and are a step in the right direction.”<sup>48</sup> Harriet’s memories of the late 1960s, as well as union records from the time, suggest that she self-consciously set out to encourage greater worker participation in the GWIU. Over the next three years, Harriet and the executive attempted to instate more democracy into union structures and improve contact with workers. Their sights were set firmly on winning significant increases during the next round of negotiations. Harriet recalled that the union put in place a week-long election process for shop stewards, to guarantee that the elections in factories were as thought-out and democratic as possible. The GWIU also initiated intensive shop steward training courses. Previously, the union had held quarterly general meetings. The constitution was now altered to have two general union meetings a year and general shop steward meetings every three months. Shop stewards were also now called to special meetings if the need arose.<sup>49</sup> Harriet added that new emphasis was also put on factory meetings:

If there was any trouble ... we got the entire factory in, with the organizers and myself, and then reported to the committee and if it was serious then we would invite the chairman as well ... it was a very good tactic, that ... We got to find out a tremendous lot ... we got a lot of feedback about inspectors, industrial council staff, as well as conditions in factories, organisers and so on, Labour Department officials – we heard some interesting stories about them, when they were called to factories and went off with little presents of shirts and things – all this we learned from those Saturday morning or Tuesday or Wednesday evening factory meetings. And it was all kind of filed away and used, and if you kept your feet on the ground and your ears open, it was all things which helped you with organising.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Letter to Anna Scheepers from Harriet Bolton, May 12, 1967. Garment Workers’ Union Records, HP, Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal) Correspondence and Papers, 1963 – 1968, Cba 1.2, File 5.

<sup>48</sup> GWIU Annual Report 1966/7, June 1967, Garment Workers Industrial Union, Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, Folder 63.

<sup>49</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974. Also see ‘Amendment to Constitution 1966/67’, GWIU, June 1967, Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, Folder 63.

<sup>50</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

Interestingly, Harriet maintained that she learnt the importance of the role of shop stewards through observing the emphasis that Communist Party aligned trade unionists placed on shop steward elections during the turbulent 1940s and 1950s:

I noticed then the importance the Communist movement placed on getting their men in as shop stewards. I remembered that as a good lesson; I think it is *terribly* important. Your shop stewards: it's better to have a strong shop steward movement than it is to have a strong committee. It's actually your life-line and you ought to motivate your shop stewards. You ought to handle every election with great *care*.<sup>51</sup>

Some perspective on how Harriet's leadership of the union differed from Jimmy's is illustrated in a publication sent to workers in 1963, entitled "A Call to Members". Negotiations were underway for what would be Jimmy's last agreement as the head of the union. The leaflet pleaded with members not to embark on a go-slow, as negotiations were at a "delicate stage". They were also requested not to stop overtime and to obey what the union, which was clearly not working from a mandate from the workers, deemed the correct course of action: "an appeal is made to our members not to take drastic action but to follow the policy determined by the Union."<sup>52</sup> The union was also at the time having problems establishing contact with workers:

the vast majority of our members do not, for various reasons, attend our Quarterly General Meetings with the result that, except for the contact established between the Organisers, or through the Shop Stewards or Shop Committees, many members are not fully aware of what is actually happening with regard to their Union ...<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>52</sup> Garment Workers' Industrial Union, "A Call to Members", November, 1963. Garment Union Worker Records, HP, Clothing Industry, Garment Workers Industrial Union, (Natal), Correspondence and Papers, 1963 – 1968, AH 1092, Cba 1.2, File 5.

<sup>53</sup> Garment Workers' Industrial Union, "A Call to Members", November, 1963. Garment Union Worker Records, HP, Clothing Industry, Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal), Correspondence and Papers, 1963 – 1968, HP, AH 1092, Cba 1.2, File 5.

## **“Busiest woman in Durban?” Harriet Bolton’s many roles**

Despite the long hours that her position as head of both the furniture and garment unions required of her, Harriet continued her active membership of welfare organisations. A 1968 newspaper article, aptly titled “Busiest woman in Durban?” listed her involvement in a number of trade-union related committees. On top of this, she was also chairman of a fund-raising committee for a local child welfare organisation, as well as the secretary of the regional Housewives’ League. By this stage, only two of Harriet’s six children were living at home full-time. She sent her four eldest children to boarding school a year after Jimmy’s death, reasoning that “they would gain more from boarding school than she would be able to give them at home.”<sup>54</sup> She said she missed them terribly, but tried to spend as much time with them as she could when they were at home on school holidays. Harriet’s daughter Pat recalled that after Jimmy died, the union offered to set up a fund to pay their education fees. Harriet, however, “refused to take anything, and instead the monies that would have been used were used to establish a scholarship which was for union members’ children.”<sup>55</sup> Harriet’s mother – who was by this time also widowed and lived with Harriet – assisted her with domestic duties and care for her two youngest children, and in Harriet’s words was “a tremendous help”.<sup>56</sup> Having her mother at home also brought into sharp relief their political differences, some of which Harriet felt were mostly to do with generation. Harriet remembered with humour how she negotiated this:

When my mother lived with me before she died, I had people of other colours to lunch with me ... my mother’s eyes were out on stalks, but she soon adapted quite well ... because I had Butch [Shonilal], and Violet [Padayachee] often came, and other people we were on committees with came to lunch, or if I had some ‘do’. Of course what the hell the government would have thought! I loved it when they came round to ask us how we were going to vote ... you know they’d come to one door ‘cause I had two, it was a long house. They’d knock on the one door and they’d probably get me and say “how was I going to vote?” and I’d say “well for the” it was the forerunner of the Democratic Party you know, and then go and knock on the other door. My mother would answer, or she’d be sitting out on the

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<sup>54</sup> Cynthia Bretemfel, She stepped into her husband’s shoes, *Living & Loving*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Patricia Brickhill, e-mail message to author, 07 June, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> “Busiest woman in Durban?”, newspaper article, undated, Harriet Bolton’s personal collection.

veranda, and she'd be voting for the Nationalists! Not that she knew what they were about, but she said "you don't vote against the person who's in".<sup>57</sup>

Harriet's position as union secretary, and for a period as the chair of the Industrial Council for Clothing, also required that she be in consistent contact with employers and their factory managers through the day-to-day business of running the Industrial Council. As union secretary, she was also involved in negotiations with employers both on the individual factory level and, every four years, negotiating a new agreement for workers through the Industrial Council. In her work, Harriet navigated two 'worlds'; that of the poor, black disenfranchised woman worker, and that of the mostly white, male capitalist. As I have already argued, while obviously identifying with the workers whom he represented, Jimmy Bolton's 'social capital' as a member of a white, male, British working class elite would have eased his dealings with employers, as well as government officials. Although operating as a woman in a 'man's world' would have created challenges for Harriet, her existence in a "white", essentially middle-class, Durban would also have mediated not only her dealings with employers, but also with government bureaucrats and police. This was a point which Harriet acknowledged in our interviews. We shall now turn to a discussion of the 'world' of Durban's clothing factory employers.

### **"Bosses" in Durban's clothing industry**

In the story of South Africa's textile and garment industry, the figure of Phillip Frame looms large. Frame immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania in 1925 and set up his first factory three years after this in Durban. At the height of his powers, he employed over 30 000 workers throughout South and Southern Africa, although most of his factories were centred in Durban.<sup>58</sup> Speaking about an earlier period in South Africa's manufacturing history, Belinda Bozzoli notes that the petit-bourgeoisie or artisan manufacturing class often started off with modest operations and worked, and often slept,

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<sup>57</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>58</sup> James (Paddy) Carol McDowell, "A History of the South African Textile Industry. The Pioneering Phase, 1820-1948" (Master of Commerce, University of Natal, 2000)

in their factories themselves while trying to get their businesses off the ground.<sup>59</sup> This was certainly true of Frame, ‘a self-made man’, as well as a number of other capitalists, several of them also from Eastern Europe, who were attracted by the relatively low start-up costs and protective tariffs offered in the clothing and textile industries. Harriet remembered that employers with such a background were often tougher on their labour: “they said ‘we came up the hard way they must do too’”.<sup>60</sup>

Frame has often been singled out as a particularly harsh and uncompromising employer, “autocratic and abrasive” in his dealings with labour, trade unionists and shareholders alike.<sup>61</sup> Following the 1973 strikes, his operation in particular came under the scrutiny of South Africa’s press. Frame factories generally paid wages that were around 20 percent lower than the norm, and he was a great abuser of migrant African labour contracted from the Transkei. He was also a keen proponent of decentralising industry and built factories in so-called “border areas” to avoid the reach of trade union agreements.<sup>62</sup> However, the point should be made that Frame was certainly not the only unscrupulous employer. Conditions and wages at many Durban clothing and textile factories were often much the same, or only marginally better, than they were at Frame’s. For example, Harriet remembered a family-run factory whose owner locked workers in, timed them on toilet breaks and barred Industrial Council inspectors from their premises.<sup>63</sup>

Most employers could rely on a certain degree of cooperation and protection from the state when disputes with labour arose. This came in a number of forms. Police were generally called at the first hint of a strike, but more importantly Labour Department officials worked in favour of employers. Harriet claimed that the Department was, in fact, full of security police agents working undercover.<sup>64</sup> Factory inspectors, employed by the

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<sup>59</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, “The Origins, Development and Ideology of Local Manufacturing in South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1975): 194-214.

<sup>60</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, November 7, 2006.

<sup>61</sup> James McDowell. “A History of the South African Textile Industry”, 130.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Maylam, “The Struggle for Space in Twentieth-Century Durban” in *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*, ed. Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996)

<sup>63</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June, 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987) 89.

Industrial Council and charged with ensuring employers complied with the legal minimums, also often turned a blind eye in favour of employers. Indeed, even union representatives were not immune to bribes from employers. David Hemson remembered that Harriet sometimes had to take GWIU officials to task for accepting invitations to tea, as well as gifts, from employers when they were out on factory visits.<sup>65</sup>

The vast majority of capitalists in the clothing industry were white. But thanks to the openings that the boom years from the 1930s provided, Indian tailors and merchants began to grow their small businesses into larger industrial concerns. In 1948, ten Indian manufacturers employed around 600 workers. A decade later this had grown to 32 factories employing around 1 500 workers. The 1960s saw more significant expansion: by 1968, a total of 82 Indian owned factories employed over 6 000 workers.<sup>66</sup> Freund suggests that Indian capitalists regarded their relationship with their majority Indian workforce as one bounded by paternalism. For example, “small favours that acknowledged common membership in a racially defined community” were often granted.<sup>67</sup> Despite this, he notes that their more precarious circumstances often forced Indian bosses to cut costs, and that wages were generally lower at these factories – leading to the perception that ““working for an Indian boss was hardly a boon.””<sup>68</sup> Harriet commented on this issue at length when interviewed by David Hemson in 1974:

... you can't generalise, naturally there are always exceptions everywhere ... but I mean there's absolutely no evidence to prove that Indian employers treat Indian workers better. There's quite a lot of evidence to prove that they're far stricter on them. They're not fooled as easily. You can go to ... which I know has happened ... you can go to a white employer and say, um, somebody in my family's died and I want to go off to the funeral, and get away with it. I know, my members have. But you can't do it to an Indian employer, because they know each other and they know who's died and they know who your relatives are. Or else their foreman does; somebody knows. And they want to know, too. I always remember the classic case of that chap who lost his job ... a youngster ... and came in, and I

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<sup>65</sup> David Hemson, “The 1973 Natal Strike Wave – how we rebuilt the unions”, Congress Militant Paper of the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC, December, 1990. Gerhard Maré papers, Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Natal Room Collection, PC 126.

<sup>66</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 78

<sup>67</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 80

<sup>68</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 80.

said to him ‘look, you’ve got to start work, there’s plenty of work; go down to’ ... I think it was Queensgate, at the time ... I said ‘there’s two jobs down the road; they’re both crying for workers, go down there’. And he said to me ‘Queensgate? Don’t send me to no ‘charra’ factories’. And I said to him ‘you’re a ‘charra’ yourself’, and he said ‘... I’m not working for them; I’d rather draw unemployment pay and wait ‘til I get a job’. A lot of my members said that. Not that white employers were angels at all. They were absolute swines, many of them, but there was a feeling among Indian workers that Indian employers were no kinder than anyone else. If they had to choose, nine out of ten members, if they had to choose between a white factory and an Indian factory, would choose the white factory; I feel, with very little justification, really, but it *is* so.<sup>69</sup>

Much was made of the good understanding between the Industrial Council and the union in GWIU annual reports and commemorative brochures. However, Harriet commented wryly in a newspaper report that this relationship tended to sour dramatically during the period that their agreements were negotiated.<sup>70</sup> In interviews, Harriet commented that some employers had “consciences”; she felt this was particularly true of a younger generation of industrialists who took over the family run business. For instance, she recalled that the son of one factory owner would leak information to her during wage negotiations: “he was a bad employer, his son used to come to me and say ‘I heard them talking, you just push them, they can go higher’, you know (laughs)”.<sup>71</sup> The “official” attitude of the union in brochures and some press reports, also read by employers, was also obviously not always what union officials and Harriet felt:

I think employers as a class ... my own opinion, employers as a class I tar them all with the same brush; I don’t care what colour they are. They sift out about evenly into unscrupulous and revolting (chuckles). A few live with a bit of a guilty conscience here and there, that makes them a little bit better. There are no angels, I don’t think.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>70</sup> “Busiest woman in Durban”, newspaper article, undated, Harriet Bolton’s personal collection.

<sup>71</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June, 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

## **“How Harriet sewed up the Rag trade”: an account of the 1971 strike at Currie’s Fountain**

Just how sour the relationship between the union and employers could become is illustrated through their acrimonious negotiations for a new agreement, which culminated in a mass strike meeting at Currie’s Fountain in 1971. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1971, more than 24 000 workers walked out of clothing factories in Natal and demanded a living wage, effectively halting industry for the day. In doing so, they participated in the first regional industry-wide strike since the GWIU’s turbulent formative years in the 1930s. Employers, powerless to resort to disciplinary action in the face of the numbers involved, quickly acquiesced to the workers’ demands of a 20 percent increase in wages. Harriet, meanwhile, was dubbed “the heroine of the workers” in Natal’s press.<sup>73</sup>

When the union initiated the agreement negotiation process with employers in 1970, wages for garment workers in Natal were well below those set in the Transvaal. As already discussed, this phenomenon dated back to at least the 1930s. The regional structure of Industrial Councils and later the intensive investment in factories in ‘border’ areas, which were not covered by the agreement, meant employers in Natal could get away with lower rates of pay. In an interview with David Hemson in 1974, in which Harriet reflected on the 1971 strike in detail, she recalled that the union no longer wanted to be held responsible for pulling the entire industry’s wages down:

I mean, Johannesburg, and Cape Town would say to us – whether it was truthfully or not – but they would say to us ‘our employers use you as an example for why our wages shouldn’t go any higher, because they can’t compete with your employers’. That’s all we needed ... I also wanted to put to the test my theories that if you have a strong shop stewards’ team and you had prepared the ground, that you could in fact meet the employers head-on and your, your sheer numbers backing you would make you win the day. And in fact the employers were absolutely adamant that they were going to give quite a small increase.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Post Reporter, “How Harriet Sewed up the Rag Trade”, *Golden City Post*, undated, Harriet Bolton’s Personal Collection.. *The Leader, The Sunday Tribune*.

<sup>74</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.



She recalled that the atmosphere in South Africa during this period was “tense”. Harriet was perhaps referring to the anti-Republic protests planned for 1971, which received intensive coverage in *The Leader*. However, several other factors might have contributed to this “atmosphere”. In an article on the detention by the Special Branch of seven people in February, *The Leader* commented: “Within recent weeks there has been growing police activity and apart from the detentions, a number of persons have been questioned.”<sup>75</sup> Harriet said the union’s negotiating committee were pushing for a peaceful bargaining process. Harriet, however, maintained that she “wanted a test”:

It was a highly sort of emotional time in South Africa. There’d been a lot of talk about patriotism and loyalty and agitators ... feeling was running quite high, and Special Branch were fairly active, and people were generally afraid to be too outspoken ...<sup>76</sup>

Harriet also asserted that, largely because of the increasing number of African workers getting work in garment factories at around this time, the state had begun to perceive the clothing industry as a possible “security risk”. She said the Department of Labour felt the union was “out of hand and getting too strong and above ourselves.”<sup>77</sup> She said this was also related to the number of African workers who were entering the clothing industry at this time, and the GWIU’s determination to give them some representation:

... there were a fair number of Africans drifting into the industry then, we had invited elected representatives for Africans working in delivery and where they were part of the machine staff, they participated in our shop steward elections, and we had invited them to all our general meetings, all of this with strong disapproval from the Labour Department, the employers and so forth, but they didn’t say anything about it, they *knew* about it. This sort of made us ... bear watching.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Leader Reporter, “Detainees: Families face hardship”, *The Leader*, February 26, 1971. Notwithstanding the points above, Hemson interviewed Harriet in 1974, after three years of unprecedented labour activity and related state repression in Durban. Harriet thus might have been referring to her more general experience in the years following the 1971 strike.

<sup>76</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>77</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>78</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974

Harriet recalled that employers came in with “strong arm” tactics from the outset. They agreed there was need for some changes, that the workers “weren’t quite happy”, and offered labour a two-and-a-half percent increase. Harriet said that the employers’ association accused the GWIU’s negotiating team of being difficult, and accused them of having “agitators” amongst them. A letter from Harriet to TUCSA’s Robert Kraft, dated December 1970, attests to the fact that negotiations deadlocked a number of times. Harriet in turn accused the employers’ negotiating committee of not being properly constituted, and refused to continue talks with them, “what I thought was an impossibly transparent and naïve bit of strategy”, as she described it. Harriet’s strategy worked:

You should have seen and heard the panic and chaos the next day, and we just acted like prima donnas, and now all the Employers are hammering *their* Committee for aggravating the Union and they are having a terrible internal row. Isn’t it fun!<sup>79</sup>

Employers, however, continued to say that workers were not expecting the kind of increases the union was pressing for:

Well, they couldn’t bluff us. We knew, we were in total communication with the workers and we knew what they expected ... and we knew they would back us up. We were in a very, very strong position. Well, the first tactic that we tried ... we went back and we said to the workers that ‘will you, each of you, write down your budget and what you feel about the latest offer.’ And we gave them two weeks. I went to the industrial council meeting which was two weeks later, and when we were sitting down around the table I had my staff bringing in the three sacks of mail that we’d got. 18 000 letters, written on the backs of cigarette boxes, on bits of pockets, you know, belts, bits of material, paper – sweet paper, some of them – but, you know I said: ‘choose at random.’ Labour Department were absolutely staggered, we’d put them on their beautiful shining boardroom table. I mean they were absolutely staggered, they were obviously real, they were obviously genuine, they were obviously not a put-up job, and I think this shattered them a bit. Anyway, they raised their offer to about seven-and-a-half-percent ...<sup>80</sup>

When employers refused to budge higher than this, the union authorised Harriet to place a bold mock advert in *The Natal Mercury*, which detailed what garment workers were

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<sup>79</sup> Letter to Robert Kraft from Harriet Bolton, December 10, 1970, TUCSA records, general correspondence 1971, AH1426 AB4.2.41 File 2.

<sup>80</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

earning. She recalled that factory owners at the time were “advertising madly” in Natal’s press for workers, but were not prepared to pay reasonable wages. The union’s advert ran as a half-page spread, and provoked a furious reaction from employers. In later interviews, Harriet recalled that *The Natal Mercury* staff members who took the advert were so shocked at the low wage rates advertised that they told Harriet if they could have run the advert for free, they would have:

WANTED: Slaves at Starvation Wages.

The Clothing Industry in Natal desperately needs: Male and Female machinists, cleaners, layers up, cutters. But the basic laid down wage buys only bus fare and one meal per day!

Starting rate R5.00 per week

After 2 years R9.25 per week

After 4 years R15.25 per week

Could you live on this?

26 000 clothing workers are battling to do so!<sup>81</sup>

Harriet’s shaming tactic worked. “A lot of them said their friends accosted them in clubs, and so on, and said ‘My God, is that all you pay, you rats!’”<sup>82</sup> She said a meeting was called soon afterwards, where fuming employers demanded an apology from the union’s committee. Confident that they had the upper hand, Harriet said she responded: “‘If the employers’ association wants an advert in the paper, they CAN PUT IT IN THEM BLOODY SELVES!’ (laughs) and our, our whole delegation got up and walked out!”<sup>83</sup> Anna Scheepers, among others, congratulated Harriet on the “novel idea” of the advert. “I suppose the employers are most unhappy about it” she continued, “The cost of living over the past three years has increased by 14.1 points, so how can they expect you to accept a 10 percent increase on lower wages?”<sup>84</sup>

Illustrative of the support that employers received from the state, Harriet and the GWIU negotiating committee came under pressure from police during their wage talks. Harriet

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<sup>81</sup> Advert, *The Natal Mercury*, February 3, 1971.

<sup>82</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>83</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, 2005.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to Harriet Bolton from Anna Scheepers, February 4, 1971, Garment Workers Union Records, HP, AH 1092, Clothing Industry, GWIU, Cba 1.2, File 6.

said that threats were made when it became clear that the union were not going to accept the employers' offer of a seven-and-a-half percent increase:

... we were again told by some of the employers that other employers had said to them – “Don't worry to argue any further with the Negotiating Committee of the Garment Workers, especially Mrs. Bolton, because we have access to higher authorities and you will be able to speak to her at Pretoria Central Jail next week, so don't worry to call a meeting.”<sup>85</sup>

Whether what was said to Harriet was true, or whether it was merely a threat intended to intimidate the union, in the 1974 interview with David Hemson Harriet said it was these comments in particular that pushed her and the committee in favour of calling the mass meeting, as a “safeguard” for the negotiating committee and for herself:

So we said if in fact it's the negotiating committee and not the workers who want these increases, and if what the employers tell us is right, that the workers are ready to accept what the negotiating committee isn't, we'll have this confirmed in a meeting at Currie's Fountain.<sup>86</sup>

Shortly after this decision, the union sent out a notice requesting that workers meet at Currie's Fountain in order to give their opinion of the seven and-a-half percent wage increase that employers had offered. Harriet recalled that despite the notice being “low key” it received swift attention from the Special Branch:

Immediately, we were visited by the Special Branch who asked for copies of the notices, and for the reasons why we were holding a meeting on that day, and warning us again that it could cause incidents, and it could be dangerous. The same Lieutenant from the Special Branch visited us every day until the day of the meeting, and I think that we counted upwards of seven or eight Special Branch men at our meeting.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1972, Cape Town, August. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1972) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.21.

<sup>86</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>87</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1972, Cape Town, August. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1972) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.21

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, a Tuesday, nearly the entire membership of the Garment union, which at that stage stood at around 24 000 workers, met at Currie's Fountain. Several employers, who Harriet said wanted the negotiations settled, cooperated with the union and gave workers permission to leave the factories. Others prohibited them, but the workers walked out anyway. Only one factory was not represented on the day, because the Labour Department had warned the shopsteward against it, saying there would be serious repercussions:

... what I knew, and didn't tell anyone else, I didn't tell my committee either because they would have been afraid, was that the meeting in fact constituted a stoppage of work and I thought that's the kind of demonstration that we needed. So that the workers could stop work, they could be out of their factories where some of the employers were willing to give the increases we'd asked and I knew what would happen. Those employers would say 'we are willing, so will you work', so we had to get them away from the factories and out and stop them all ... Currie's Fountain was absolutely chock-a-block full. I remember I was so worried that I didn't even sleep at home the night before, because I was *certain* the police would come and pick me up and then everything would collapse ... We went to Currie's Fountain, I was pretty certain we'd have a *good* meeting. I was *amazed* that we had such a terrific meeting.<sup>88</sup>

Two days after the strike, the union sent out a circular informing members that a settlement had been negotiated and all their demands, including a 20 percent increase in wages, met. The letter indicated that the agreement had been settled in their favour thanks to the stand made by members in attending the general meeting at Currie's Fountain "like true Trade Unionists."<sup>89</sup> The saga, however, was not yet over. The owner of a Clairwood factory, Del Lingerie, fired the shop steward after the strike, and 37 women clothing workers then tendered their resignations and walked out of the factory. The owner then charged them with participating in an illegal strike and the matter went to court. The story made headlines in *The Leader*, where Harriet slammed the way Labour Department officials had handled the incident, saying they had "acted like policemen."<sup>90</sup> The workers

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<sup>88</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>89</sup> "Notice to all shop stewards and show stewardesses", GWIU, February 25, 1971, Garment Workers' Union Records, Clothing Industry, GWIU (Natal), 1969-1971, HP, AH 1092, Cba 1.2, File 6.

<sup>90</sup> Leader Reporter, "Labour Department 'Acted like policemen'", *The Leader*, June 18, 1971.

were eventually found guilty and insisted on seeing their five day sentence through, on a matter of principle. The union persuaded them otherwise and paid the fine.

Reflecting on the negotiation process, Harriet recalled that it was marked by the solidarity of the workers across racialised structures. A ban on overtime, traditionally exceptionally difficult to implement, had been strictly adhered to:

During the whole of that negotiation, workers also took a decision not to participate in any incentive bonus schemes and not to work any overtime; and this constituted considerable sacrifice. The African workers in the industry agreed to this as well, and supported to the hilt the movement ... They showed the most terrific spirit, and it just shows you what total communication with workers can do.<sup>91</sup>

This dramatic series of events has received little attention in histories of Durban's trade union movement. While a number of work stoppages, some of them based at Durban's docks, as well as discontent in the textile industry which shall be addressed in this chapter, are seen as significant forerunners of South Africa's 1973 strike wave, the strike at Currie's Fountain is overlooked. This is possibly because it involved a registered union with a majority Indian membership and an undeniably 'conservative' history. Perhaps more to the point, however, is that events in Durban were soon to overtake the GWIU, relegating its 1971 moment of militancy to relative insignificance. That said, I would argue that the strike was hugely significant for the GWIU, as well as for Indian workers, and also had some important, but largely unacknowledged, consequences. On the former point, it had been well over twenty years since Indian workers had so directly, and collectively, challenged Durban employers and the state. It is my contention that nearly forty years of 'top down' bureaucratic management, oppressive legislation and shop-floor quiescence in the GWIU were, if only for a brief period, overcome. Quite apart from the significant gains in wages won by the workers, the strike received press attention and precipitated interest and activity from a network of people, including trade unionists, academics, politicians and student activists. Over the next few years, this group were

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<sup>91</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

involved in aiding the development of fully fledged worker organisations. As Harriet remembered it:

That big meeting at Currie's Fountain, it led to a revival of the political movements that had lain dormant for ages. Because people had not been aware that workers were that *motivated* or that interested. And that meeting, which received publicity, in the press and on radio, and to the people of Durban, it brought home the fact that workers were in fact interested, you know, alive for things in their own interest, and there was a possibility of political movements getting going. The Coloured Labour Party were very interested, the Indian Congress were very interested, the African Congress were very interested. As well as the Progressive Party and other ministers. Helen Suzman phoned me, when she'd heard about the meeting. Winchester visited me ... I mean it created an *enormous* amount of interest ...<sup>92</sup>

While helping to organise illegal strikes, pressuring for pay rises and, later, organising African unions could all be read as 'political' acts in themselves in the context of Apartheid South Africa, Harriet's work for the union was not performed in alliance with a political movement. She therefore registered surprise at the amount of interest that the police paid to the GWIU's negotiations. She said she did not initially take it seriously, however:

... because I am naïve enough to believe that I am only a trade union secretary. I don't have political affiliations. Not because I don't think that politics affect the workers – they do. Politics are our business, because politics is what we put a Government there for, to look after us. I am not saying that the trade union movement has nothing to do with politics. In that way it does, because that is our bread and butter, but I don't have time to do anything but my trade union work, and look after my family, and I feel that for that reason we, as trade union secretaries, should be safe. We are doing a job which we are legally supposed to do ... I am naïve enough to believe that in this way I am protected.<sup>93</sup>

Harriet's belief that there should be "no politics in the trade union movement" – a philosophy which she said she had learned from Jimmy - frequently came up in my interviews and conversations with Harriet. Jimmy Bolton came from a context where

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<sup>92</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1974.

<sup>93</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings, 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Cape Town, August, 1972 (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1972), 425, TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.21.

'politics' and the work of trade unions were generally not closely associated. The universal franchise and the establishment of parliamentary processes and the social welfare state in Europe meant a tacit acceptance, at least in Britain and Germany, that 'political' issues were the domain of political parties: the responsibility of workers became voting in a party that best represented their interests. In turn, trade unions generally turned their attention to the more immediate problems of wages and the shop floor. Here Rob Lambert's definition of 'orthodox unionism' is useful. He defines this as unions whose integration into the state's industrial relations system means collective bargaining becomes their focus, while "community, living place issues, and questions of state power and its role in maintaining systems of dominance" are regarded as being the work of political parties.<sup>94</sup> TUCSA unions were generally seen to exemplify this approach, although I would qualify this with the point that a number of unions, the GWIU not least among them, did concern themselves with 'community' and 'living place issues', although this was limited in that the question of state power was generally not addressed. For SACTU, the glaring contradiction of 'orthodox unionism' in South Africa was the lack of a universal franchise and the growth of capital largely on the back of a vote-less, exploited and migrant labour force. Hence TUCSA's apolitical 'truncated economism' represented a political position in itself.<sup>95</sup>

During a policy debate at a TUCSA special conference in 1969, Harriet, as a member of the National Executive Committee, moved a resolution which committed TUCSA to participate in all "national planning involving social and economic issues" in order that trade unions had some stake in state policy. Her comments on the resolution are worth quoting at length, since they provide further insight into her perspective on where the responsibilities of political parties and trade unions lay:

In South Africa, in spite of what some people try to tell us, there is actually no representation of the workers in Parliament, and no Political Party in this country can truthfully claim to represent the workers. The fault is directly attributable to the workers, and to the traditional attitude of those workers in South Africa who

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Vincent Lambert, "Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965" (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1988), 35.

<sup>95</sup> David Lewis, "Black Workers and Trade Unions" in *From Protest to Challenge*.



are fortunate enough to have a vote, but who have not exercised it in their own enlightened interest, and in the interests of their fellow workers ... If the workers in South Africa ... could give in the future, their support to a Labour or Workers' Party, and thereby have direct representation in Parliament, then many of the burdens which fall onto the shoulders of the Trade Union Council could be dealt with in a more direct way. But as this is not so, it is our duty, as the largest combined representative group of workers in South Africa, to give our attention to and to act on every aspect of the well-being and for the welfare of the workers by any legal means available to us.<sup>96</sup>

Harriet's assertions of 'no politics' therefore did not preclude an understanding of politics as vital to workers' interests. While she certainly supported Jimmy in his political career, as evidenced in the previous chapter, and while he seemed to find no contradiction between his mantra of not involving politics in trade union work and his personal political ambitions and involvement on the city council, Harriet still consistently maintained that she could not, and did not, become involved in party politics because she worked in the trade union movement:

... I said "I can't join political parties when I am with the trade union movement, you know, it's not, it's not done." I dunno my husband told me this, so. But ... he did in fact in the end stand for the, it was called the Federal Party ... They wanted Natal to secede from the rest of the union (laughs) of South Africa or some, blasted thing ... in the end he did sort of soften up on that but I still, I felt I agreed with that and you see COSATU they've, they've seen that now. They mustn't tie in with a political party ... because in the end the political party put politics first, they don't put the workers first.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps reflecting on a later period, she similarly commented in a different interview:

... and I must say I was very sympathetic with the ANC, although I was in the union movement, and I couldn't come out politically, openly, because, the trade unionism that I was taught you don't mix with politics. Which I think COSATU is finding out now. I did tell them at the time (laughs) "trade union members should not tie up with a political party" because they are different, usually different politics, that your members have got, they should only be loyal to the trade union movement as far as their work place and their conditions are concerned, and their

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<sup>96</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings, Special Conference 1969, Durban, August, 25-27 (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1969), 287-288, TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1.18.

<sup>97</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 17, 2005.

religion and their politics were their own business. Ja. That's the way we were taught anyway.<sup>98</sup>

### **The James Bolton Hall**

Harriet's work for the union during the early 1970s did not only revolve around the shop floor. She kept her promise to Jimmy and initiated the garment and furniture unions' construction of much larger premises in Gale Street. The Albert Street building was under pressure from the growing membership of the GWIU and the increasing number of Industrial Council employees, but the union were unable to extend the building because Group Areas had frozen the area. Of particular concern to Harriet was keeping the industrial council in the same building where the union could maintain some degree of control over it, and ensure that factory inspectors did their job. She said she feared if the GWIU stayed in the Albert Street building, the council would move without them. Before construction of the new hall began, Harriet had to wage war with Group Areas. She recalled that by this time the area around Gale Street had been designated as "white":

... we had to apply to the Group Areas of course naturally and I had to ... fly to Pretoria and see the Group Areas Board ... and I appeared there ... (they said) "oh you're a mainly an Indian union" ... "and it's a white area" I said to them "come down into Gale Street and stand there for one day and show me the whites!" ... I said "we're not registered in any race" ... "No but the committee is mainly Indian and we can't, this is gonna be a white area"<sup>99</sup>

Harriet eventually took legal advice on the matter and used a loophole in the legislation. This involved setting up a board of trustees who bought the land on the union's behalf. Many union members were, however, very against the move. Harriet suggested this was because of their sentimental attachment to the Albert Street hall, and because they were worried they would lose, along with the hall, the GWIU's history there and the sense of community that had been built around it. Harriet, however, recalled that "Gale Street soon became exactly the same ... much used".<sup>100</sup> The garment and furniture unions

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<sup>98</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, June 9, 2005.

<sup>99</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>100</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

moved to their new ‘home’ in late 1971, although the Hall was only officially opened in 1974. A commemorative plaque on the building honoured Jimmy Bolton’s work in founding both the unions:

I put “in memory of” you know “Jimmy Bolton, the founder of the unions” because he did, he formed them both. They [union members] were FURIOUS with me ‘cause I hadn’t put my name on. I said to them “I don’t want my name on, I didn’t build it to put my name on it” you know ... I mean I only did the like spade work, you know ... I mean it was the unions’ hall it wasn’t mine ... anyway they loved it once they were in.<sup>101</sup>

An important, yet hitherto largely neglected, part of the story concerns what the space of the James Bolton Hall, both in Albert Street and later in Gale Street, came to represent to workers and a broader Durban community. The James Bolton Hall in Albert Street was, in the 1950s, established as a meeting space not only for trade union related affairs. For example, segregation restrictions on racially ‘mixed’ theatre companies and audiences dictated that theatre groups often had to seek out alternative venues. Indian and African players often put on performances in community halls, schools and churches willing to take the risk of hosting them. The Bolton Hall became an important venue that welcomed black and ‘mixed’ groups and audiences. During the course of the 1950s, for example, the white owned Brian Brooke Theatre Company organised for a series of controversial plays, among them *The Kimberly Train*, to be put on at Bolton Hall.<sup>102</sup> Harriet remembered that playwright and director Benjy Francis, together with his group MAD, were also regular performers, often in front of ‘mixed’ audiences and under threats of scripts being banned.<sup>103</sup> “... they used to have their plays that nobody else would have in our hall” Harriet recalled.<sup>104</sup> In 1972, Harriet agreed that several shows of Athol Fugard’s *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and *The Island* could run at Bolton Hall after police shut down the play at their original Durban venue, ostensibly due to the violation of the Group Areas Act. Harriet remembered police “moaning” at her on a number of occasions and she said they were particularly upset by the Black Employers Association’s use of the hall. In a

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<sup>101</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 6, 2006.

<sup>102</sup> Muthal Naidoo, “The Search for a Cultural Identity: A Personal View of South African “Indian” Theatre” *Theatre Journal* 49.1 (1997): 29-39.

<sup>103</sup> Leader Reporter, “Green light for ‘Colourful World’”, *The Leader*, February 26, 1971.

<sup>104</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 2006.

special effort to detract the police's attention, it was once hired out to the National Party, a point which Harriet used in her favour when police next hounded her on the issue. "I mean we did prefer people who couldn't get a hall anywhere else (laughs) but our arrangement was we hired it out to anybody who could pay the fee".<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, the Bolton Hall was chosen as the venue to reconvene the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) on 25 June 1971, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to a broader support base by showing solidarity with the thousands of Indian garment workers who had been out on strike three months earlier.<sup>106</sup> When NIC leader Mewa Ramgobin was banned three months later, a protest meeting was called at the Bolton Hall. *The Leader* reported that a "multi-racial" audience of around 1 000 attended. Among the speakers were Steve Biko and Fatima Meer: "Loud cheers and Black Power exhortations greeted a call for "togetherness" among Black South Africans at the Bolton Hall ..."<sup>107</sup>

### **Student activists, Harriet and the Bolton Hall unions**

Soon after the garment workers' strike at Currie's Fountain, three students from the Durban campus of the University of Natal – initially David Hemson, Halton Cheadle and David Davis - arrived at Bolton Hall and volunteered their services. Hemson and Cheadle both recalled being surprised when they met Harriet: "What was a white woman doing running an Indian trade union?" they wondered".<sup>108</sup> The students were acting on the advice of Durban activist academic Rick Turner, who challenged them to put theory learnt at university into practice. As Harriet remembered:

Rick Turner ... we all knew him because he was a famous lecturer at the university, you couldn't get into his classes. You know, everyone fought to get in

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<sup>105</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 2006.

<sup>106</sup> Despite this, Singh and Vawda conclude that "the direction of the politics of the revived Congress was far removed from the concerns of the working class." Ratnamala Singh and Shahid Vawda, "What's in a name? Some reflections on the Natal Indian Congress," *Transformation* 6 (1988): 1-21.

<sup>107</sup> Leader Reporter. "Black Unity, the Solution", *The Leader*, October 1, 1971.

<sup>108</sup> One affiliate of the Wages Commission (Dudley Horner) described her as a "mother hen" figure, "who brought all these kids together," and organized feasts at her house during Durban's sardine run. Grace Davie, "Making poverty research political: Student "Wages Commissions" in Durban, 1971-1973" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, February 2003) 18. The Durban campus newspaper, *Dome*, referred to Harriet as a "white liberal helping out", and printed a curry recipe which she recommended.

to his classes. He said to these men, we had appeared in the newspaper quite often for various reasons, our agreement and cases for workers and blah blah blah ... and Rick Turner said to his students, you know, “you’re studying ... instead of studying these things at university, why don’t you go to where they’re happening?” and they said “where?” and he said “for instance Bolton Hall, go there, and see the secretary and see how it all works and offer your ... part-time services”<sup>109</sup>

Harriet recalled being “delighted” by their offer - there was obviously a serious need for assistance. “I thought it was fabulous ... my members were old stick-in-the-muds.”<sup>110</sup> For example, the garment union had just committed money to the Natal division of TUCSA to employ two full-time organisers for the Durban area. In a letter to Arthur Grobbelaar, Harriet envisaged that the two organisers would give support to those unions which could not afford to employ organisers, as well as assist with the: “active, rapid, and planned organisation of the thousands of Indian and Coloured workers in this area who are not covered by any Trade union, and who daily ask the Garment and other Unions to assist in organising them.”<sup>111</sup> According to Steven Friedman, Strini Moodley and Brian Fredericks were hired for the job.<sup>112</sup> While no mention was made of African workers in Harriet and Arthur’s official correspondence, Friedman asserts that as early as 1970 Harriet noted that “a boom was bringing Africans into the garment and textile industries” and that she had “tried to persuade TUCSA that we couldn’t ignore thousands of new workers”.<sup>113</sup> Certainly, Hemson, Cheadle and Davis did assist with organising Indian workers, but their main focus was, from the start, establishing contact with African workers. From 1971, this core group of Durban National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), together with others, began to play an increasingly important and controversial role in the affairs of the Bolton Hall unions.

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<sup>109</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 20, 2006.

<sup>110</sup> Conversation with Harriet Bolton, December 2008.

<sup>111</sup> Letter to Arthur Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, March 4, 1971. Trade Union Council of South Africa Records, HP, ‘Correspondence with Secretaries’, AH 1426, AB 4.2.41.

<sup>112</sup> Moodley became a black consciousness activist and served five years in prison, while Fredericks later became an organiser for the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 61.

<sup>113</sup> Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*, 41.

Why these students chose to volunteer to help at Bolton Hall and what they thought they might achieve needs to be explored and contextualised.<sup>114</sup> A non-racial organisation, NUSAS provided for some contact between white and black student leaders during the 1960s. Friedman asserts, however, that white student protests against Apartheid were “little more than ritual expressions of liberal dismay”. The South African Student Organisation’s (SASO) subsequent formation and the development of black consciousness dictated that white NUSAS students, who wanted “to be counted in the struggle”, find alternate routes of activism.<sup>115</sup> This coincided with the growth in influence of a radical group of scholars who, by the late 1960s, had begun to rewrite South African history and to re-interpret current society, rejecting the liberal interpretation of Apartheid. Central to their analysis was the link between capitalism, apartheid and economic growth. This, along with “a rediscovery of socialism” struck a chord with a number of students. “Debates within the Congress movement and the Communist Party in exile filtered back. The legacy of the Natal Indian Congress .... proved important both in London and Durban.”<sup>116</sup> On their embrace of “new Left” analysis they both matched and were influenced by trends worldwide. Global student revolt took its cue from “the extraordinary outbreak of May 1968 in Paris, epicentre of a Continent-wide student uprising.”<sup>117</sup> In Durban, university students were further influenced by Rick Turner, a young and hugely influential political scientist and philosopher who started lecturing at the university in 1970. Turner had recently returned to Durban from Paris, where he had completed his doctorate on Sartre. There he had witnessed the student uprisings and resultant strikes. Drawing on this experience and following Marcuse, he argued that while the participation of workers was a prerequisite to revolution, students could play an

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<sup>114</sup> Nicole Ulrich has stressed the diversity of the ideological influences of the students who assisted in regenerating ‘democratic’ or ‘independent’ unions in South Africa, but some important similarities in their politics can also be sketched. Nicole Ulrich, “Rethinking Labour in the 1970s – rediscovering the trade union and political traditions of the organised African working class” (paper presented at the international History Workshop and SWOP conference ‘Worlds of Labour. Southern African labour history in international context’, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, July 2006)

<sup>115</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 41- 42.

<sup>116</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 240.

<sup>117</sup> Hobsbawm, for example, has commented on the seeming anomaly of students “who were obviously on the way to a far better future than their parents” choosing “a radicalism of the Left” (pp299-300) Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, 298.

important role in this as a “vital detonator”. He encouraged students to put theory into action.<sup>118</sup>

Their first attempt at ‘praxis’ came in the form of the Durban Students Wages Commission. Its immediate mandate was an investigation into the wages and working conditions of unskilled black university staff, but ultimately it aimed to gather information and publicise “starvation wages” in other industries too. Apathetic students were goaded into action with directed jibes at their complicity in the low wages of unskilled campus workers. They were told it was their responsibility to use the facilities provided by the university to make the issue a public campaign. Soon afterwards, NUSAS elected to set up branches at Pietermaritzburg, Rhodes, UCT and Wits, although it took months for these to start functioning.

With Harriet’s support, the Durban branch’s first campaign began in early June 1971. The Wages Commission printed and circulated pamphlets detailing the Wage Board’s latest recommendations for wages for unskilled workers. The pamphlets, which were distributed at Durban factory gates, pointed out that the R6,80 for females and R8,50 for males recommended by the Wage Board was less than half of the Poverty Datum Line (PDL) of R16,30 a week, a calculation of the bare minimum needed for survival. Workers were also encouraged to attend a meeting at the Bolton Hall to collectively express their dissatisfaction with the recommendation. Durban’s press reported that between 400 and 800 workers attended the meeting; the Bolton Hall was described as “packed”. The workers there were adamant that the minimum wage recommendations were unliveable. Rick Turner, academic activist Fatima Meer, the NIC’s Mewa Ramagobin and Labour Party representatives attended, and signed a petition which rejected the Wage Board’s recommendations. Anna Scheepers and Jock Espie, the Natal TUCSA representative, also addressed the meeting. Ultimately, however, their representations were ignored and the recommendation was gazetted. The day after the

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<sup>118</sup> In March 1973, Turner was banned along with seven NUSAS leaders and eight SASO leaders, including Steve Biko. In January 1978, he was assassinated. Grace Davie, “Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33:2 (2007): 401 – 420.

meeting, workers at a foundry outside of Durban stopped work, and holding Wages Commission pamphlets in their hands, demanded pay increases; an unintended consequence of the meeting and pamphleteering. The strike was unsuccessful but alarm bells about the Wages Commission's work nonetheless began ringing at the Labour Department.

Over the next few months Wages Commission activists, along with Harriet and Jock Espie, encouraged workers to attend several Wage Board meetings. Once again, they did this through pamphlets which publicised the dates of the hearings and stressed that workers had a right to attend. Perhaps drawing on the success that the GWIU had with workers' budgets, the pamphlets urged workers to list their wages and their expenses. These inventories were then compiled by the students and presented as evidence before the Wage Board. As Hemson, Friedman and Davie detail there were often heated exchanges at the hearings as students, employers, workers and worker representatives in the form of Labour Department officials and 'indunas' spoke at cross purposes. Employers and Wage Board officials were unused to African workers articulating their demands and clearly found it discomfoting.<sup>119</sup> In particular, the Durban and Cape Town dockworkers' Wage Board hearings in July 1972 were explosive, and were closely followed by two strikes when the PDL was not granted.<sup>120</sup>

Commenting particularly on the arrogance both of employers and Wage Board officials at these meetings, Harriet gave similar accounts of the dockworkers' hearing in two different interviews. In terms of her description of her intervention, one gains the sense of her determination to "speak up" in the face of (official) male authority. Union and newspaper records also suggest she was consistent in her challenges to state 'male' power in the form of policemen, labour department officials and, later, the TUCSA executive.

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<sup>119</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today* and Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich, "White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement" in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007).

<sup>120</sup> The Durban stevedores had a long history of organisation, resistance and strikes and had initiated contact with the Wages Commission in early 1972. See, for example, David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock workers of Durban," (Ph.D. diss., University of Warwick, 1979). From comments that Harriet made to the press later, it appears that Grobbelaar warned Jock Espie not to support such Wage Board hearings as a representative of TUCSA.



Certainly, from a reading of interview material and more recent newspaper articles and book excerpts, Harriet is and was invested in constructing herself as someone who daringly pushed the limits in her interactions with state officialdom. This was a major theme in her memories of this period:

... when the wage board sat (laughs) I always remember this, very embarrassing for the man, he was very cross with me. The Wage Board sat there and they were *so superior* ... and we'd told them [the stevedores] what dockworkers in other countries got and, so on and so forth and also, I mean, they do a heavy and dangerous job ... so, we had told them and we'd organised them, and we'd said the dockworkers in every other country are militant and stick together and push for their wages, and you know these ships - the people are very wealthy and the importers are wealthy and the shops that sell their stuff are wealthy and the manufacturers in other countries are wealthy, you know, they should get better wages. Anyway, they sat there and had their tea and *smoked* their cigars and what not ... I went to this man who was smoking his big cigar on the Wage Board, I don't even know who he was, and I said "I want you to know that your box of cigars must've cost more than these workers get for a week's work!" you know and I mean they're working like fifty hours a week or something you know ... and I must say he looked *quite* embarrassed, that was my (laughs) *words* to him ... but I mean God, I was so angry with them! And they did up their wages a bit but, not *much* you know, I mean because the manufacturers had much more clout with them [the Wage Board] than, workers or us. I mean people had no regard for black workers, you know as you've even seen with today, you know, they've got to really battle with this government ...<sup>121</sup>

At the 1971 TUCSA conference, Harriet urged delegates to utilise Wage Boards, even if they thought the Wage Board system was problematic. She felt that Wage Boards could be used "far more effectively" and suggested that TUCSA delegates had a "duty" to "do as we have been trying to do in Natal":

... that is to make the persons affected by the Wage Board sittings – I think that that is everybody – but the people not organised into trade unions – to make them aware of their rights, and to make them aware of the fact that they can appear before the Wage Board and make representations for themselves ... I think that all of us should devote ourselves to making sure that when a Wage Board sits in our area, that every single person who should be represented there is aware of the fact

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<sup>121</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

that the Wage Board is sitting, where it is sitting, what its functions are, why it is there, and how they can go and speak on their own behalf.<sup>122</sup>

In December 1971, Durban students issued the first edition of *Isisebenzi* or *Bulletin of the Wages Commission, Students Representative Council*.<sup>123</sup> The *Bulletin*, published in isiZulu and English, pitched itself as a paper to provide “information on labour and wages in South Africa to the press, interested bodies, and individuals.”<sup>124</sup> In the first edition, workers were urged to “organise themselves”, either into unions or into Works Committees as a first step to forming unions. The students’ ambitions for workers were not, however, matched in enthusiasm by the workers themselves who had very real fears of the consequences that organising into unions would have. In June 1972 at a meeting of African textile, furniture and garment workers at the Bolton Hall, they showed little interest for the idea of a union, pitched by David Hemson. Instead Harriet suggested a funeral benefit fund, based on the model of British ‘friendly societies’ and already tried and tested by the FWIU after they were forced to wind up their benefits section under the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act:

She suggested that a mass workers’ organization could be built up by starting a benefit fund which could attract workers to a common organization. Once the basis for association had been established, the question of industrial organization could be discussed in the light of the fear of the workers of police and employer repression.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa Report of Proceedings, 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Durban, September 1971, (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1971), TUCSA Records, HP, AH1426, Ad 1. 20. Interestingly, David Hemson points out that Jock Espie, as the Natal TUCSA representative, was reprimanded for his involvement with the dock workers’ Wage Board hearings. “Such a level of public involvement in a dispute affecting African workers was unprecedented in TUCSA’s dubious relationship with the organization of African workers ... Although formally committed to ‘organizing the unorganized’, TUCSA officials were extremely cautious to avoid giving support to striking workers, and were embarrassed that Espie had attended the mass meeting”. David Hemson, “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”, 595.

<sup>123</sup> The Cape Town version, *Abasebenzi*, was printed from March 1973.

<sup>124</sup> A letter from Gatsha Buthelezi extolling the virtues of unions was prominent on the front page of both the Cape Town and Durban editions, beginning a short-lived and controversial but nonetheless significant relationship between the KwaZulu Homeland government and the new worker organisations which would establish themselves at Bolton Hall. Bulletin 1 of the Wages Commission, Students’ Representative Council, University of Natal, Durban, December 6, 1971. National Union of South African Students, Wages Commission – *Bulletin*. Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, IV (115).

<sup>125</sup> David Hemson, “Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers”, 563.

This idea was readily taken up by workers. Hemson, however, recalled the surprise and disappointment of the Wages Commission activists at this decision.<sup>126</sup> The General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF), as it was named, was started up with a loan from the GWIU, and initially offered funeral benefits and a Christmas bonus, but later also supplied sick and unemployment pay. Minutes from their first meetings illustrate the close involvement of Harriet and the Wages Commission's Rob Lambert.<sup>127</sup> However, from the outset the GFWBF was run by workers. It became a dynamic point of contact between African workers in different industries and the Bolton Hall trade unionists, and by 1974 claimed 22 000 members.

### **Situating the Textile Workers Industrial Union (Natal)**

The Natal branch of the Textile Workers Industrial Union was so central to the new activity based around Bolton Hall that it is worth a brief digression to examine its history and contextualise its position in 1972. As already discussed the majority Indian union was one of SACTU's strongest affiliates, but was rocked by intrigue and corruption in the 1950s, mostly at the hands of its secretary Alec Wanless. Union records suggest that the consequences of this were felt as late as 1968, when appeals were still made to workers to resist the influence of the so-called "Wanless cabinet", or workers who had sided with Wanless in the past. Reference was also made to lengthy and costly court cases.<sup>128</sup> Harriet officially took up the position of secretary for the Natal TWIU branch in late 1972 after the former secretary, Ambrose Reddy, was fired for stealing pension fund money. However, the union had been associated with Harriet and the Bolton Hall for at least two years previously. According to Harriet, she was approached by the union's national leader, Norman Daniels, to assist in reorganising the branch. Records suggest that the

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<sup>126</sup> "Coming from bourgeois families, members of the Wages Commission were able to grasp the resistance of black workers to racial oppression quite readily, demands on issues such as pensions and sick benefits they found difficult to grasp." David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers", 597. Hemson much later put it thus: "She understood that mass unionisation had to rest on a bedrock of benefits and concrete achievements." David Hemson, "So long to a fiery spirit", *The Mail and Guardian*, November 27, 2009.

<sup>127</sup> Lambert was by then also an official of the FWIU.

<sup>128</sup> "Textile Workers' Forum, Origin of the Textile Workers Industrial Union, Durban Branch", August, 1968. Federation of South African Trade Unions records, HP, AH1999, c<sup>1.13.6.19</sup>.

first efforts to re-organise the union on a national scale were made by TUCSA affiliated trade unionists in 1969. By August 1972, David Hemson was ensconced as a full-time organiser and education officer of the TWIU. In January 1973, shortly after Harriet took over the Natal branch, the paid-up membership figure stood at around 400 workers, this more than doubled to 988 workers by May that year.<sup>129</sup>

From 1971, workers were encouraged to get involved with drawing up demands for a new agreement. They called for a 60 percent increase over three years, and major improvements in working conditions, including paid public holidays and reduced working hours. The textile Industrial Council covered 12 408 workers nationally in 1972; this did not include workers in the “cotton” section of the industry, or those employed in factories in border areas. Of this figure, nearly 4 000 were women workers. African workers made up 79 percent of the workforce, while Indian and coloured workers accounted for 19%.<sup>130</sup> These figures are a stark reminder of the absurdity of labour legislation which dictated that the less than 20 percent of workers represented by the TWIU could determine wages and working conditions for the large majority. The wage negotiations deadlocked in March 1972 with a counter-offer from employers of a 30 percent increase for the highest grade of worker and no concessions on working conditions. To put this in to context, this meant that the best paid workers would still be earning two Rand less than the PDL per week, while women’s wages were set at 20 percent less than their male colleagues. Phillip Frame claimed that “serious further inflation” would result if employers were to meet the union’s demands. He also warned that if the union was not willing to compromise, the Industrial Council faced certain disintegration.<sup>131</sup> The dispute was referred to arbitration, and finally to the Industrial Tribunal to make an award. In a report-back meeting to Durban workers, the union’s

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<sup>129</sup> “Textile Workers’ Forum,” Vol. 1 No. 2, August 4, 1972. Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, Textile Workers’ Forum, Karis-Gerhart Collection, IV, Folder 146.

<sup>130</sup> National Industrial Council for the Textile Manufacturing Industry of the Republic of South Africa. Employee Strengths by race and sex in Firms under the jurisdiction of this Council as at 22 March 1972, Trade Union Council of South Africa records, HP, Textile Workers Industrial Union (Natal), ‘Statistics, based on race and sex, of textile workers’, AH1426, AB 4.2.104.

<sup>131</sup> National Industrial Council for the Textile Manufacturing Industry of South Africa. Minutes of the 49th Meeting of the Council, Durban, 22 March 1972. Trade Union Council of South Africa records, HP, Textile Workers Industrial Union (Natal), AH1426 AB 2.2.104, File 2.

national secretary, Norman Daniels, reassured them that “If we had even thought of accepting those pitiful proposals I am sure you would have lynched us. You would have said we had sold you down the river and you would have been right.”<sup>132</sup> Soon after this, workers started a slow-down in production to back their demands. The tribunal, however, supported employers’ offers and the TWIU’s national leadership accepted this; allegedly without consulting workers. Friedman traces the “climate” of the 1973 strikes in the textile industry to the disappointment engendered by the failed negotiations in 1972.<sup>133</sup>

The August 1972 edition of *Textile Forum* newspaper did some damage control, arguing that the union needed full support from workers in order to bargain from a position of strength. It was pointed out that the new wage rates set out only minimum wages, and workers could win more through bargaining at individual plants. To this end, shop stewards were encouraged to attend a training course, hosted close to the Afritex Mill, which featured lectures by Harriet, Rick Turner, Jock Espie, Rob Lambert, Ambrose Reddy and David Hemson. *Textile Forum*’s stress on plant-based bargaining and “industrial democracy”, together with the obvious point that not all of those involved with teaching the course were trade unionists per se, are all indications of the “new wind” sweeping through Durban’s trade union movement during this period:

... the workers should now turn to getting the best wages and working conditions in their own mills by plant bargaining. The union leadership has realised how important the shop stewards are and has designed a shop stewards’ course which will have experts in collective bargaining at all levels ... The union believes, provided always that the union representatives know what they are about, that such systems give the most direct opportunity for our members’ earnings to be kept in line with the increases in their output. It also encourages the direct participation of the workers in bargaining and maintaining control over their own wages and working conditions. By this means the point of trade unionism is driven home daily to the workers. Since their own directly elected representatives, the shop stewards and executive, negotiate their wages, industrial democracy becomes a reality.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Bulletin 8 of the Wages Commission, Students Representative Council, University of Natal, Durban, May 1972, Karis-Gerhart Records, HP, A2 675 IV, Folder 115.

<sup>133</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 64.

<sup>134</sup> “Textile Workers’ Forum,” Vol. 1 No. 2, August 4, 1972. Karis-Gerhart Collection, HP, Textile Workers’ Forum, IV, Folder 146.

The university educated activists' influences, politics and ideals of participatory worker democracy, some of which are evident in the above *Textile Forum* extract, have already been discussed. As Sakhela Buhlungu and Nicole Ulrich both point out, a less acknowledged influence on the character of the GFWBF, and later the non-racial unions, were the traditions and 'lived experience' of the workers themselves. Ulrich suggests that "By this time benefit societies had become an established feature of urban African culture ..." and argues that it was the African workers' influence that shaped and determined the centrality of democracy and consensus at GFWBF meetings.<sup>135</sup> However, if we are to take seriously Grace Davie's suggestion that "Bolton's influence on these students was perhaps as significant as that of Biko and Turner ..." it is important to begin to consider what her influence was.<sup>136</sup> Steven Friedman, for example, points out that the trajectory of the independent unions organised in Durban was very different to those in Cape Town and Johannesburg because of the support they received from Harriet Bolton's registered unions. Events over the next few years would prove that this involvement was driven almost exclusively by Harriet. I would go further than Friedman and suggest that Harriet played an important part in helping to shape, at least initially through her influence on the young activists, the intensely practical and "bread and butter" driven character of the new worker organisations, as well as their willingness to exploit loopholes in labour legislation where possible.<sup>137</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>135</sup> Nicole Ulrich, "Rethinking Labour in the 1970s – rediscovering the trade union and political traditions of the organised African working class" (paper presented at the international History Workshop and SWOP conference 'Worlds of Labour. Southern African labour history in international context', University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, July 2006), 11. Sakhela Buhlungu, "Rebels without a Cause of Their Own? The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973 – 94," *Current Sociology* Vol. 54, No. 3 (2006): 427 – 451.

<sup>136</sup> Grace Davie, "Making poverty research political: Student "Wages Commissions" in Durban, 1971-1973" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, February 2003), 17.

<sup>137</sup> Harriet helped to shape a practical politics of engagement with the issues at hand. For example, although she maintained that labour legislation worked in favour of employers rather than workers, the new worker organisations made use of existing legislation to assist workers wherever it was possible. This tactic became increasingly important towards the end of the decade.

Less than a decade after Jimmy Bolton died, Durban's labour context had shifted significantly. The GWIU also saw some significant changes to its structure and functioning during this period. I have argued that this was propelled both by the changed position of the Indian working class in Durban, as well as by Harriet herself. While alluding to her husband's legacy both at the time and in her recorded memories, Harriet nonetheless initiated some important breaks with the 'traditions' of the GWIU. The direction that these changes would take the union in was first publicly indicated at the mass meeting at Currie's Fountain in 1967. Soon after this, the union endorsed amendments to its constitution. The union's negotiations for their next agreement, which began in 1970 and culminated in the 1971 strike at Currie's Fountain, were a testament to Harriet's success in instating more worker investment and control in to the functioning of the GWIU. The union won substantial salary gains for the workers. I have also argued that the strike was remarkable because it was well over twenty years since Indian workers in Durban had directly, and collectively, challenged Durban employers and the state. By the early 1970s, Harriet had established herself as an important trade union leader in Durban, and also nationally, through her involvement in TUCSA. Harriet's decision to take on several student volunteers during this period facilitated important initial contact with African workers in industries other than clothing and textiles. Ultimately, the efforts of the Wages Commission in lobbying Wage Board hearings were not met with much success over the course of 1971 and 1972. Perhaps more important, however, were the connections established between Harriet and the Wages Commission students, local political parties, activist academics in the form of Rick Turner and Fatima Meer and the first contact with sections of the largely unorganised Durban African labour force. A significant, but unlikely, ally was also found in the Durban press. Through their work, important spaces, both physical and ideological, were opened in Durban that made more possible the emergence of nascent worker organisations, both pre and post the 1973 strikes.

## **Chapter Four: “Empty bellies, not Agitators”: Harriet Bolton, the 1973 Strikes and TUCSA, 1973 – 1974.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Robinson, “It’s empty bellies not agitators”, *Sunday Tribune*, May 6, 1973.



## Introduction

In early 1973, Durban was rocked by a wave of strikes of an unprecedented scale. In the first three months of 1973, it is estimated that around 60 000 workers, the majority of them African, struck. By the end of the year, this figure had grown to 100 000, countrywide.<sup>2</sup> The statistics are put into perspective when considering that between 1965 and 1971, only 23 000 African workers stopped work.<sup>3</sup> These strikes and the nation-wide strikes which followed have gained indisputable status as a vital force for change. They are generally credited with sparking a major resurgence in worker organisation, marked by principles of 'open' unionism and shop-floor democracy. Lewis also points to the significantly broader impact the strikes had in forcing the state and employers to rethink industrial regulations over the next few years, significantly so in the form of the Wiehahn Commission, which recommended the recognition of African unions in 1979:

Industrial relations were forced onto the agenda of employers long used to ruling with the stick ... The government undertook a major reorientation of the legislative framework that for fifty years had regulated relations among African workers, employers and the state. These were not ephemeral shifts but major institutional changes marking off one era from another.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the strike action was focussed around Durban, and particularly the textile industry, in which Harriet, new organisers at the Bolton Hall, and the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund were collectively deeply invested. The strikes added important momentum to these new Bolton Hall initiatives; four unions, an administrative hub and an industrial education organisation were formed within ten months of the mass work stoppages. Indeed, the entire year was marked by heightened worker struggles in the textile industry. This chapter will chart some of these disputes and in particular a strike in August by textile workers in Phillip Frame's factories. This particular dispute, coupled with the new initiatives out of Bolton Hall, became a critical issue at the 1973 TUCSA

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<sup>2</sup> David Hemson, "Trade Unionism and the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa", *Capital and Class* 6 (1978): 20.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, "Black Workers and Trade Unions" in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), 189.

conference, the outcome of which would have important consequences for Harriet's relationship with the union federation.

In comparison to those preceding it, this chapter covers a relatively short period of time: just over one year. This is due both to the significance of this period for Harriet, and the plentiful sources for this phase. The combination of newspaper reports, trade union and TUCSA meeting minutes, Harriet's correspondence with both international and local unions, and interviews with her, other trade unionists and workers spanning the past 40 years, allow for a detailed account. Narrative aside, the diversity of sources available also makes possible an interesting investigation into how Harriet addressed, presented herself and interacted with different audiences. She had emerged as a personality in Durban's press from the late 1960s, and particularly as the hero of exploited Indian garment workers during the Currie's Fountain Strike in 1971. Thanks to close press coverage of the textile worker disputes in the Frame complex throughout 1973, her image as a critical and authoritative voice on local labour matters was entrenched. This chapter will chart how this personality developed. In broad outline, this chapter will look into responses to the strikes from the Durban press and public, as well as employers. It will then move on to discuss TUCSA and other trade unionists' responses, linking these to the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) conference in 1973, as well as the TUCSA conference later the same year. The chapter will then provide a detailed overview of Frame's dispute with the textile union, and the implications of this both for TUCSA and Harriet, and in particular their relationship.

### **Responses to the 1973 strikes**

The 1973 strikes reverberated locally, nationally and internationally. They provided a major wake-up call for registered unions, most of which had been lulled into varying degrees of complacency by decades of bureaucratic bargaining procedure. Indeed, a point often neglected by historians of the strikes, as well as the newspapers reporting on the strikes at the time, is that a large number of Indian workers went out on strike along with their African colleagues. A survey conducted soon after the strikes revealed that most of

the walk-outs had Indian worker support. However, this was not always voluntary.<sup>5</sup> The survey also found that Indian male workers expressed a high degree of solidarity with African workers; a point which the authors suggested had great “political significance”.<sup>6</sup> However, history shows that, barring a few exceptions, these expressions of solidarity generally remained just that. As mentioned above, the strikes also added important momentum to the new Bolton Hall initiatives. Many of the African workers involved in the strikes felt a new sense of confidence; this was illustrated in greater interest in the Benefit Fund and moves to form unions proper in the months following the strikes. Importantly for this chapter, the interest generated by the strikes meant that labour issues became a key news item, and a source for public debate, for at least the duration of the following year. The strikes created new space, particularly in *The Natal Mercury* and *Daily News*, in the coming months for critical commentary on labour issues. As Durban’s most active and vocal TUCSA trade unionist, Harriet used this space to promote the work being done out of the Bolton Hall. She was also sought out by journalists for comment. The following section shall firstly give a brief synopsis of the strikes, and their relationship to the Bolton Hall, and then touch on the Durban press, public and employers’ immediate responses.

Unliveable wages, high inflation, desperate living conditions, a poor working environment and discrimination in the work place, embodied by the job colour bar, all contributed to the mass work stoppages which started at the Corobrick and Tile factory in early January 1973. The KZN Homeland government became involved after King Goodwill Zwelethini was called on to intervene when the strike first began at Corobrick. He convinced workers to end the strike after promising to negotiate a better deal for them.<sup>7</sup> In the weeks that followed, the major upheavals were concentrated around the Frame group’s textile factories in Pinetown. Their genealogy, the reasons for the strikes and their spontaneity, or otherwise, have been discussed at length elsewhere. It is not my

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<sup>5</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes 1973*, (Durban and Johannesburg: Institute for Industrial Education in association with Ravan Press, 1974), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Zwelethini had visited the company in 1972 where he apparently left workers with the impression that their wages would be increased in 1973. When they were not, they walked out on January 9, 1973.

intention to recount these debates in any depth here.<sup>8</sup> Suffice to say, the strikes should be understood in the context of a number of scattered strikes since the start of the decade, including strikes by Durban and Cape Town dock workers, work stoppages on the Namibian mines and several strikes in Johannesburg.<sup>9</sup> I have also discussed the existence of a network of people and organisations which, in different ways, had started to open up channels of communication with certain sections of the African labour force in Durban and elsewhere by the time the strikes shook the city in early 1973.<sup>10</sup> Whether the first attempts at contact and organisation from the Bolton Hall group had any impact on the timing of the strikes is not clear. Histories of this period have generally not directed much attention to the relationships being formed out of the Bolton Hall and possible links with the strikes.<sup>11</sup> Davie has recently put this down to a trend in scholarship towards “the isolation of autonomous, agentive ‘African voices’”. She makes the argument that the influence of, for example, the students’ Wages Commissions has largely been ignored because of this, but can “pertain directly to our understanding of the timing and

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<sup>8</sup> See in particular: Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes* and Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*. Also: David Hemson, “Trade Unionism and the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa” Capital and Class Issue 6 (1978), Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich, “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007), David Lewis, “Black Workers and Trade Unions” in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), Rob Davies, Dan O’Meara and Siphso Dlamini, *The Struggle for South Africa. A reference guide to movements, organizations and institutions. Volume One and Two*. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*. In April 1969 2000 dockworkers struck, at the end of 1971 13 000 Ovambo workers went on strike in Namibia. In October 1972, dockworkers were again on strike in Durban.

<sup>10</sup> UCT Wages Commission students, working with ex-SACTU unionists, formed the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau and Wits Wages Commission students and ex-SACTU members formed the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) in 1973. It is important also to acknowledge the work being done by a group who called themselves the Urban Training Project. Founded by two disgruntled ex-TUCSA trade unionists, Eric Taycke and Loet Douwes-Dekker, who were unhappy with TUCSA’s decision to expel African unions in 1969, the UTP acted as a coordinating body for several Transvaal-based African unions, working in close association with the Catholic Church. The organisation has a different history, politics and trajectory from the other - initially - student-driven groups. It has been largely neglected in the historiography because many of those involved with the latter groups have been responsible for much of the literature. Steven Friedman puts in a nutshell how the other groups felt about the Urban Training Project: “They charged that it was forming unions which would win only limited bread and butter gains; they, on the other hand, were building a democratic, grassroots movement which would unite workers across factories and industries to change not only work conditions but the country.” Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 90-91. For more on the UTP, see: Donovan Lowry, *20 Years in the Labour Movement, The Urban Training Project and Change in South Africa, 1971 – 1991*, (Johannesburg: Wadmore Publishing, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> An exception to this is the recently published “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement”.

magnitude of the 1973 Durban strikes.”<sup>12</sup> I would suggest that she overstates this argument to an extent, as oral evidence certainly suggests that the majority of the workers who went out on strike had had little or no contact with the Bolton Hall group. However, it is still myopic to dismiss outright the impact of the efforts out of the Bolton Hall. This was particularly so with respect to the textile workers, some of whom were already members of the Benefit Fund, and all of whom received the support of the registered union under Harriet’s guidance throughout their strikes. Indeed, the textile union knew of the dissatisfaction of textile workers well ahead of their strikes, and Harriet had submitted a comprehensive list of demands to management.<sup>13</sup> David Hemson’s argument that the strikes were spontaneous, in that they were not planned from a political centre, but that they were not unorganised, is convincing. He points towards a level of underground leadership at the factory-floor level by ‘politicised’ workers, and also a degree of coordination by SACTU activists within the workforce.<sup>14</sup>

The strikes generated unprecedented press and public interest in labour issues. Durban’s ‘white’ press, including newspapers such as *The Natal Mercury*, *Daily News* and the *Sunday Tribune* reported on the stoppages extensively, and generally sympathetically.<sup>15</sup> However, this was only in so far as they felt workers to be *legitimately* expressing grievances.

It seems fair to say that the press backed the strikers in so far as they were expressing grievances, but not in so far as they were attempting to exercise power.<sup>16</sup>

The newspapers’ ‘sympathetic’ treatment of the strikes could also perhaps explain why a survey of white middle-class male opinion in Durban found that the majority felt wages were too low. Most were also in favour of the idea of unions for African workers.

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<sup>12</sup> Grace Davie, “Strength in Numbers’: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33:2 (2007): 403.

<sup>13</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*,<sup>29-30</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> David Hemson, “Trade Unionism and the Struggle for Liberation”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*, 44. Indeed, some employers apparently put the blame for the spread of the strikes on the press. There were also apparently rumours that pressure was put on newspapers to play down the extent of the strikes.

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*, 44.

Employer attitudes and responses were generally more ambivalent. While some strikers were fired, most factories affected by the strikes granted small increases of between one and two Rand to workers who had walked out. Increases were also granted to workers in a number of industries as a pre-emptive measure, and some agreements were revised well before they were due to expire. For example, the Natal garment union, perhaps with employers under pressure, achieved an increase of one Rand on all wage rates, including learners. The starting wage moved up to just over eight Rand per week, which made beginner garment workers in Natal better paid than their contemporaries anywhere else in the country. Although the Natal Employers' Association and the Durban Chamber of Commerce had, prior to the strikes, publicly stated they supported the formation of African unions, a survey of factory owners and management shortly after the strikes led the Institute for Industrial Education to conclude that management at most factories was not convinced of the huge extent of workers' dissatisfaction.<sup>17</sup> "They do not seem to be in touch with the workers' situation, nor with the urgent necessity for immediate and large-scale change ..."<sup>18</sup> Harriet also criticised employers' reactions to the strikes and in particular their claim that 'agitators' were to blame:

The Natal Employers' Association, in its attempts to keep wages down – as it has consistently done at Wage Determination Boards – acts as if it is entirely reasonable and the only unreasonable element is the worker.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A survey of employer opinion a year prior to the strikes found that only 12 percent supported the idea of registered African trade unions, while just less than 60 percent were in favour of Works Committees. Employers in the sample generally felt that unions caused unnecessary trouble, and were vulnerable to agitators. Survey cited in Eddie Webster, "Management's Counter Offensive" *South African Labour Bulletin* Vol. 2 No. 3 (1975): 29-39. However, in late 1972, a few months prior to the strikes, organised Durban business in the form of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and the Natal Employers Association, in meetings and public statements, made it clear that they supported the recognition of African Trade Unions. Post strikes, at a conference in 1974, the Chamber formed a sub-committee to investigate the issue and put forward recommendations. The Minister of Labour responded furiously, and stated that any agreement formed with African unions would be declared null and void. The Chamber back tracked, and soon after this officially endorsed works and liaison committees. Nelson Sambureni, "The Apartheid City and its Labouring Class: African workers and the Independent Trade Union Movement in Durban, 1959 – 1985" (PhD Diss., University of South Africa, 1997), 254.

<sup>18</sup> Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Brenda Robinson, "It's empty bellies not agitators", *Sunday Tribune*, May 6, 1973.

Therefore, although employers publicly stated support for African unions, on the ground this was generally not followed through. As Sambureni concluded:

Quite clearly, there was a contradiction between the discourse of recognition and the practice of non-recognition and reliance on repression by employers.<sup>20</sup>

The state's practical responses came in the form of a pledge by the Wage Board to rework their wage determinations, with their first focus on unskilled workers. Government also amended legislation, in the form of the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Bill, which was gazetted on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973. The Bill basically extended some of the powers of the Works Committee system and granted, in theory, a very limited right to African workers to strike. Internationally, after several newspaper exposés of the starvation wages paid to South African workers, the House of Commons launched a parliamentary enquiry into wages paid by British companies operating in South Africa. The strikes also re-focussed world attention on the plight of African workers, setting the scene for a tumultuous ILO meeting in June 1973. The debates at that conference and their outcomes will be discussed during the course of this chapter.

In the weeks following the strikes, Harriet's opinion was sought out by academic and more general audiences alike. On the face of it, her comments to newspapers, and her public speeches, did not differ much from other TUCSA unionists' responses, particularly so Arthur Grobbelaar. Her public calls for representation for African workers post-strikes were certainly not out of line with TUCSA policy. However, what did set her apart were her forthright attacks on employers. As unfolding events would show, TUCSA seemed unable, or unwilling, to confront and hold to book employers. And despite some of the above seeming similarities, the next few months would see Harriet and the TUCSA executive, and in particular Grobbelaar, on a head-on collision course. I shall now turn to a discussion of Harriet's, Grobbelaar's and other TUCSA officials' immediate public responses to the strikes.

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<sup>20</sup> Nelson Sambureni, "The Apartheid City and its Labouring Class" 259.

Once the textile workers had negotiated for an increase and were back at work, Harriet assured the readership of *The Natal Mercury* that the workers didn't intend to bring "the people of Durban to their knees":

Mrs Bolton said the strikers had no intention of bringing the people of Durban to their knees. What they wanted to do was draw attention to their plight. "One worker told me: 'We are not striking, we are crying out. They never heard us with words, so we stop work and then they notice us for the first time.'"<sup>21</sup>

In the article, Harriet also reassured the readership by refuting the employer and government line that "agitators" were behind the strikes. She also, however, condemned white scabs who pitched in at some of the factories "in a spirit of high adventure" but, she maintained, would never work the long hours for the pitiful wages that workers earned.<sup>22</sup>

Harriet was also called on to address university audiences on the state of the trade union movement in March. This was probably as a result of her connections to the university through students working with the Wages Commission, as well as the new interest in labour issues generated by the strikes. In March she delivered a lecture at the Durban and Pietermaritzburg Campuses of the University of Natal, entitled "The Trade Union Movement in South Africa Today." While the text of the speech itself has proved elusive, two newspaper reports covering the lectures give us a reasonably detailed picture of Harriet's talk, which slammed white workers, as well as trade unionists, for opposing the progress of Black workers:

'White trade unions have selfishly turned the objects and ideals of trade unionism to their exclusive purpose and have ignored the mass of the population,' she said. Describing the vision of success in South Africa as being 'as rich, greedy, protected and as White as possible,' Mrs Bolton said that trade unionism should be a force which knew no racial barriers.<sup>23</sup>

Bringing up the Durban strikes, she again blamed them on the lack of communication between workers and management. She added that those trade unions who had offered

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<sup>21</sup> Brenda Robinson, "When the gloating is over let's do something", *Sunday Tribune*, February 11, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Brenda Robinson, "When the gloating is over let's do something", *Sunday Tribune*, February 11, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> Mercury Reporter, "End race barriers, unions told", *The Natal Mercury*, March 23, 1973.



assistance, helped to avert a deepening crisis.<sup>24</sup> A month later, Harriet addressed a symposium on “Black Trade Unions” at the Pietermaritzburg campus. Here she stressed the legality of Black unions and appealed to employers to assist, rather than hamper them. She also warned of a looming confrontation between “responsible” unionists and employers who still treated African trade unions as illegal.<sup>25</sup> A common theme of her insistence on the *legality*, and hence respectability, of African unions is evident. Harriet was also a guest speaker at the (coloured) Labour Party’s annual conference in April, where she spoke on challenges facing the trade union movement. She was also invited to present a paper at the Natal Indian Congress’s annual conference in July, which dealt with wages and trade unions for African workers.<sup>26</sup> Two months after the upheavals of January and February, Labour Minister Marais Viljoen again put the blame for the strikes on “agitators”. In a feature article in the *Sunday Tribune* which quoted Harriet at length, she slammed employers for using the word “agitator” for anyone who wanted better wages, for failing to pay reasonable wages, and for not establishing proper communication avenues with black workers. She also criticised government’s favoured Works Committee system, saying they were open to grave abuse and victimisation.

The only “agitators” involved in Durban’s industrial unrest is the Black man’s empty belly, says Mrs Harriet Bolton ... “Agitators? Employers keep talking about agitators, but who are they? If they mean people who want better wages and conditions of employment, then most workers in South Africa – Black or White – are agitators.”<sup>27</sup>

Harriet blamed the “industrial impasse” on the obduracy of employers and again called for an amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act to include African workers.

TUCSA had long paid lip service to the ideal of African unions registered under the same legislation as White, Indian and Coloured unions, and the strikes provided another platform for this line. Buoyed by a mandate in favour of organising African unions from the overwhelming majority of affiliated unions, the TUCSA executive felt empowered to

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<sup>24</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Union leader slams white workers”, *The Natal Mercury*, March 8, 1973.

<sup>25</sup> Mercury Reporter, “African unions legal – secretary”, *The Natal Mercury*, April 12, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> *Leader* reports, April and July.

<sup>27</sup> Brenda Robinson, “It’s empty bellies not agitators”, *Sunday Tribune*, May 6, 1973.

repeatedly call for government recognition of African trade unions in the months following the strikes. While the labour minister condemned TUCSA as having “leftist” agendas, the executive positioned the organisation as a responsible and experienced trade union organisation who “(could not) allow the labour situation to drift into aimless chaos, and thus TUCSA must pursue its responsibilities to its members, and to South Africa, by continuing to press and work for reform,”<sup>28</sup>. Their attitude to the strikes, and suggested way of dealing with African workers, was put in a nutshell in the NEC’s report to the 1973 TUCSA Conference, which stipulated that the strikes were caused by a combination of the high inflation rate and fewer jobs available, and the fact that workers did not have another means of expressing their “economic grievances”.

They resorted to the final weapon of normal collective bargaining procedures, namely, striking, which was the only course open to them. TUCSA holds the view that with adequate collective bargaining machinery, viz. trade unions for African workers, these strikes would not have occurred, or been very limited.<sup>29</sup>

At their 1972 conference TUCSA had requested their affiliates to indicate whether or not they would be willing to assist in organising African unions; however they had not yet gone so far as to call on their member unions to do so. Only Harriet’s furniture and textile union, as well as the tin workers union to a lesser degree, offered any assistance to workers during the 1973 upheavals in Durban. In Johannesburg, the garment union also assisted in settling disputes daily during February and March. The generally lax response of TUCSA unions to the strikes was an indication of their non-involvement with African workers at factories where they had membership. That TUCSA’s stance on African workers was more to do with pragmatic self-interest than a serious commitment to the rights of African workers is reflected in a letter to the Labour Minister, quoted in part below, requesting an interview to discuss the representation of African workers. Their reasoning was that if African workers were granted registration, TUCSA unions would

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<sup>28</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1973, Durban. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.22: 139

<sup>29</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1973, Durban. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.22: 136 – 137.

still wield influence on industrial councils, and the position of White and Indian workers would be protected.

It must be mentioned that TUCSA is just as vitally concerned about the maintenance of existing trade union rights for its White, Coloured and Asiatic members, as well as the need for equitable treatment for the Bantu workers. The erosion of those rights caused by the loss of proportionate representativeness, requires early remedial action.<sup>30</sup>

Their consistent call for 'responsible representation' is also reflected in their objections to the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Amendment Bill, gazetted on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973. The Bill basically extended some of the powers of the Works Committee system. Under very stringent conditions, the right of African workers to strike was also theoretically recognised. TUCSA's NEC report to conference warned of the "very grave dangers" for South Africa of the new Act.<sup>31</sup>

That TUCSA was not a homogenous organisation has already been pointed to in preceding chapters. As of 1973, TUCSA comprised 64 affiliated unions claiming 197 923 members. I have argued that, for a period, the garment and textile TUCSA unions represented a more 'progressive' grouping in TUCSA. In terms of responses to the strikes, a few hours were dedicated to a discussion of their impact at a meeting of these unions in March. The strikes had brought home strongly the weakness of the registered unions, particularly so in the Natal textile industry, where African workers vastly outnumbered newly organised Indian and Coloured workers. As the TWIU (SA) general secretary Norman Daniel's commented: "Although membership [was] on strike most unions seem to have felt that the initiative was in [the] hands of unorganised African workers." He went on to state that the strikes had provided a much needed morale boost for the national textile union, and served as "a good lesson to the employers". He added that Durban's African textile workers "were owed a debt of gratitude because of the

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<sup>30</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1973, Durban. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.22: 22.

<sup>31</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings Annual Conference 1973, Durban. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.22: 142 – 143.

direct effect the strikes had on everyone else in the country.” Daniels also stressed the point that the workers “acted in a responsible manner and at no stage could they have been called irresponsible in their actions.”<sup>32</sup> This appeal, perhaps to government, perhaps to the public, seemed to be a consistent theme in registered union officials’ responses to the strikes. Harriet left the meeting early and hence did not comment on the issue, but her assistance to the strikers, together with the GWIU’s executive committee and Cheadle’s, was acknowledged and placed on record. It was also at this conference that the GWUCC took the step of inviting the National Union of Clothing Workers to join their ranks as a constituent union. The decision followed a discussion of the new TUCSA policy in favour of organising African workers into parallel unions. It was stressed at this meeting that TUCSA advocated that African workers should “join registered unions in preference to forming separate African unions.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Laying the foundations for the new unions**

Harriet’s commitment to unorganised workers in Natal was already well established through her work with publicising wage board hearings, her association with student activists in the form of the wages commissions, her vocal denouncement of employers during the strikes earlier in the year, and her support of, and involvement with, the Benefit Fund.<sup>34</sup> The strikes added important momentum to these projects, and Harriet’s assistance, both financial and practical, in forming a number of worker organisations and new unions from the Bolton Hall in 1973 put her even further at odds with the rest of the established registered trade union movement in South Africa. What distressed TUCSA about these new organisations, as would be amply illustrated over the next decade, was that although initially dependent on the support of the Bolton Hall registered unions, they were not formed as parallel unions. Their employment of white ‘students’ and ex-SACTU unionists as officials, and a focus from the outset on principles of union

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<sup>32</sup> “Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers’ Unions’ Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg, March 6, 1973”. Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP), Karis-Gerhart Collection, Garment Workers Unions’ Coordinating Committee, Folder 66.

<sup>33</sup> “Minutes of a meeting of the Garment Workers’ Unions’ Consultative Committee (SA) in the Garment Centre, Johannesburg, March 6, 1973”. Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP), Karis-Gerhart Collection, Garment Workers Unions’ Coordinating Committee, Folder 66.

<sup>34</sup> Cheadle and Robert Lambert were at this stage employed full-time by the textile and furniture unions.

democracy and the ideal of power ultimately being in the hands of workers, were also anathema to TUCSA.<sup>35</sup>

Post strikes, with a new sense of their potential to act collectively, workers flocked to the Bolton Hall to sign up with the Benefit Fund. Membership grew from two-thousand before the strikes, to six-thousand in August and ten-thousand by the end of 1973.<sup>36</sup> Realising the need for co-ordinated and effective administration for the Benefit Fund, as well as other anticipated new worker organisations, Harriet poured her energy into forming Central Administration Services (CAS). According to CAS pamphlets, their objective was to provide clerical and organisational administration to the “smaller and poorer worker organisations”.<sup>37</sup> The reasoning was that unions were only as strong as their membership, but also only as effective as the efficiency that their administration allowed.<sup>38</sup> The CAS constitution very specifically stated that membership was open to any organisation representing workers in Natal, and it was stressed that affiliation to TUCSA was not required.<sup>39</sup> In an overt attempt to “bind the registered unions to CAS’ adopted role”, Reg Vial, who was then the assistant secretary of the GWIU, was appointed secretary of CAS.<sup>40</sup> Harriet was in the chair, a position she held until her move to England in 1975. Records show that, in an effort to get protection for the emerging worker organisations from employer and state hostility, a formalised relationship between the KwaZulu Government and CAS was envisaged: “After Chief M.G. Buthelezi had

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion on the ‘location’ of the white officials in the new non-racial unions, see Sakhela Buhlungu, “Rebels without a Cause of Their Own? The Contradictory Location of White Officials in Black Unions in South Africa, 1973 – 94” *Current Sociology* Vol 54 No. 3 (2006): 427 – 451 and Johan Maree “Rebels with Causes: White Officials in Black Trade Unions in South Africa, 1973 – 94. A Response to Sakhela Buhlungu,” *Current Sociology*, Vol 54 No. 3 (2006): 453 – 467.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 43 and Dave Hemson et al. “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement”, 257.

<sup>37</sup> “A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, B12.2.2.1. It was essentially established as an administrative hub which would provide services for the Benefit Fund, and for the anticipated new unions. This assistance included providing secretarial services, office space, meeting venues, arranging representation and transport.

<sup>38</sup> “Central Administration Services”, signed C.R. Vial, November 3, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999/D3 CAS Correspondence.

<sup>39</sup> “Constitution of the Central Administration Services”, March 13, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH1999/D3 Rules of CAS.

<sup>40</sup> “A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999/ B12.2.2.1. Vial later admitted to drinking with the Special Branch on a number of occasions.

been approached, he warmly accepted the idea and referred all labour dealings to Mr B.I. Dladla...”<sup>41</sup> Barney Dladla at the time was the Minister of Community Affairs, a portfolio which included responsibility for labour matters. Up until this point, the Bolton Hall group’s relationship with the KwaZulu Homeland government had been informal. The students’ wages commissions had, however, given positive publicity to the KwaZulu leadership through their publication *Isisebenzi* from 1972. Maré and Hamilton argue that many workers were ‘migrants’ “and therefore easily dependent on a ‘traditional’ authority figure such as Buthelezi.”<sup>42</sup> Unions including the Garment, Textile, Furniture and Motor Assemblies were involved along with the Benefit Fund, Urban Training Project and Wages Commission. The latter provided support specifically around wage research and through *Isisebenzi*.<sup>43</sup> CAS hence represented a specific attempt to coordinate registered unions’ assistance to emerging African unions. That the support given to unions at the Bolton Hall came from numerous sources is indicated in correspondence between National Union of Students Welfare and Social Action Department (NUSWEL) coordinator Gordon Young, and Vial: In July 1973, the salaries of three organisers were paid by NUSWEL, one was paid from donations by UND lecturers, two by the GFWBF, three by CAS itself and one by donation from the NIC.<sup>44</sup> Jeanne Lomberg, herself an ex-garment worker and later union administrator, maintains that Harriet contributed some of her salary to the new organisers’ wages too, a point also mentioned by Harriet’s daughter Pat.<sup>45</sup>

The Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) was set up soon after CAS. Its stated aim was to provide much needed education to workers:

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<sup>41</sup> “Report on Relationship with the KwaZulu Government in the Past. Relationship with CAS”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH1999/B12.4. TUACC Dealings with KwaZulu.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power. Buthelezi’s Inkatha and the Politics of ‘Loyal Resistance’*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 118.

<sup>43</sup> “A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999/ B12.2.2.1. Vial later admitted to drinking with the Special Branch on a number of occasions.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to Gordon Young from C.R Vial, July 10, 1973. HP. Karis-Gerhart Collection A2 675 IV Folder 110. National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) Wages Commission, 1973.

<sup>45</sup> Jeanne Lomberg, interviewed by Hannah Keal, January 24, 2007.

These workers both need and want the kind of information that can help them to organise constructively and to acquire some say over their conditions of work and their wages ... Our intention is to introduce an educational programme which will fill this gap.<sup>46</sup>

The IIE was a coordinated effort between academics and trade unionists. Sociologist Foszia Fischer headed up the institute, while Buthelezi was appointed as the vice-chancellor; a position which they felt would lend credibility to the organisation in the eyes of workers. The institute was affiliated to Ruskin College in England. The Institute soon after started up the South African Labour Bulletin, which is still published today.

Maré and Hamilton suggest a combination of reasons for the KwaZulu leadership's "credibility in the labour field" in the early 1970s. These include the lack of working class organizations, a dominance of liberal reformists in political activity in Natal during the period and a belief that Bantustan politics "might offer the possibility of advancing progressive struggle" as well as practical issues, such as the protection they could offer newly established unions. Certainly, union and IIE records suggest they had purely pragmatic reasoning for the relationship. Apart from the degree of protection such an association might offer, in some instances when employers refused to negotiate with unions, they would agree to a meeting with a KwaZulu official. Indeed, workers themselves were often the initiators of calls for Barney Dladla to intervene on their behalf. Harriet's memories of Dladla and Buthelezi's relationship and the politics of their connections to the emerging unions are useful to quote at length:

... we got Buthelezi to head it [the IIE]... but he didn't get on with Barney Dladla. He was his sort of labour minister, who was much more outgoing and progressive than he was ... and saw the workers, whereas Buthelezi was, you know, a chief and so he didn't sink to all *that* you know. He would come to meetings, he would speak to workers when we asked him, but he had to have a position. I mean he didn't say that, but you *knew* you had to respect his chieftainship, whereas Barney Dladla didn't have that. He was a good and well educated man with ideas about ... he supported, which Gatsha also didn't like, the PAC I think, that Azanian idea ... I forget what it was called in that day but I first heard of it from Barney Dladla. He was a charming man and he would go and

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<sup>46</sup> Memo and Inaugural Minutes, June 15, 1973. HP. Karis-Gerhart Collection A2 IV Folder 71, Institute for Industrial Education.

... speak to workers in Richards Bay, you know, he went all over and he was a good speaker as well and he was very cooperative. And he saw the value not of organising people to be loyal Zulus, but to organise people to be thinking people, you know, he could see that. He didn't feel we were wresting his, you know, nation from him by organising unions, which we had to be careful of Gatsha about that ... taking over his function. We had to involve him. That's why we involved him. It was tact ... You know a lot of people didn't like it. Like I think David Hemson and all those people thought, you know, I was bending over backwards for him *but* they did see the logic of it you know...<sup>47</sup>

Barney Dladla was to play an important role in the Bolton Hall affairs. He was called on by workers a number of times to intervene in disputes over the course of 1973 and 1974. At a strike at a refinery in Richards Bay in March 1973, he raised the ire of management there, and Durban business in general, when he suggested that until decent wages were paid and the matter resolved to the liking of the workers, recruitment of labour from KwaZulu would be halted. During the same year he also attended the launches of several of the new unions as a "prominent speaker", where he "unreservedly pledged his government's full support for the unionization of African workers."<sup>48</sup> Citing interview material, Hemson et al describe Dladla as "a political radical", who supported SACTU and planned to use the homeland government to initiate political opposition.<sup>49</sup> Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu also show Dladla had strong links to the SACTU underground. He met with exiled SACTU members several times during overseas labour conferences and received some funding from them to aid Natal's new unions and revive SACTU structures.<sup>50</sup>

At a Benefit Fund meeting in Pietermaritzburg in April, metal workers from two factories called for the establishment of a union. Two months later, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) came into being, while a Durban branch was launched later in the

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<sup>47</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal. August 2006.

<sup>48</sup> "Report on Relationship with the KwaZulu Government in the Past. Relationship with CAS". HP. FOSATU Papers, AH1999/B12.4. TUACC Dealings with KwaZulu.

<sup>49</sup> Hemson et al, "White activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement", 258.

<sup>50</sup> Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, "The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980", in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007), 187-241.



year.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned before, the Benefit Fund was set up to attract members with tangible benefits such as life and death insurance and to serve as a platform for contact with African workers with the ultimate aim of forming unions. Following MAWU's formation, a report on the role and future of the Benefit Fund, dated May 1973, suggested that a new strategy should be adopted. Trade unions should be formed first, and benefits should follow. The report, of unknown authorship, reflected the bolder atmosphere:

The Durban Strikes have radically altered the political climate in which the African worker found himself before the strikes ... The African workers ... have now realised the value of concerted action. Encouraged by the success of the Durban Strikes and the calls of their political leaders in the 'homelands' African workers for the first time in 13 years appear to be ready and keen to form unregistered Trade Unions. The Metal workers have laid the way and others will ... follow.<sup>52</sup>

Textile workers did follow suit in July of the same year, forming the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), initially with the close cooperation of the registered union.<sup>53</sup> The Union of Clothing and Allied Workers was formed in late August, and the Furniture and Timber Workers Union in September.<sup>54</sup> The new unions were shaped under constant surveillance and harassment from the Special Branch, as attested to in numerous interviews with Harriet, as well as minutes from meetings. Employers too were hostile, and often worked with the Labour Department and police. Frame factories in particular were ruthless. For instance, African textile workers set up a caretaker committee as the first step towards forming a union in June. Frame management got hold of a list with the names of all the workers who had attended the meeting, and threatened to fire them.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This created tension with the UTP and their union the Engineering and Allied Workers Union, which was affiliated to the international IMF. They felt they had been deliberately excluded from extending into Natal. Hemson et al. "White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement", 257.

<sup>52</sup> "Report on the State, Role and Future Requirements of the Benefit Fund", May 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers. AH1999/C1.13.9.13.4.

<sup>53</sup> Harriet, Halton Cheadle and Barney Dladla all addressed textile workers at the inaugural meeting. According to Sithole and Ndlovu, Emma Mashinini was also present at the meeting. Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, "The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980", in *The Road to Democracy*, 203.

<sup>54</sup> The GFWBF would ultimately become the Transport and General Workers Union when the organisation came under pressure from government in 1974 for not being a properly constituted 'Friendly Society'.

<sup>55</sup> "Minutes of the Branch Executive Council Meeting of the Above Union (Textile Workers' Industrial Union of SA (Natal Branch) James Bolton Hall," Sunday June 17, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers, C1.13.9.13.2.2.

The importance of Harriet providing space for the new worker organisations at the Bolton Hall should not be underestimated. Intimidation from police was a constant, and Bolton Hall support allowed them some form of legitimacy and protection. Indeed, Friedman suggests that different strategies adopted by the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB) and Natal unions were directly linked to the support given to the latter from registered unions.<sup>56</sup> In many ways, however, Harriet was leaving her Indian and coloured worker constituency behind her. That they were ultimately not prepared to accept the changes Harriet was pushing for was amply illustrated in the years to come.

### **Taking Frame on: Harriet Bolton, Phillip Frame and TUCSA**

Harriet's public battle with Phillip Frame started in May 1973 over conditions in one of his factories. Frame was a powerful figure; as one of the largest blanket manufacturers in the southern hemisphere and a Nationalist government supporter, he had the full backing of the state.<sup>57</sup> Minutes of meetings as well as reports in the *Textile Forum* from June through August clearly show the battles which even the registered TWIU had against victimisation of its members and refusals from management to cooperate with the union, for example by refusing to grant stop orders.<sup>58</sup> Works Committee members were also not

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<sup>56</sup> During this period a debate raged over whether to support Works Committees as a first step towards building unions, or whether to reject them. A policy document released in October 1973 reveals that at the outset, CAS supported the establishment of Works Committees. However, events between March and October led to them shelving this initial guiding principle in favour of unions. In their policy document, CAS rejected Works Committees as "both paternalistic and impractical". But more importantly, the committee acknowledged, was the fact that workers had mostly rejected Works' Committees, while management generally used the organisations as "a weapon against African trade unions." "Every Worker a Trade Union Member!", October 4, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers AH 1999/D2. The WPWAB, on the other hand, favoured Works Committees. Friedman argues this was first as a necessity, and later a principle. "The area was dominated by 'top heavy' TUCSA unions which were controlled by a few officials and the WPWAB activists were determined that their organisation would be different. They stressed grassroots organisation more than any other group ..." The UTP also favoured this system. Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 58.

<sup>57</sup> James (Paddy) Carol McDowell.. "A History of the South African Textile Industry. The pioneering Phase, 1820-1948", (Master of Commerce: University of Natal, Durban, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Soon after Harriet took over the reins of the beleaguered textile union in January 1973, the union's *Textile Forum* newspaper was re-launched. Published on a roughly monthly basis, the *Forum* was distributed to factories and aimed to keep union members and potential members up to date with union and factory news. It was also an important space which the union used to lobby for acceptance of the idea of an African union and cooperation between all workers. Over the next few months, it became an important point of contact for the union and members. For the historian, too, it provides a detailed picture of factory battles during 1973 and 1974.

exempt from employer pressure. Frame's threat to fire workers involved with setting up the African textile union, as well as a number of incidences where workers had been unfairly dismissed, prompted the national organiser, Halton Cheadle, to put forward the idea of setting up a victimisation fund at the June meeting of the Branch Executive Committee for the Natal textile union. Furthermore, Mr Rampersadh, an organiser at Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mills reported that a policeman in plain clothes had been posted outside the factory gates: "he said that he was placed outside the factory to pick up any pamphlets which would be handed out by Mrs. Bolton."<sup>59</sup>

On 22 May the *Textile Forum* ran an article on the abysmal conditions at Afritex, one of Frame's factories in Mobeni. *Forum* made the point that it was only in Frame factories that the TWIU was banned from holding meetings. Instead, they were forced to "hold their meetings outside the gates, half in the road, sometimes even in the rain."<sup>60</sup> The union took the issue up with various Frame managers, but to no avail. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, the union decided to force the issue and hold a report-back meeting in Afritex. Harriet recounted this particular story at length in a number of our interviews:

I said to Halton "now, what we do is we've got to get *into* the factory and tell workers what's happening". We only could see them when they come out on shift, you know, Phillip Frame didn't allow us into the factories, and we didn't have the Industrial Council on the Textiles [cotton section]. So, I said "Halton what we do is, when the workers are dashing in" they had old white guys at the gate there seeing the workers going in and coming out, one at each side, and at like a turnstile. I said "now Halton we just go dressed like the workers are," and there were coloured women, coloured men some, Africans and so on, I said "but go in with a crush of them. But just dress ordinary in our takkies and our ordinary clothes and so on, and we'll, we'll get through and we'll get into the factory". So we did this and Halton got through quite easily because there were, you know, more men and, although he was quite pinkish and fair ... but they didn't notice him at first, but he noticed me because there weren't as many white women you see, and office workers didn't go that way. "Wait! Wait! Wait!" he said, but we *rushed* and we went, the workers had said "we'll open the back doors and you zip up and come right to the top to our can" they wanted to show us the canteen, their

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<sup>59</sup> "Minutes of a Meeting of the Branch Executive Committee of the Natal Branch of the above union (Textile Workers' Industrial Union – Natal Branch), August 26, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers. C1.13.6.21 26.

<sup>60</sup> Textile Workers' Industrial Union, *Textile Forum*, Vol. 2 No. 1. (May 22, 1973). HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999 C1.13, 6.12.2 NUTW Textile Forum.

so-called canteen, they said “you know when we’re sitting there eating our sandwiches, the birds fly through these” - they had little windows like this with no glass in them - “the birds fly through, we don’t have to put salt and pepper, the birds salt and pepper the food for us unless we’re very careful!” ... and they were right! We went up there and the birds were flitting back and forth through there, and I mean as for the wash basins and the loos! There weren’t any doors on the loos and ... some of the wash basins didn’t have, I mean he’d never attended to those things, factories’ inspectors obviously, which were supposed by law to go into *every* factory, had obviously never been in there, out of respect for Mr. *important* Mr. Frame. In about fifteen minutes of us speaking to workers and our shop stewards ... we’d told them where to be and we’d talked to them in their places, we aimed it for, you know, the time when they could leave their machines like tea-times and lunch-times, and we were in the factory and they couldn’t find us. Then *up* came Mr. Frame’s right-hand man from the office, his managing director, and said “what are you doing here? I said “we’re speaking to our workers”, “you’re not supposed to be in here!” we said “yeah well you know it’s their lunch-time”, “will you please go out!” and we said “when we’re finished we’ll go out” we were very polite, I mean he couldn’t forcibly remove us he couldn’t lay hands on us. So then we said to the workers “ok” and he said “and *where* are you going now?” I said “I am going to the other factory to do the same thing” (laughs) *whew!* He was so cross but we weren’t, we were going home ... uh oh God we got such a rocket from them about, you know going to their factory with no permission and blah blah blah, you know wending our way in when it wasn’t allowed. Anyway we ignored all that, *but* I was on the phone soon as I got back to Gale Street phoning the Labour Department the divisional inspector and saying “why have your inspectors never gone into those canteens there were *hundreds* of workers there and the place is a bloody disgrace”, you know ...<sup>61</sup>

Harriet also contacted *The Mercury*, which ran a story two days after the union’s visit. The story, entitled ““Probe filthy plant’ plea” quoted her at length. Journalists from the newspaper were barred entry to the factory. In the article, Harriet called for action from the Labour Department, and described the conditions in detail:

Cobwebs of dirt hang in festoons from the ceiling. It looks like something out of the Middle Ages, instead of a factory belonging to one of the richest men in South Africa. There is filth everywhere.<sup>62</sup>

*The Mercury* followed their initial story up with another article which stated that there would be a formal investigation by the Labour Department into conditions at the

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<sup>61</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 10, 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Mercury Reporter, ““Probe Filthy Plant’ Plea”, *The Natal Mercury*, May 17, 1973.

factory.<sup>63</sup> That the Natal branch of the TWIU was committed to taking a public stand for workers was now obvious. In the months to follow, this struggle would intensify.

The 1973 ILO conference was another public platform where fissures between Harriet's role as a member of the TUCSA executive, and her work with Natal's emerging unions, became more obvious. She was officially there because of her position on the TUCSA executive, but was focussed on making a distinction between TUCSA and the work that the Bolton Hall unions were doing in her appeal for aid from international unions.<sup>64</sup> In a later interview, Harriet remembered discussions with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' (ICFTU) Andrew Kailembo about TUCSA and the direction they were taking, and in particular the influence of Arthur Grobbelaar:

... that is what I said when we went to Geneva. I said to Kailembo, "you cannot reason with this man, his brain has calcified on this matter, he has gone as far as he can go with change."<sup>65</sup>

The TUCSA observers to the conference in Geneva were met with hostility. The strikes earlier in the year had focussed the eyes of organised international labour on South Africa, and the TUCSA delegates found themselves even more unwelcome at the conference than in previous years. Grobbelaar later commented in a report-back to a TUCSA conference that Bolton, Scheepers, Mvubelo and himself had "experienced ... a torrid time in pleading the case for democratic trade unionism in South Africa".<sup>66</sup> Stringent sanctions against South Africa were agreed to at a meeting called specifically to determine the ILO's policy towards Apartheid. TUCSA was firmly against sanctions, believing they would spell economic collapse for South Africa. TUCSA's line at the conference was that breaking off contacts in South Africa would not assist change, and advocated instead "a strengthening of these contacts with those forces seeking change

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<sup>63</sup> Mercury Reporter, "Check on Frame factory", *The Natal Mercury*, May 18, 1973.

<sup>64</sup> Harriet was overseas to attend a meeting of the ITGLWF in June. She was also given a "Leadership Grant" through TUCSA to spend some time in the USA after the ILO conference.

<sup>65</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, July 16, 1993.

<sup>66</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 152.

which would be effective and responsible.”<sup>67</sup> In this appeal, they only officially secured the assistance of the United States’ worker delegate. To add insult to their injury a strong lobby from SACTU members prevented Lucy Mvubelo from putting her case before delegates.

SACTU at this stage claimed the status of the only legitimate organisation representing South African workers, and hence the control of funding from international labour. As Southall summarises, aid from western trade unions was a contentious issue.

(SACTU) ... initially contested the legitimacy of the emergent democratic trade unions whilst, none the less, western trade union aid went ahead and in so doing breached the boycott of contacts with South Africa for long advocated by the liberation movements. Nor were matters rendered any less difficult by the fact that as the democratic trade union movement developed, it gave form to competing tendencies which meant that external assistance was almost always potentially divisive, especially when the unions themselves adopted rather different attitudes towards the issue of international labour aid.<sup>68</sup>

It was at this conference that the first major cracks in SACTU’s monopoly began to show. As pointed to above, Harriet’s role at the conference was somewhat more ambiguous than the other TUCSA delegates. Through her work as the South African representative on the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF), she already had several contacts with international unions and used these to put forward the case for assisting the handful of new African unions being formed out of the Bolton Hall. Her requests were not always successful, as evidenced by her correspondence with the International Metalworkers’ Federation. The IMF, after consulting with their affiliates in South Africa as well as with the Urban Training Project, declined to give funds to the newly formed MAWU. Their reasoning was that the registered Metal unions should form parallel unions, because the IMF was “aiming at the highest possible degree of unity, instead of having a variety of small and weak

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<sup>67</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 150.

<sup>68</sup> Roger Southall, *Imperialism or solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions* (Cape Town: UCT Press (Pty) Ltd., 1995), 28.

organisations.”<sup>69</sup> But despite pressure from SACTU, Harriet’s contacts with the ICFTU, in the form of Andrew Kailembo, ultimately did ensure funding and support from that body for the emerging unions.<sup>70</sup> In stark contrast to Grobbelaar’s assertion that SACTU’s “propaganda” campaigns “against South Africa” were turning world opinion, Harriet hinted in a newspaper interview after her return from the meeting that SACTU’s claim to be the only legitimate trade union representing South African workers was being questioned.<sup>71</sup>

““Even the leader himself admitted that he was out of touch with conditions,” said Mrs Bolton. “They are a group of tired old men, and heartbreakingly homesick.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Dragging the “old guard” into “war”: The Bolton Hall “upstarts” at the 1973 TUCSA conference.**

In many ways, the 1973 TUCSA conference in August marked an important opportunity for the Council to become a representative worker organisation. Significantly, in articles discussing the conference, Durban newspapers suggested that nothing short of the council’s reputation was on the line. According to *The Natal Mercury*, TUCSA’s follow-through on a number of resolutions taken at the conference would ultimately determine how the organisation was viewed.<sup>73</sup> Of particular note was TUCSA’s strongly worded pledge of “war” on Phillip Frame. However, the warning signs that TUCSA was not committed to the changes promised at the conference were already there. TUCSA conferences in the twenty years prior to 1973 had been the scene of fierce debates between more progressive trade unionists, and those invested in retaining the status quo. Some of these arguments have already been detailed. However, I would argue that this

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<sup>69</sup> This could also be seen as an attempt by Harriet at damage control. As already shown, it was more than likely that the UTP still felt slighted at Natal’s decision to form MAWU without consulting them first. Letter from Werner Thonnessen (Assistant General Secretary of the International Metalworkers Federation) to Harriet Bolton, August 30, 1973. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, AC1.13.6.19.

<sup>70</sup> Harriet met the ICFTU’s Andrew Kailembo in Botswana in December 1973 to discuss funding for the new unions. The ICFTU agreed to provide the money, but stressed it was on condition that the unions stay out of politics. Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980”, in *The Road to Democracy*, 209.

<sup>71</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, “Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings” (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 151.

<sup>72</sup> Mercury Reporter, “ILO warning for S.A: Your time is running out”, *The Natal Mercury*, June 28, 1973.

<sup>73</sup> Corine Jessup, “Reputation of TUCSA at Stake”, *The Natal Mercury*, August 20, 1973.

rift had never been more evident than it was between the ‘old guard’ and the Bolton Hall group at the 1973 conference.

A week before TUCSA’s annual conference was due to get underway in Durban, five-hundred textile workers were fired from the Frame group’s Wentex Mills in Jacobs. Dissatisfaction with wages and the inability to get a hearing from Frame’s management, stemming from similar grievances in June, had finally boiled over into a walk-out on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August. According to *Isisebenzi*, workers had demanded increases of between five and seven Rand, and received less than a Rand increase.<sup>74</sup> The workers were sent home and invited to reapply for their positions the following week. The majority were re-employed, but between sixty and eighty of them were not granted a position.<sup>75</sup> Among those refused were nine out of the thirteen members of the factory’s Works Committee, who felt they had been victimised. Five of the workers were also charged with contravening the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act during the strike. This led Harriet to comment to *Isisebenzi*: “If the employers demonstrate this total lack of respect for their Works Committees, then what respect are workers expected to hold?”<sup>76</sup> A letter from the union to Frame management following the strike stated that the issue of substantial wage increases had been raised a number of times, long before the strike, and the union had also brought these proposals to the notice of Frame at the National Industrial Council meeting at the end of June. The letter summed up that if management had tried to engage and negotiate a settlement, the situation would have been avoided.<sup>77</sup> Frame refused to back down, and in response the textile union voted to set up a relief fund to help support those who were fired, as well as provide legal assistance to the workers facing charges. The GWCC pledged to support the textile workers during a

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<sup>74</sup> National Union of South African Students, *Isisebenzi* (1973 – not dated otherwise) HP. Karis-Gerhart Collection. A2 675 IV Folder 116. *Isisebenzi* reported that, contrary to newspaper reports, workers were getting an average of twelve to fifteen Rand, and not the twenty to thirty Rand that Frame management claimed in the papers.

<sup>75</sup> Figures that newspapers the *Daily News* and *The Natal Mercury* reported are different to those that *Isisebenzi* provided. What is clear is that the majority of the Works Committee members were not re-employed.

<sup>76</sup> National Union of South African Students, *Isisebenzi* (1973 – not dated otherwise) HP. Karis-Gerhart Collection. A2 675 IV Folder 116.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Textile Workers Industrial Union (Natal) to the Divisional Inspector, Department of Labour, August 24, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.



meeting prior to the TUCSA conference. The memory of the strike wave from the earlier part of the year was still fresh, and coupled with the textile union's firm stand; the scene was set for a TUCSA conference where the issue of organising African workers could no longer be swept under the carpet.

Indeed it was at this conference that TUCSA finally committed itself to organising African workers into unions. However, they stopped short at inviting affiliation: this step was only taken a year later. TUCSA's reputation was in tatters internationally, and new initiatives such as the Urban Training Project and the work being done out of the Bolton Hall reflected an organisation which was increasingly out of touch with the changing labour situation in the country. TUCSA had lost what little respectability they had in Harriet's eyes at the preceding year's conference, when instead of taking action to organise African workers, they got a mandate from their member unions and then sent a letter to government, calling on them to alter legislation.<sup>78</sup> As usual, they were met with rebuttal. Therefore, the pledge to organise African workers in 1973 was a vital resolution for the organisation to adopt, but it was met with only a brief debate at the conference. This could be read as indicative of the general membership's apathetic attitude as well as unwillingness on the part of TUCSA leadership to seriously engage with the issue. While the resolution was passed with a unanimous vote, the lack of enthusiasm for the majority of TUCSA unions to seriously heed the call to organise African workers was amply illustrated in the years to come. Significantly, Harriet was the executive member who moved the resolution, which tasked individual unions with organising African workers. As she put it in her argument in favour of it:

... another chance was being given to re-establish the trade union movement, to organise the work-force of South Africa, and a great deal of consultation would have to take place between all the people involved in this concept ... if the programme was going to be successful,<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson. 1993.

<sup>79</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22,

She also called for the registered unions to organise African unions on an industry-wide basis. This was an important and perhaps potentially provocative point for her to make, for many of the TUCSA affiliated unions at the time represented splintered sections of industry, and as a result held little sway.<sup>80</sup>

The proposed resolution calling for support of the Natal textile workers meanwhile became *the* talking point of the conference. Newspapers dubbed it TUCSA's "war on Frame". Broadly, the proposed resolution pledged TUCSA's full support to the textile workers "in their just struggle for a decent and humane standard of living," and unions were encouraged to generously support the relief fund, which had been set up by the union earlier in the week.<sup>81</sup> Recognition of the TWIU at Frame factories was demanded, and the labour minister was called on to order an urgent Wage Board investigation in to the Cotton Section of the Textile Industry. A negotiated national agreement for all cotton workers was requested, and the resolution pledged TUCSA to make representations to the Labour Minister to pressure Frame into reinstating the recently dismissed workers.

The proposed resolution was initially met with great hostility from TUCSA leadership, and was put on hold until the last day of the conference. The TUCSA executive had been in touch with the Labour Department and was more inclined to believe their claims than those of the union. Harriet recalled this in an interview 20 years after the conference:

We had an emergency meeting, in a special room, there was me, there was Steve Scheepers, and there was Arthur, and he said, "look, everything we have heard, has only been from (one) trade union, and I insist on getting the other point of view," do you remember that? When he said, "the Department of Labour has given me information". (DH: I do) He said "everything that I have heard from this

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<sup>80</sup> The resolution itself read: "Conference recommends that individual affiliates of the Council take steps to examine practical ways to establish parallel Union organisations for African workers. Conference suggests to affiliates that they proceed individually to set up such organisations as agreed to by the affiliates themselves, so that at some future date recognition will be given by Government to such de facto working examples of practical and responsible labour organisation for African workers".

<sup>81</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22. "Conference considers the attitude of Management in the Frame Group towards the workers, both organised and unorganised, to be completely indefensible ... and Conference is gravely perturbed over the unjustifiable dismissals of 10 of the members of the Works Committee in the weaving, warping and raising sections ... and Vice-Chairman of the Natal Branch of the Textile Workers' Industrial Union..."

place up to now, and I want to present the following facts,” I have forgotten what those ‘facts’ were because it was like all trumped up. “I think it was going to be a disaster if TUCSA had supported this,” he said, “I want to say that in no way, we’ll not be dragged into these kind of things.”<sup>82</sup>

The Labour Department had apparently told Grobbelaar that the textile union was in a state of upheaval, and the unrest was politically motivated. The Divisional Inspector of Labour also maintained that Works Committee members had not been victimised.<sup>83</sup> In an interview with the *Financial Mail* after the conference, Grobbelaar revealed that the resolution had been put on hold as he spent the week during the conference verifying the TWIU’s complaints with the Labour Department and the Frame Group. This in part accounted for what the newspaper termed the “relative indifference” displayed during the early part of the conference to the union’s fight with Frame.<sup>84</sup>

It turns out that TUCSA executives were being deliberately reticent while general secretary Arthur Grobbelaar carefully checked out the TWIU’s complaints. As Grobbelaar put it this week: “TUCSA veterans recognised there could be difficulties. If we were going into a war, we didn’t want to go in blindfolded or find our feet in quicksand.”<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately however, Grobbelaar concluded to the newspaper that TUCSA deemed “war was justified”. The resolution was eventually passed on the final day of the conference. In his speech in support of the motion, Grobbelaar said that he was committed to the resolution, which he described as a test “in which the Trade Union movement must show that it could and would take care of employer practices such as were being used by the Frame Group.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, TUCSA’s pledge to assist the TWIU marked a potentially important turning point for the organisation, despite it being soured by the executive’s initial fierce resistance to the proposal. This is recounted in FOSATU’s records of the relationship between TUCSA and the emergent unions:

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<sup>82</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1993.

<sup>83</sup> “A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, B12.2.2.1.

<sup>84</sup> Financial Mail Reporter, “An important battle”, *Financial Mail*, August 24, 1973.

<sup>85</sup> Financial Mail Reporter, “An important battle”, *Financial Mail*, August 24, 1973.

<sup>86</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 450.

A tremendous tussle ensued on the TUCSA resolutions committee which ended with the executive backing down completely and resulting in TUCSA voting to support the strikers and donating over R6,000 towards relief pay and legal aid. This was regarded as a major victory in that the “right wing” had been discredited as “sell outs” and forced to accept an outspoken, militant line.<sup>87</sup>

Events which were to unfold over the next few months, however, revealed that TUCSA was not prepared to put its neck on the line in pursuance of this so called “militant line”.

A speech made by David Davis, then employed as an administration officer by the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund, on the second day of the Conference further distanced TUCSA leadership from the Bolton Hall unions. Davis was at the conference as an observer from the Natal textile union. The official TUCSA report of proceedings does not include a transcript of his speech, as he was ruled “out of order”, but FOSATU records summarised it thus: “supporting SACTU, ridiculing TUCSA and accusing delegates of being stupid and almost illiterate”<sup>88</sup>. He spoke in response to a resolution proposed by the National Executive Committee, which condemned the “rapid spread of International Communism on the one hand, and the unbridled growth of Multi-national Capitalism on the other hand”.<sup>89</sup> In supporting the resolution, Grobbelaar mentioned the growing hostility to TUCSA of the international labour movement, which he described as a “broadly based Communist attempt to isolate South Africa from the rest of the world”.<sup>90</sup> Grobbelaar’s words can be read as a response to his and other TUCSA delegates’ humiliating experience at the recent ILO meeting. Davis’ speech in support of SACTU must have stung, as it was largely due to their efforts that the TUCSA delegates

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<sup>87</sup>“A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, B12.2.2.1.

<sup>88</sup>“A brief history of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75”. HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, B12.2.2.1.

<sup>89</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 411.

<sup>90</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 412.

were shunned. Unsurprisingly, his words caused uproar at the conference. Norman Daniels rose on two different occasions to vehemently distance Davis from his union.<sup>91</sup>

After this suspicions of the Durban unions involved with Africans increased dramatically, and the extreme conservatism (sic) of the TUCSA executive was re-inforced. The progressive elements had the ground cut away from under their feet.<sup>92</sup>

Harriet remembered Davis' speech with some humour. She chuckled when she recalled TUCSA delegates' outrage, but then quickly moved to defend the role that she said TUCSA trade unionists saw themselves, and perhaps in some ways as an extension, herself, playing:

David Davis particularly, was also, one of those quiet but endlessly defiant people (laughs) ... He insisted on speaking at, the conference ... and he insisted on addressing them because he didn't like their policies, you know, and oh! It caused a big furore. David Hemson he was there too, but David Davis was the one who insisted on speaking to the delegates and he *wasn't* a delegate! And they were furious with him. [He spoke] about, you know, their constitution. And there were many people in TUCSA ... who didn't agree with all of TUCSA's, principles but they came in because we had to have a united movement. I mean I didn't agree with all of them but, you know ... you know there were a lot of people who had that sort of feeling you know we've got to, hold it together ... we can't, withdraw we can't leave we've got to keep it together but we've got to speak out against the things we don't agree with ...<sup>93</sup>

This tied in with a more general attitude of hostility to the young trade unionists working out of the Bolton Hall, which was soon to be overtly extended to Harriet herself. Still on the same issue, in a later interview Harriet recalled the same conference, and the attitude towards the Bolton Hall 'upstarts', which seemed to be shared among most of TUCSA's affiliates:

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<sup>91</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22.

<sup>92</sup> "A brief history of the TUACC Unions' Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliated Unions and Unregistered Unions. 14/5/75". HP. FOSATU Papers, AH 1999, B12.2.2.1.

<sup>93</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, 2005.

There was a terrific fight ... some people received them well and others “no, no you know you’re young you don’t know what you’re talking about” ... and then of course I think, secretly, they were quite thrilled when they were banned ... ja I think, I think they were quite pleased ...<sup>94</sup>

The Bolton Hall group was a thorn in TUCSA’s side. They were in a sense practising what TUCSA preached in the public sphere, but the organisation ultimately found it difficult to embrace what the Bolton Hall unions were doing. Harriet commented in an interview that TUCSA did not want to lose the government contacts and communication channels that they had established, as well as the comfortable relationship with some heads of industry, not least among them Phillip Frame.<sup>95</sup> The leadership, as well as general membership, of the Furniture and Garment unions, on the other hand, had different reasons for their growing unease at the new developments out of Bolton Hall. Harriet described the predicament she found herself in:

... the workers were afraid of, I’ll tell you why, that my Indian workers particularly and some of the white workers, but specially the Indian workers, were very afraid of getting too close to African organisations. That’s why I didn’t push unionism to them as much, even when they used our hall. My chairman, he was a Muslim, called me and said “I think you’re putting us in danger”, so I said “no we’ve always let the hall to anybody who wants to use it”, and also he said, he liked these students but he thought we shouldn’t have them you know in our offices and so on, and I said to him “why?” well then the reasons came out, because the Special Branch was visiting them at home, and harassing them and their wives you know. Knocking on the door and saying “tell your husband I am coming tonight to see him” and you know, I mean they weren’t all as brave as some people can be you know. Some Indian people were very brave, but by and large most of them were ordinary workers and they weren’t, they didn’t want to be harassed at home, and these were *government people* warning them, you know, talking to them and they were worried so it was ... I had to tread very, very carefully.<sup>96</sup>

The next decade would see attempts by TUCSA unions, to which the majority of Indian workers belonged, to establish African unions on a parallel basis; unions which were largely rejected by African workers. These unions, including the parallel to the Natal

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<sup>94</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December, 2005.

<sup>95</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, 1993.

<sup>96</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

garment union, battled to survive and by the late 1980s had mostly either fallen into ruin or had been absorbed into a more progressive union grouping. Freund asserts that this tendency of Indian dominated unions to avoid involvement with the new, more politicised African unions, was deeply entrenched and had a long history. Writing in the early 1990s, he observed then that it was only effective unions which found it possible to win over and hold Indian members:

Indian workers often have deeply internalised self-images of diligence and acceptance of authority, and this applies particularly to women; the historic fears of being undercut by African workers also run deep. In particular, pro-African National Congress politics, have not been acceptable to Indian workers who continue to understand the unions, most of the time and outside crisis situations, in terms of practical benefits rather than as a cultural component of a new hegemonic approach to South African society.<sup>97</sup>

### **Harriet, TUCSA and the “war” on Frame: August 1973 – January 1974**

Ironically, it was TUCSA’s declaration of “war” on Frame that would ultimately lead to a complete deterioration of Harriet’s relationship with the organisation. Over the months following the conference, it became increasingly clear that TUCSA leaders were not prepared to follow through on promises made at the conference. Harriet aired her dissatisfaction with their handling of the situation publicly, which obviously complicated her relationship with her colleagues on the council’s executive. The situation culminated in the banning of four of the recently appointed union officials working out of the Bolton Hall at the end of January 1974. This move by the state was to have serious implications for Harriet, TUCSA and Bolton Hall unions, both registered and unregistered. I shall now turn to a detailed exploration of the battles between TUCSA, Frame and Harriet from August 1973 to January 1974.

True to their word, four days after the TUCSA conference wrapped up amid cries of war on Frame, TUCSA sent a letter to Labour Minister Marais Viljoen, detailing their “serious concern” with the Frame Group’s lack of regard for labour legislation. In

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<sup>97</sup> Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 90.

particular, they pointed out that Frame was disregarding the Bantu Labour Regulation Amendment Act of 1973, as well as ignoring the Industrial Conciliation Act, which protected workers from victimisation. As had become customary, the Labour Minister's reply to TUCSA was brusque and unhelpful. He said that the issue was between the unions and Frame, and the Department could not intervene. It was, however, pointed out that Cotton Manufacturers had requested a wage order for the Cotton Industry, which was receiving attention.

Soon after this, newspapers made much of what they termed a "secret meeting" between Frame and TUCSA's top brass, Murray, Steve Scheepers and Grobbelaar. The *Daily News* reported that the men met behind closed doors, and added that "TUCSA is trying hard to keep its contacts with Mr Frame secret for the present". Adding to the intrigue, Scheepers was quoted thus: "This is very sensitive and we don't want any Press reports." Following the newspaper reports, TUCSA sent out a circular in which they defended their actions, and explained their luncheon meeting with Frame was in keeping with the TUCSA president's verbal undertaking at the recent conference to approach Frame at the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Meeting. It was at this lunch that they arranged a further meeting for September 7<sup>th</sup>, in Durban. With no records of the meeting save the press reports, it is difficult to come to any conclusions about its dubious, or otherwise, nature. What is apparent, however, is that this first meeting set the tone for the protracted 'clash' between TUCSA and Frame. From the outset, suspicion was cast on the relationship between TUCSA and Frame.

Grobbelaar and Scheepers met with the TWIU (Natal) on the day before the September meeting scheduled at Frame's offices in Durban. Here they agreed that the role of TUCSA representatives would be as 'peace makers'. A press statement in *The Natal Mercury* quoted Grobbelaar calling for "better understanding on both sides".<sup>98</sup> The next day, Grobbelaar, Scheepers, Harriet, Norman Daniels, Halton Cheadle, David Hemson and Johanna Cornelius met Frame and his management at his Durban offices. Harriet's memory of this meeting is worth recounting at length. Her comments suggest that she

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<sup>98</sup> Mercury Reporter, "Frame and Unions Meet", *The Natal Mercury*, September 7, 1973.



saw TUCSA's involvement as an unwelcome intervention, although whether this is more of a retrospective attitude, formed due to events which followed, it is not clear. Her tone was heavy with sarcasm as she recalled how TUCSA officials' battled to negotiate with Frame. Despite the serious issue at hand, she still found amusement in the limited success that TUCSA officials had with Frame:

... they came to negotiate between *us* and Phillip Frame and it was quite interesting because he sat behind his huge desk, Mr Frame in his *fabulous* office, and he put us all in these quite small chairs like, school children in front of him including, the TUCSA secretary. I was very impressed with his tactics ... he just sat them there, I was very interested in what he did, laughed quietly to myself, and we sat there as well. Now Arthur and them were going to tell us amateurs how you do things "you don't fight with employers you *negotiate* with them" ... so, sat there and got nowhere with Frame eventually you know he, was very tactful and polite but we didn't get anywhere. And they said to me "now you keep quiet we will negotiate with him", and I mean it was all just put off you know "oh we, we will do this when and we will see you then and" you know nothing happened. In fact, then it broke up, Arthur did get a bit impatient but the meeting broke up then it was too late. Mr Frame said "now, you know he's given us a lot of time, and he now has to go, and he's got other things to do, board meetings to go to and so on" and so then we all got up and there were *thousands* of reporters outside. They came to ... all of us and said "would you, instead of facing this horde of reporters, we'll show you out of the back door" I said "I have *never* gone out of a back door in my life! You can if you want". Well they did, I just went out and I said to the press, "we have been told not to make a statement at the moment", "where are you going?" I said "we're going back to our office now" we had been there since *five* o'clock in the morning the meeting was ten o'clock we'd been speaking to the workers early in the morning outside as they came in on shift and as the others came off shift, and told them ... why we were there and why TUCSA were there ...<sup>99</sup>

In an earlier interview, Harriet remembered that the same meeting started off with Frame furious at her for making statements to the American press about his treatment of textile workers. It is reasonable to assume that she made these comments during her earlier visit to the United States on a leadership grant from TUCSA.

Mr Frame sat at this huge I mean very good tactician you know, he's gotta have it hey, he sat at this huge desk and he brought these little chairs for us you know that we sat down, like children at school, listening to their, teacher you know. First of

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<sup>99</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

all he pulled this, was a press cutting out of his drawer and said “I have, I’m an important man! And the government has respect for me and I go to America, on important business and I’ve got to see this!” and he threw this on the desk you see. And said “I need an apology!” So I said “well, why don’t you do something about it?” you know, Arthur and the other men were saying “shh, shh, shh, shh” so I said “no, I am not going shush shush shush, I mean, it’s a fact of life.” I said “I am entitled to say, give my opinion, you can give yours if you like.” Anyway they, Arthur and them said *they* will speak you know, we had a little recess and they said to me, “you don’t say anything we’ll speak.” Then he (Frame) tried to say, the other people that weren’t, you know, part of the registered union had to leave and, I said “no ways,” you know, and I must say then, Arthur also said “no we’ve all come together and we, we’d like to speak to you”. But we got nowhere ...so, the press were all gathered ... ‘cause they’d heard all this you see, and the whole world press was outside and ... one of his senior people came and said to me you know “... if you and the other trade union people would like to go out of the side door, you know or a back door you needn’t face all these people.” I said “I’ve never gone out of a back door in my life!”<sup>100</sup>

Similar themes of male TUCSA officials trying to silence her, and smooth over relations with Frame, have come up in a number of other interviews. The way Harriet described herself as boldly outspoken in the face of Frame’s authority is also a consistent thread through her life story. In our interviews, I have gained a powerful impression of her living her life in constant resistance, and sometime rebellion, against authority. This theme is repeated in a number of her stories. Examples range from her fierce battle with the Group Areas Board to get permission for construction of the new Bolton Hall, her numerous run-ins with the police and security branch during the 1970s, as well as her living and working illegally in Britain for more than ten years. This above excerpt is also interesting because of the sense it gives us of the intense tensions and power dynamics at the meeting, usually conspicuously absent from dispassionate meeting minutes. Harriet’s assertion that she wouldn’t use the back door is also significant. She obviously felt she had the moral high ground in meeting the press head-on instead of skulking around the back. In addition, both of her accounts above are part of a bigger story about the events of that day, which is worth a brief digression. When she and Cheadle returned to the Bolton Hall, they found the place mobbed by reporters. She then, as she put it, “having never been out of a back door in my life”, showed Cheadle out the back way of the Bolton Hall,

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<sup>100</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 11, 2005.

which involved a climb down a fire escape and a scramble over a wall, in order to get some much needed lunch at a nearby hotel:

... and we ordered, a lunch or a breakfast or whatever, coffee and sandwiches and things and Halton says to me “have you got any money?” so I said “no! Don’t you?” so he said “no!” and I said “what are we going to do?” so I called the waiter I said “do you know me, waiter?” ‘cause you know the waiters had a very big union and Louis (Nelson) ... he was their secretary a good friend of mine. He said “yes, I know you. You know our secretary and our union ... you’ve been to our meetings, we know you well.” So I said “well can you go and ask your manager, tell him we’ve got no money (laughs) we’ve just come from a factory, and we’ll come back and pay later?” “Only a pleasure,” he said “we will guarantee you,” said the waiter (laughs) and then we got back and we paid them later (laughs) ... that was getting out of a back door, oh ja! We had some nice adventures, (laughs) in our day.<sup>101</sup>

Harriet’s recollection of the waiter’s familiarity with her and her work with the unions attests to the relatively tight-knit community of Indian dominated trade unions, most of which by this stage were TUCSA affiliates. It also taps in to a larger story of Harriet’s closeness and identification with Indian workers in Durban. For instance, in a number of our interviews, Harriet has referred to the cooking practices and recipes that she learned from the union members and office staff of the garment union. In email correspondence, Harriet’s daughter Pat recalled that the union members “always held (Harriet) in the highest esteem”:

I can’t tell you how many weddings we attended – and how many people would come by the office or our house with a little gift for my mom – a packet of cherries, some jelabi or other sweets things or samoosas at festival times like Deewali.<sup>102</sup>

Once the trade unionists had been escorted out the back door, a press statement, signed by Grobbelaar and Frame manager Selwyn Lurie, was released to newspapers. It was remarkable in its vagueness, stating only that they had had “open and frank” discussion

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<sup>101</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 11, 2005.

<sup>102</sup> Patricia Brickhill, e-mail message to author, June 07, 2007.

about recent events in the textile industry, and that they had agreed on “an acceptable modus operandi ... for future discussions between the Frame Group and the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union of S.A”. But, most importantly: “The Union sincerely regrets some reports of unfounded and adverse criticism of the Frame Group which have appeared in the press from time to time.”<sup>103</sup> The statement then went on to say that in order to create “a climate of cooperation for proper conciliation”, no further comments would be made to the press. Newspapers were also requested to respect this position. Such a statement, inevitably, blew up in TUCSA’s face, with Grobbelaar’s statement at the recent conference that TUCSA was “entering into battle” with Frame coming back to haunt him. Journalists and editors’ were incensed by this perceived stab at their freedom to report, and the insinuation that their reporting was somehow to blame for the poor relations in the textile industry. “The battlefield has been the boardroom and the Press the only known casualty. No wonder some trade unionists are uneasy, even alarmed” commented a *Daily News* editorial entitled “Some War”.<sup>104</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, newspapers took up the issue of the textile union “regretting” some of their criticisms of the Frame group’s horrendous conditions of employment. It was now that reporters recounted Grobbelaar’s declaration of war on Frame just a few weeks earlier, and contrasted this with the very half-hearted joint statement from TUCSA and Frame. While Harriet did not mention it in the interviews I have had with her, newspaper reports suggest that she tendered her resignation to the Natal textile union after the disappointing meeting with Frame. This made headline news in the *Daily News*, under the banner: “Frame row: Mrs. Bolton threatens to resign”:

Several unionists quickly denounced the outcome of the talks as a ‘sell-out’ and referred to the promises made at TUCSA’s annual conference in Durban last month when delegates demanded firm action to end the alleged victimisation of Frame’s textile workers. Mrs Harriet Bolton, who accused the TUCSA secretariat at the time, of being ‘too casual’ said today she would offer her resignation at a meeting of the Textile Workers’ executive.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Press Release, Durban September 7, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

<sup>104</sup> Daily News leader, “Some War”, *Daily News*, September 10, 1973.

<sup>105</sup> Daily News reporter, “Frame row: Mrs. Bolton threatens to resign”, *Daily News*, September 10, 1973.

In the same article, Grobbelaar dismissed the criticisms from Harriet as being “a lot of malarkey”. He claimed everyone at the meeting agreed to the press statement. Harriet denied this, however. Grobbelaar, meanwhile, blamed reporters for being “hysterical” and losing sight of the “real objectives”. On the same day the *Mercury* quoted two other unionists, from the Typographical and Engineering union, slamming TUCSA’s actions. Harriet meanwhile claimed she had been gagged: “Mr Frame and TUCSA have told me I may not speak to the media”.<sup>106</sup> The *Rand Daily Mail* ran similar stories, and in their editorials questioned the “sudden reversal” of the union on the Frame issue:

If a wrong image of the Frame Group’s labour practices has been given then let’s have the facts. It is too important an issue for the parties concerned to get away with their refusal to say more.<sup>107</sup>

*The Mercury* editorials similarly denounced TUCSA’s actions, and called for an explanation of “their present awkward posture”, which they said would be needed urgently, in order to avoid “trouble”.<sup>108</sup> The next day *The Mercury* sought the opinion of Barney Dladla. He said what the statement amounted to was “an attempt to whitewash the Frame Group”. Dladla also made the point that TUCSA only wanted to establish African trade unions so that they could control them. He called for the formation of exclusively African unions, which wouldn’t be dominated by white officials.<sup>109</sup> On the same page came the assurance under the headline “Bolton will not resign”.

In an interview with *The Mercury*, she said: “I certainly felt like doing so on Friday after our meeting with Mr. Frame. “But Mrs. Bolton does not give up so easily,” said a colleague, “and she certainly would not allow any action of hers to jeopardise the future of her workers.”<sup>110</sup>

Therefore despite the statement making it clear that TUCSA would not issue any further comment, Harriet was quoted in various newspapers following the meeting. Her offer of resignation in itself spoke volumes, and her pointed refusal to comment because others

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<sup>106</sup> Mercury reporter, “Unions slam Frame ‘deal’”, *The Natal Mercury*, September 10, 1973.

<sup>107</sup> Rand Daily Mail leader, “Needed: The Facts”, *Rand Daily Mail*, September 10, 1973.

<sup>108</sup> *The Natal Mercury* leader, “A lot to explain”, *The Natal Mercury*, September 11, 1973.

<sup>109</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Bolton will not resign,” *The Natal Mercury*, September 11, 1973.

<sup>110</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Bolton will not resign,” *The Natal Mercury*, September 11, 1973.

had instructed her not to, was also an obvious voicing of her disapproval.<sup>111</sup> The *Financial Mail*, meanwhile, had a more positive take on the outcome of the meeting. They emphasised the importance of the news that Frame would support a national Industrial Council for the cotton section of the textile industry, which would give protection to one-hundred thousand workers. “Up to now Frame has used its powerful position to block the formation of such a council.”<sup>112</sup>

Grobbelaar was quite obviously incensed by Harriet’s refusal to toe the TUCSA line and shut up about Frame. On September 26<sup>th</sup>, the TUCSA Officers’ Committee released a Progress Report on the Natal textile issue. This was necessary because, as they put it, “a considerable degree of misunderstanding appears to have arisen amongst the Council’s affiliates (and others)”.<sup>113</sup> They blamed the “misunderstanding” on press reports following the council’s meeting with Frame which, they said, were “compounded of a mixture of conjecture, supposition, and fantasy”. The report went on to point a finger at Harriet, although it did not name her, as one of the people at the meeting who went on to make comments, although she apparently supported the decisions at the meeting. This, the circular maintained, was “particularly distressing”. The Progress Report also detailed the agreements that had been reached with Frame during the meeting. They included a pledge from Frame that the group would not oppose unionisation of workers, that they would support efforts to set up an Industrial Council for the Cotton section of the textile industry, that union officials would be given access to senior Frame management if they wished to make complaints or raise issues, and that a general improvement in wages would be considered. Why these - admittedly rather broad - outcomes were not made public to the press in the first place is not entirely clear.

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<sup>111</sup> David Hemson also made comments to *the Sunday Express*, but was not as overtly critical as Harriet. He denied TUCSA had backed down in the dispute with Frame, and said that they were pursuing all avenues possible, within the confines of industrial legislation. Express reporter, “Union man denies TUCSA backdown”, *Sunday Express*, September 9, 1973.

<sup>112</sup> Financial Mail reporter, “Frame and the unions Armistice”, *Financial Mail*, September 14, 1973.

<sup>113</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Circular No. 49/1973 re: The Council’s Dispute with the Frame Group, September 26, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

A few days after this, a meeting of the National Industrial Council for the textile industry was held. The General Secretary for the TWIU (SA), Norman Daniels, maintained that “a very cordial and friendly atmosphere prevailed.”<sup>114</sup> At this meeting it was agreed that Cheadle could consult with Selwyn Lurie, from the Frame Group. During informal discussions with Frame it was also agreed that close liaison should be established between the union and management, and that the union would be allowed to address workers at the factory. This promise was to ring hollow, however, until well into the 1980s. A NUTW booklet, detailing the union’s struggle for recognition with the Frame Group, is testimony to this: “today 11 years later these same Frame workers still fight a bitter struggle for the recognition of their union...”<sup>115</sup> Despite Daniels’ positive sounding feedback, no significantly new ground seemed to have been covered at the meeting. The TUCSA Progress Report, however, rounded off with the statement: “TUCSA has done everything in its power to meet with the requirements of the Textile Workers’ Industrial Union.”<sup>116</sup>

Meanwhile, the five workers who had been charged under the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act during the August strike at Wentex, were found not guilty of inciting the strike at the Durban Magistrate’s Court in November. The court heard that despite voicing their complaints about low wages to management a number of times, the workers got no reply.<sup>117</sup> They were asking for R21 a week, or for a combination of the two five

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<sup>114</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Circular No. 49/1973 re: The Council’s Dispute with the Frame Group, September 26, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

<sup>115</sup> “UkuQaqqa Ifindo Frame – the struggle for recognition”, 1984. HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999 1312.2.1.

<sup>116</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Circular No. 49/1973 re: The Council’s Dispute with the Frame Group, September 26, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame group”. Floating amidst a sea of official correspondence between the TWIU and TUCSA, is a foolscap page of handwritten notes, apparently Grobbelaar’s. It appears that this page formed his rough draft for the first Progress Report that TUCSA issued on the 26<sup>th</sup> September, in response to the outcry over the Frame issue. Although it details much that the progress report covers, it is interesting because it makes more direct reference to Harriet’s activities. Also interesting is how Grobbelaar expresses his dissatisfaction with the resolution taken at the conference. Although written in keywords, he clearly states his reservations “by self and others” over the resolution and his uneasiness about the issue, especially as it became “the issue” of Conference. Under the subheading “The Press Statement” Grobbelaar lists the reaction of *The Natal Mercury*, Harriet’s statements, “TUCSA muzzling Mrs. Bolton”, statement of resignation and “further denials etc.” Undated Document, Arthur Grobbelaar, HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

<sup>117</sup> Rand Daily Mail Reporter, “Textile strikers got ‘no reply’”, Rand Daily Mail, October 19, 1973.

percent increases for 1973 and 1974. From a later report to the Natal area division of TUCSA, Cheadle reported that “Under cross examination it became clear that Management had been unreasonable and that workers had attempted several times to negotiate a settlement.”<sup>118</sup> However, during the case five state witnesses claimed they had been forced to make statements against the workers who had been charged. The state promptly charged them with perjury. Cheadle reported that the union decided to provide support for their legal defence. Money from the textile relief fund was also being used to support the sacked Frame workers who had not yet managed to find work.

In early January, the new wage rates for cotton workers in the textile industry were introduced. Although the union had requested that they be consulted on the wages, they were excluded from the process which was finally decided by the Labour minister and employers, dominated by Phillip Frame. This brought into being a wage scale for around one-hundred thousand workers, who previously had had no wage regulating measure. Some newspapers pointed out that the rates set down were an improvement on some of the wages set through the national industrial council in other sections of the textile industry. The new minimum wage prescribed for Border Area factories was ten Rand a week, rising to twelve after eighteen months, and for women eight Rand a week rising to just under ten Rand a week. The TWIU (South Africa) made known their unhappiness about their exclusion from the negotiations, and said the scales “could have been improved considerably.” However, they added they were grateful that over 100 000 workers would now have some degree of protection.<sup>119</sup> What wasn’t mentioned was the fact that the new wage scales would make little impact on long-term, as well as skilled, urban workers. It was exactly this problem which led to further unrest at Frame’s factories in January 1974. *Isisebenzi* also pointed out that since the wage order had been calculated, the cost of living had increased by 12 percent:

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<sup>118</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Natal Area Division, Minutes of the divisional Meeting Held at Caxton Hall, Beach Grove Durban on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Norman Daniels to The General Secretary, re: Industrial Relations in the Textile Industry, November 28, 1973. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.



Some workers said that now they were getting a better wage they had lost their bonuses. They didn't like the way management was implementing this new wage order. So they went on strike to try and get a just wage for their labour.<sup>120</sup>

Harriet made the point to *The Natal Mercury* that the new wage rates were also met with resistance because of the absolute lack of consultation with the cotton workers; the people who they were intended for. The Natal union knew well in advance about worker dissatisfaction and impending industrial action in Frame's factories in January 1974. Post strikes, in a letter to the local Labour Department, Harriet outlined the extent to which union officials went to try and engage management and stop the situation escalating. This included union officials contacting Frame directly to discuss worker grievances. However, Frame flatly refused to entertain Cheadle and Hemson's suggestions, saying there was no way he could "break" the cotton order by increasing wages so soon after it was implemented.<sup>121</sup> What followed was to have serious consequences for the union officials, the union itself and finally the direction that Harriet's life took.

On Friday 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1974, workers downed tools at Pinetex Mills. Union officials met with workers, who told them Frame had instructed them to leave the factory grounds and come back on Monday morning, when he would speak to them. One of the union organisers had also been arrested, allegedly for not having the correct papers with him. On Monday morning, Harriet, Cheadle and two union organisers waited in vain with workers for Frame's arrival. Meanwhile, workers at Dano Textiles in Pinetown and Hammarsdale had joined the strike. By Monday afternoon, not one of the Frame Group's factories was left untouched by the strike. At Nortex, police cordoned off around 100 workers, and arrested over 200 picketers outside Seltex. Frame still flatly refused to speak to the union. At an emergency meeting held on Monday night, the union decided to call on Barney Dladla for assistance. He addressed around 5 000 workers at the Clermont Stadium on Tuesday morning, and then led them in a march to the Frametex factory gate,

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<sup>120</sup> National Union of South African Students, "The January Strikes", *Isisibenzi*, (undated). HP. Karis-Gerhart Collection, A2 675 IV Folder 116.

<sup>121</sup> Letter to Mr. R. Jackson from Mrs. H. Bolton, January 28, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, AB 4.2.104, "TUCSA's dispute with the Frame Group".

where he demanded that management negotiate with workers.<sup>122</sup> Some union representatives and Dladla were then allowed a hearing, and they negotiated between forty and eighty cents increases for long service workers. A raise which Dladla termed “peanuts”. The workers were incensed, and the union directed them back to Clermont Stadium “in order to get them away from outside the factory and to prevent any disturbance.”<sup>123</sup> Here, under heavy police and Security Branch surveillance, Dladla and Cheadle addressed the workers again, and convinced them to go back to work. Their reasoning was that not all workers had joined the union, and many were not in solidarity with the strikers. The strike was therefore in danger of being undercut as workers trickled back under pressure from police. This would make negotiation with management impossible. Secondly, “a return to work if we all returned together would not constitute a defeat but merely a draw”. The *Isisebenzi* report of the strike concluded that workers went back to factories the next day with the attitude that the strike was “one battle in the struggle for a living wage.”<sup>124</sup> Ironically, it was this speech which apparently decided government officials to impose banning orders on Cheadle.<sup>125</sup> Around 250 workers were arrested during the strikes; some workers who tried to get away were chased down by police dogs. In her letter to the Labour Department, meanwhile, Harriet said the union felt very strongly that wage grievances should be settled by the trade union and the Labour Department, “and that the firms should be weaned of the inclination to call in armed police, on wage negotiations, to do the work of the Labour Department and the Trade Union.”<sup>126</sup> Meanwhile, messages of solidarity from associated International unions, as well as from local organisations, notably the Natal Indian Congress, flowed in to the Bolton Hall. Harriet clearly remembered the pickets, and heading up the march with Dladla and Cheadle:

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<sup>122</sup> Dave Hemson et al, “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, 269.

<sup>123</sup> Letter to Mr. R. Jackson from Mrs. H. Bolton, January 28, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

<sup>124</sup> National Union of South African Students, *Isisebenzi*, “The 1974 Strikes” (undated), HP, Karis-Gerhart Collection, A2 675 IV Folder 116.

<sup>125</sup> Tim Clarke, “Did Speech Trigger Unionist’s Banning?”, February 2, 1974.

<sup>126</sup> Letter to Mr. R. Jackson from Mrs. H. Bolton, January 28, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, AB 4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

... the, head of the Special Branch he was there, and they picked up some of what they thought were the strike leaders you know and they had them in the Black Maria, you know, taking them off, and these workers were singing, you know freedom songs as they were borne off. Ag, they were each fined fifty Rand which the union paid for them and they were released for being disorderly; attending the meeting outside the factory was being disorderly. Halton was, no David was taking pictures ... and luckily he had taken one reel and he handed me the reel he must still have those pictures somewhere, of the Special Branch and arresting the people and shoving them into these vans and whatnot and he gave me the one reel and I stuck it down my dress and I think, threw it in the boot of my car. But then the next minute, when he was taking pictures they grabbed his camera ... but he had some of them already. There was a lovely picture somewhere which I think David must still have ... that policeman said to me “are you satisfied now Mrs Bolton?” ‘cause they were taking these workers off in the police van so I know I punched him on the arm, David took that picture, and saying “are *you* satisfied? You’ve done this!” bashed him on the on the arm ... and, that’s the picture that David must have somewhere if it came out (laughs) ... banging him on the arm and saying “are you satisfied?” God, he was lieutenant something or other ...<sup>127</sup>

Harriet, meanwhile, was criticised by Daniels’ national textile union for her handling of the strike.<sup>128</sup>

A few days later, Harriet wrote to Grobbelaar, requesting that more money be released from the textile workers’ relief fund to reimburse the Garment union, which had fronted the cash for the bail of those arrested and detained during the strikes. Grobbelaar provided the money, but added that the officers’ committee expressed reservations about doing this:

... since the purpose for which it is required does not fall strictly within the frame-work for which the Trust Fund was established ... making this amount presently available in the most recent dispute is hardly justified.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 11, 2005.

<sup>128</sup> “Workers we call on you to resist Daniels’ union and stand by your union the National Union of Textile Workers, we call on members of Daniels’ union to resign and join the National Union of Textile Workers”, (undated), HP, FOSATU records AH 1999 C1.13.6.21.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Arthur Grobbelaar to Harriet Bolton, January 25, 1974. TUCSA Records A.B.4.2.104, “TUCSA’s dispute with the Frame Group”.

Harriet's furious reply to Grobbelaar is worth quoting at length. She requested that he convey her message to the members of the Officers' Committee who had expressed reservations about the use of the money:

Here in Durban workers are facing every traditional obstruction that workers have ever faced in their endeavours to make a stand as organised Trade Unionists. The workers concerned are Indian, Coloured and African workers but in their human aspirations and hopes, they are no different to white workers and history recalls the fight white workers had, to secure Trade Union rights for themselves in the 1920-1924 era.

The Constitution of TUCSA refers to all workers irrespective of race, colour or creed when laying down the principles on which TUCSA is founded. Surely all the theories to which we all pay lip service at Conference, and to the Trade Union Movement throughout the World, should be able to stand translation to reality.

In Durban in many industries where Unions are being founded, and particularly in the Textile Industry, a number of dedicated Trade Unionists (employed by Unions who pay affiliation fees to TUCSA), are organising unorganised workers into Trade Unions, and what is seen is partly the logical follow-up of workers being organised to deal with situations which they find intolerable (the conditions and the wages in their factories), but which they have to suffer when standing alone and can deal with only when organised. This is a classic Trade Union situation, and if the workers cannot turn to the Trade Union Movement as led to expect, where can they turn?

I know the answer to that, and I am sure the Officers Committee do too. I think it is fairly obvious that the first home for workers is the Trade Union Movement, with support and help from those already there. It is obvious to me that the task of the Trade Union Movement is to give help and advice, and not to stand on the side lines and to be technical or split hairs about which workers should be helped. The workers here are in the struggle together, and all are affected by the events taking place. They are not separate because the law is written down to separate them.

Harriet then extended an invitation to members of the Officers' Committee to come to Durban and meet the union and workers involved in the textile struggle; an invitation which, incidentally, was never taken up. She concluded:

In my opinion, the workers here are engaged in the struggle of their lives, and they are making history for the Trade Union Movement. We thank the Officers for releasing the money ... I think it can be accepted that being in goal overnight

is no joke, especially for Mothers of babies and small children. The workers are making their sacrifices in the name of the Trade Union Movement, and I feel moved to help wherever possible, and I hope the whole of TUCSA feels the same way.<sup>130</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Harriet's sense that the strikes and unrest in the textile industry in 1973 and 1974 represented something significant for history, that workers were involved in "the struggle of their lives", is echoed in most of the records from this period. The 1973 strikes have since been marked down as perhaps *the* vital turning point in South Africa's shorthand labour history. At the time itself, there was certainly a sense of the magnitude of the events which were sweeping Durban and South Africa. As Harriet recalled in a later interview: "It *was* exciting ... because we could see change coming, we could, it was almost within our grasp".<sup>131</sup> Soon after Harriet penned her letter to Grobbelaar the state banned and placed under house arrest Cheadle, Hemson, Davis and Cunningham-Brown, or the "Bolton Hall Four", as the press dubbed them. It is generally accepted that the unrest in the textile industry in early 1974 was a major precipitating factor to their banning.<sup>132</sup> In the House of Assembly a week later, Viljoen defended the state's action, saying the four were "trying to disturb industrial peace and order". He added "Whites" had been behind the strikes in the textile industry, "and that they were trying to use the workers to break down industrial peace."<sup>133</sup> While their bannings were a major setback for the Bolton Hall group, the strikes of 1973 had created a vital momentum which would ultimately prove impossible to quell, despite the harsh responses from the state.

1973 also marked an important turning point for Harriet's professional and ultimately personal life. As this chapter has detailed, her frustration with TUCSA's obduracy in the face of what she recognised as an important "new wind" of worker activism reached the

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<sup>130</sup> Letter to J.A. Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, January 28, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, "TUCSA's dispute with the Frame Group".

<sup>131</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>132</sup> Dave Hemson et al., "White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement" in *The Road to Democracy*.

<sup>133</sup> "Viljoen defends bannings", *Rand Daily Mail*, February 7, 1974.

point where she began to criticise the organisation's policies publicly for the first time. The consequences of this are considered in the next chapter.

## Chapter Five: “Durban’s Rebel Trade Unionist”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Mrs Bolton Foresees Natal’s own ‘TUCSA’”, *Daily News*, February 12, 1974.

## Introduction

A *Sunday Tribune* file photograph shows Harriet Bolton elegant in a dress, heels and pearls, striking a pose outside the Durban City Hall with hand on hip as a member of the Special Branch snaps photos of people at a gathering there. The photograph, reprinted in the 1990s to accompany a profile piece on Harriet, is undated but was probably taken at a Black Sash demonstration in February, organised to protest the banning of the “Bolton Hall Four”.<sup>2</sup> In interviews, Harriet remembered the demonstration vividly:

We just stood there with placards and I want to tell you some of the people that I knew in Durban, when they saw us there, they crossed the road. People were so gutless you know. Whites. Whites, they were so gutless. A lot of people that I knew quite well didn't want anything to do with me 'cause we had, you know, placards in the street. Amazing.<sup>3</sup>

Both the photograph and Harriet's recollection of the protest meeting give us a glimpse into the world of Harriet Bolton in 1974: one shadowed by near constant harassment and surveillance by the state and one which was clearly out of step with white middle class sentiment. But it was also one bolstered by a network of activists and friends, mostly focussed around the hub of activity that Bolton Hall had become. As Chapter Four details, Harriet had made a name for herself as an authoritative and forthright personality in Durban's press during the course of 1973. This chapter will chart how this personality developed into “Durban's rebel trade unionist”.

For Eric Hobsbawm, 1973 marked a major turning point in world history. The “Golden Age” had ended decisively, and post-1973 marked an era of economic uncertainty and difficulty.<sup>4</sup> William Beinart too characterises the mid-1970s as a turning point in South African history:

The oil crisis of 1973, the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire in 1974, the rise of black worker militancy and the Soweto students' revolt of 1976 all

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Stevens, “The rich life of a defiant heroine”, *Sunday Tribune*, January 19, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 11, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (Great Britain: Abacus, 1994).



combined to slow growth and jolt the government into reconsideration of its direction ... A cycle of insurrection, reform, and repression began.<sup>5</sup>

For Harriet and the Bolton Hall unions, both registered and unregistered, 1974 was a year marked by increased state repression. As I have detailed, employers could generally count on police support during strikes. The Special Branch had also paid the Bolton Hall unions some unwelcome attention during the heated negotiations which led up to the 1971 Currie's Fountain Strike. However, from early on in 1974, the state further intensified its efforts to intimidate workers and union officials. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) too came under more state pressure in the form of the Schlebusch commission, which later in the year declared NUSAS an "affected organisation". From as early as February 1974, NUSAS officials warned the Bolton Hall unions that the organisation may no longer be able to continue contributing financially to the new unions.<sup>6</sup> This chapter considers how Harriet negotiated and responded to this increasingly repressive context, which at times threatened the safety of both herself and her children. For despite the state's action, as well as strong opposition from TUCSA and the GWIU, minutes from meetings and Harriet's correspondence with international labour attest that organising of the new unions continued apace. I argue that Harriet continued to assist in laying vital foundations from which a strong, democratic trade union movement would ultimately emerge. An important component of this was the maintenance and strengthening of links with the international movement. This chapter also considers how the banning of the "Bolton Hall Four" brought to a critical head the already evident divisions between TUCSA and Harriet. In the wake of the changing labour context post-1973, and the state's crackdown on trade unions, TUCSA seemed to chart an ever more cautious path and made further moves to distance itself from the work being done out of Bolton Hall. As the year progressed, TUCSA publicly disassociated itself from Harriet's work with the new unions, despite her position on the organisation's executive committee. In turn, her criticisms of TUCSA for their lack of support earned her the label "Durban's rebel trade unionist" in the press. Ostracised by her TUCSA

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<sup>5</sup> William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Mr. C. R. Vial from Karel Tip, February 4, 1974. Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter HP), FOSATU Records, AH999/D2 CAS.

colleagues and seemingly out of step with the leadership and membership of the GWIU, by mid-1974 Harriet had made the decision to resign from the union. Shortly afterwards, she announced her intention to quit all her union posts and leave for England with her children, two of whom were still at school. Durban's press mourned the departure of a "Mother of six ... and 30 000".

### **The banning of the "Bolton Hall Four"**

David Davis, David Hemson and Halton Cheadle were banned for five years under the Suppression of Communism Act late on Friday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974. Hemson, who was boarding with Harriet at the time, was put under house arrest at her Ramsay Avenue home. Jeannette Cunningham-Brown was served with her banning order after ten o'clock the same night. Durban's press broke the news of the bans the next day, and described the astonishment and shock which followed:

When Jeanette Cunningham Brown's fiancé informed the crowd gathered in Harriet Bolton's lounge late last night of his girlfriend's banning, they thought he was joking. "Oh no, not Jeanette," said Mrs. Bolton, "Who will they ban next?"<sup>7</sup>

From the outset, Harriet condemned the bannings as a transparent attempt by government to stifle the work of trade unions. She labelled them "the suppression of the trade unions, not the suppression of Communism."<sup>8</sup> The bannings were met with outrage and condemnation by a number of other South African trade unionists, opposition politicians as well as sections of the international movement who were in contact with Harriet and had been closely following the recent strikes in the textile industry. While "Hundreds of African workers streamed into union offices in Durban and Pietermaritzburg ... after hearing the news", Bolton Hall was also flooded by messages of solidarity and sympathy. Barney Dladla slammed the state's action: "To me the whole thing stinks to high heaven ... The whole intention is to frighten not only the Black trade union leaders but also the

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<sup>7</sup> Daily News Reporter, "They thought he was joking ...", *Daily News*, February 2, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Daily News Reporter, "Stinks to high heaven, says Dladla", *Daily News*, February 2, 1974.

trade union members.”<sup>9</sup> Various union officials, including the Clothing Workers’ Lucy Mvubelo and the Distributive Workers’ Ray Altman were also quoted condemning the move in the press.<sup>10</sup> In newspaper reports the day after the bans were enacted, TUCSA’s Arthur Grobbelaar described the state’s action as “particularly harsh” and added that the group should be brought before court “for a just trial and verdict” if government suspected any wrongdoing.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, however, TUCSA did not release a statement on the bannings until a week later. As will be discussed, the organisation’s officials also made no attempt to contact Harriet, or send a message of solidarity or support after hearing of the bannings, despite Cheadle and Hemson being full-time officials employed by TUCSA affiliated unions. This lack of communication from TUCSA headquarters was obviously indicative of TUCSA’s deep suspicion of the work being done out of the Bolton Hall. I would argue their taciturn response was foreseeable and merely symptomatic of the divisions and distrust which had been entrenched from at least the time of the 1973 TUCSA conference.

Political parties also had their say on the bannings. Helen Suzman “deplored” the state’s action, while other Progressive and United Party leaders added their voices to the chorus, also calling on government to let the four have their day in court.<sup>12</sup> Both the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL/CIO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) sent messages condemning the bans, but the ICFTU went a step further and said they were considering calling for world boycott of South African goods, a claim that earned them newspaper headlines in South Africa.<sup>13</sup> Pledges of financial support again flowed in to Harriet from international unions, particularly so from the ICFTU who, as discussed in the previous chapter, had

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<sup>9</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Stinks to high heaven, says Dladla”, *Daily News*, February 2, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Weekend Argus Reporter, “Bannings on union men seen as ‘harsh’”. *Weekend Argus*, February 2, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Weekend Argus Reporter, “Bannings on union men seen as ‘harsh’”. *Weekend Argus*, February 2, 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Sunday Times Reporter, “Banned union girl Jeanette hopes to wed”, *Sunday Times*, February 3, 1974.

<sup>13</sup> Tribune Reporter, “Bannings spark world boycott moves”, *Sunday Tribune*, February 3, 1974. AFL/CIO sent a telegram to Viljoen “strongly protesting” the bannings, particularly in the context of the recent shooting incident at Carletonville. The telegram also called for the release of Drake Koka. Telegram to J. Arthur Grobbelaar from George Meany, February 8, 1974, HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426, AC 3.3.5, File 2.

recently agreed to channel financial support to the new unions. A letter to Harriet from the ICFTU's Daniel Pedersen illustrates their close links at the time:

Thank you for your letter of 4 February which has put so much in a nutshell. As you know we have done what we could but are now wondering how our four friends are managing to sustain themselves. Although we know how very busy you are we should appreciate your advice in this respect.<sup>14</sup>

A number of overseas unions also chose to channel their assistance through the ITGLWF. Strong representations were made by the Dutch textile union as well as the Tokyo textile union and the Japanese labour federation. Collectively, they sent 1000 US dollars from the Textile Workers' Asian Regional Organisation to the ITGLWF.<sup>15</sup> However, the only evidence of Britain's Trade Union Congress involvement during this period was a letter to Harriet from the organisation's president, asking her for more information on the recent textile strikes.

Under the banning order, the "Bolton Hall Four" were restricted to their homes during evenings and over weekends. They were also barred from factories, the harbour, "African townships", and educational institutions and were not allowed to be quoted.<sup>16</sup> Government officialdom continued to maintain that the "Bolton Hall Four" were banned for activities other than their "legitimate trade union work". Newspaper reports attested to the state's attitude that those banned were "agitators" who were behind the labour upheavals in the textile industry both in 1973 and in 1974. Police closely monitored the orders. Two days after the banning, they swooped on Cheadle's home at the Bluff and declared a visit by family and friends, including NUSAS president Charles Nupen, an "illegal social gathering".<sup>17</sup> Harriet's nineteen-year-old son Peter was there too, and was later visited by police at his work at the *Daily News*, where he was a compositor. He was

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<sup>14</sup> Letter to Harriet Bolton from Daniel Pedersen, February 22, 1974. HP. FOSATU Records, AH999/C1.13.6.19 Textile Workers Industrial Union

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Charles Ford from Tadanobu Usami, President of Textile Workers' Asian Regional Organisation (TWARO), February 22, 1974. HP, FOSATU Records, AH999/C1.13.6.19 Textile Workers Industrial Union.

<sup>16</sup> Daily News Reporter, "Local strikes aftermath Ban on four young trade unionists", *Daily News*, February 2, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> Daily News Reporter, "'Illegal Gathering' Police enter restricted man's home", *Daily News*, February 4, 1974.

forced to give them a statement. Harriet later recalled Peter was “shattered” by the incident.<sup>18</sup> Harriet also recalled numerous visits from the Special Branch to her home in Ramsay Avenue, where they would count tea cups to check how many visitors Hemson had been in contact with. They were also on occasion found hiding outside her kitchen window, taping conversations and often hovered in their vehicles outside her home. In the first few weeks following the bans, newspapers documented Jeanette Cunningham-Brown and Mike Murphy’s struggle to get married and their fight to live together. This included a wedding ceremony and reception where she had to “stand to one side while guests outside the church shouted their champagne toasts from a distance.”<sup>19</sup> To the reader now, some of the action taken by the state might seem to border on the farcical. But for banned people the restrictions had very real and painful consequences. However, Harriet recalled with some humour the tactics her family employed to throw police off, as well as their chutzpah in the face of authority. This included her children taking Hemson to the drive-in in the boot of the car, and late night dinners with Rick Turner: “We had a cheek in those days,” she summed up.<sup>20</sup>

... ‘cause he [Turner] was banned as well you know, although God knows we used to go out to restaurants about seven of us (laughs) which he wasn’t allowed to. We used to go in the Victoria area you know ... it was called the “Indian area” we used to go in that area so that, you know, then they didn’t see us ... and also people were more sympathetic to us they wouldn’t report us, and he often was in my house seeing David, which also wasn’t allowed. Two banned people...<sup>21</sup>

But Harriet also had to contend with more sinister activities from the Security Police. Over and above general harassment of union officials at the Bolton Hall and attempts to force the union to curtail their activities through Group Areas Act technicalities, her car brakes were tampered with a number of times. This mostly happened during the weeks before and after the textile strikes in January 1974. Just three days before the bannings, police commented to the press that Harriet was “the target of a murder plot”: “I am now terrified of driving. Every time I start the car to take my children anywhere I think to

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<sup>18</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 23, 2006 and Daily News Reporter, “Peter Bolton is to leave SA”, *Daily News*, April 27, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Ban bride misses her reception”, *Daily News*, February 4, 1974.

<sup>20</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December 10, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 20, 2006.

myself: “What if they have done something?” she said to the *Sunday Tribune* in late January.<sup>22</sup> By early February, Harriet’s car had been interfered with four times, while a car belonging to an unnamed newspaper reporter who visited her in February was also tampered with. Hemson’s vehicle, parked outside their home, was also targeted. A brick was thrown through his car windscreen and “Commie” was spray-painted on his vehicle. During February, Harriet’s family was woken twice by a “proowler” on their property. Harriet commented to *The Mercury* that she viewed the incidents as “blatant intimidation”.<sup>23</sup>

### **An account of the Currie’s Fountain protest meeting**

Harriet organised a meeting to protest the bannings at the Currie’s Fountain Stadium on Saturday, 9<sup>th</sup> February. With no word of support forthcoming from TUCSA, she telephoned Grobbelaar and warned him that the GIWU’s executive committee had an ultimatum for the federation: either TUCSA supported the protest meeting, or the union would give notice and withdraw from TUCSA. This was no small threat: the GIWU was TUCSA’s second-largest affiliate, with just under twenty-one thousand paid up members.<sup>24</sup> Unions paid affiliation fees according to membership size, and therefore their disaffiliation would have meant a significant financial knock for TUCSA. With a majority Indian membership, the union was also strategically important for TUCSA’s claims of “inter-racial cooperation”. In newspaper reports on the day of the protest meeting, Grobbelaar confirmed that the Officers’ Committee had decided that TUCSA would not support the meeting, although he did not elaborate on the reasons why.<sup>25</sup> He

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<sup>22</sup> Sunday Tribune Reporter, “Someone trying to kill me – Harriet”, *Sunday Tribune*, January 27, 1974.

<sup>23</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Boltons: Prowler incident”, *The Natal Mercury*, February 6, 1974.

<sup>24</sup> The only larger TUCSA affiliate was the Western Cape garment union, whose membership extended to over thirty-thousand members. Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Durban, August 1973. Report of Proceedings (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1973). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ad 1.22, 458 – 464 and TUCSA Report of Proceedings 1974, 541 – 547.

<sup>25</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Garment workers to quit TUCSA in ‘no protest’ row”, *The Natal Mercury*, February 11, 1974. History shows that perhaps Harriet should not have expected a different response. In 1963, in the face of mass bannings and detention without trial of SACTU unionists, TUCSA did little more than deplore the legislation which allowed for banning. Again in 1976, after twenty-seven trade unionists were banned, TUCSA organised a meeting with the labour minister, but did not go beyond a general condemnation of government’s legislation. Letter to J.R Altman, National Secretary, National Union of Distributive

did, however, release a revealing statement condemning the practice of banning in general:

The unexplained banning of these persons poses a serious threat to the security of the labour movement for we do not know whether or not illegal and subversive activities have (or have not) recently taken place within our ranks.<sup>26</sup>

While some newspapers put the attendance figure at the Currie's Fountain protest at around 700, both Durban dailies agreed it was over 2000. A photograph printed in Maré and Hamilton's *An Appetite for Power* shows Harriet and Dladla walking together to the protest meeting, and apparently sharing a lighter moment. Both Dladla's fists are raised while Harriet looks on laughing.<sup>27</sup> Reporters remarked that "all races" were present at the meeting, but most of those who turned up were African workers from the newly formed unions. Despite the GWIU throwing their weight behind the Bolton Hall Four in theory, the poor showing from the garment workers themselves is indicative of the broad lack of support for the new organising initiatives. This was undoubtedly linked to real concerns - as the bannings had demonstrated - over aggressive attention from the state. This issue would come to a head over the months which followed.

Amid a heavy police presence - the *Sunday Times* counted 13 police vehicles - no less than 16 people addressed the meeting.<sup>28</sup> The broad range of speakers is an indication in itself of the network of activists and sympathetic contacts that the Bolton Hall group had developed. Alan Paton chaired the meeting, while speakers included Barney Dladla, activist academic Fatima Meer, NUSAS president Charles Nupen, the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council's (TUACC) Joyce Gumede, Harriet, as well as Norman Middleton, who was representing the Labour Party, P. Ramesar from the NIC, and B.B. Cele, chairman of the Clermont Residents' Association. Messages of support from 13 national and international organisations, including the TUC, International Metal

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Workers, from R.M. Haldane, Senior Vice-President, TUCSA. October 8, 1963. HP, Karis-Gerhart Collection, A2 675 IV, Folder 148.

<sup>26</sup> "Bannings are a threat to both trade union and South African security," February 8, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AH 1426 AC 3.3.5 file 2. Bannings.

<sup>27</sup> Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power. Buthelezi's Inkatha and the Politics of 'Loyal Resistance'*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 122.

<sup>28</sup> Luke Zeeman, "Police watch at protest meeting," *Sunday Times*, February 10, 1974.

Federation, International Garment, Textile and Leatherworkers' Union, Labour Party, the Black Sash, the South African Institute of Race Relations, church leaders and Progressive MP Helen Suzman were also read out. During her speech, Harriet identified herself with the work that the banned Bolton Hall Four were doing, and emphasised that the work they were doing was legal. "They were all obeying TUCSA's call to organise the unorganised and to unionise Africans ... I am doing the same work. We were all working together."<sup>29</sup> The *Daily News* summed up that the speakers all condemned the bans and criticised government policies.<sup>30</sup>

A unanimous resolution was passed, at the end of the afternoon calling on all South Africa (sic) workers and the world to note the protest meeting; and urging the immediate removal of the banning orders and recognition by the Government of African trade unions."<sup>31</sup>

While it is difficult to tell whether the Garment union executive was represented, the FWIU was in the form of Virgil Bonhomme. He too made a rousing speech:

The South African Government has forgotten one thing – in these Black hands we have got the most potent weapon in South Africa and it is not violence. They are driving us to withhold our Black hands from the labour field.<sup>32</sup>

Durban's press implicitly hailed the meeting as a success, but a story which ran in the *Financial Gazette* had a different take on the protest and suggested that the meeting was poorly attended:

While TUCSA avoided public reference to it, many trade unionists were obviously shocked by strong rumours beforehand that one of the objectives of the meeting was to call for a trade boycott of South Africa. In the event, the meeting was a flop. Only a small number of trade unionists turned out, and even NUSAS could not produce more than a handful of students.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mercury Reporter, "Garment workers to quit TUCSA in 'no protest' row", *The Natal Mercury*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Daily News Reporter, "'Old' Vorster is Criticised", *Daily News*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> Mercury Reporter, "2000 in bannings protest," *The Natal Mercury*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>32</sup> Mercury Reporter, "2000 in bannings protest," *The Natal Mercury*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Morgan, "Unions reject anti-TUCSA takeover bid", *South African Financial Gazette*, February 15, 1974.



### **“A spineless talking machine”: Harriet’s press battle with TUCSA**

In the weeks following the protest meeting, a slanging match between Harriet and Grobbelaar developed in South Africa’s press. Harriet opened the salvo with her comments at the protest, where she criticised TUCSA for not being represented:

‘In spite of every effort to get them to back the people who were actually doing as TUCSA told them to.’ Amid loud cries of ‘shame,’ Mrs. Bolton said: ‘The trade union movement outside and inside South Africa should know this, and ask them why.’<sup>34</sup>

In Durban newspapers on the Monday after the weekend protest, Harriet warned of “a mass exodus” from TUCSA, and confirmed that the GWIU would now disaffiliate. She also said that the Furniture union and the Engineering union may follow suit. Harriet suggested that the split had been on the cards for some time because garment union members were fed up with TUCSA, who among other things she said, had not taken up issues of housing and transport on behalf of Indian and Coloured members:

TUCSA gave us a directive ... to organise the unorganised workers in Natal, but apart from writing letters of protest to the Minister of Labour and professing loudly about their success overseas, it has done nothing to support us. And when its members get into trouble for doing what they have been told, they refuse to back them up.<sup>35</sup>

TUCSA president Steve Scheepers and executive member Johanna Cornelius responded by appealing for calm. Cornelius urged Harriet to reconsider the move to disaffiliate: “The trade union movement will never get anywhere if every disagreement leads to a walkout. I hope Mrs. Bolton can be dissuaded.”<sup>36</sup> On the 11<sup>th</sup> February, TUCSA headquarters released a statement outlining their reasons for not supporting the protest.

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<sup>34</sup> Mercury Reporter, “Garment workers to quit TUCSA in ‘no protest’ row”, *The Natal Mercury*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>35</sup> Daily News Reporter, “TUCSA exodus feared”, *Daily News*, February 11, 1974.

<sup>36</sup> Daily News Correspondent, “TUCSA chief appeals to Natal unions”, *Daily News*, February 11, 1974.

Chief among them was that “it was a purely sectional exercise which was not initiated by TUCSA’s NEC, Officers’ Committee, or even the Natal Area Division of TUCSA”. It was reiterated that TUCSA always had to attempt to act on a national trade union level. Importantly, the Officers’ Committee also said it had decided against attending the meeting because groups other than trade unions were involved. They were obviously referring to KwaZulu minister Barney Dladla, NUSAS and the politicians and activists present.<sup>37</sup> The TUCSA circular summed up:

The reports of the Protest Meeting that have appeared in the Press thus far, very emphatically prove the wisdom of the Officers’ Committee’s decision not to participate. Trusting this circular, and the enclosed Press Release, clearly and satisfactorily explain the reason for the decision by the Officers’ Committee not to participate in the Protest Meeting organised by minor elements of the Trade Union Movement in Durban.”<sup>38</sup>

In *The Natal Mercury* the next day, Grobbelaar hit back at Harriet’s warnings of a “mass exodus” from TUCSA, and claimed that Harriet had ‘a long-standing programme of breaking away’ from the organisation:<sup>39</sup>

It has been obvious for quite a while that Mrs. Bolton was engaged in a process of alienating herself from the rest of the TUCSA unions on basic issues of principle. The programmes which she has unilaterally commenced in Natal without prior consultation or approval from TUCSA over the past year are an indication of her long-standing programme of breaking away.<sup>40</sup>

On her charge that TUCSA had done nothing to help organise African workers, Grobbelaar reiterated that this task was up to individual unions, and not TUCSA. On the same day, the *Daily News* ran a story headlined “Mrs Bolton foresees - Natal’s own ‘TUCSA’”. Described in this article for the first time as a “rebel trade unionist”, Harriet was quoted as saying a Natal union federation, independent of TUCSA, was likely to be

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<sup>37</sup> TUCSA circular no. 2/1974 “To all affiliated unions, area divisions and NEC members: Re: Banning orders served upon Messrs. H. Hemson (sic), H. Cheadle, D. Davis and Miss J. Cunningham Brown”, February 11, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 Ac3.3.5, File 2, Bannings.

<sup>38</sup> TUCSA circular no. 2/1974 “To all affiliated unions, area divisions and NEC members: Re: Banning orders served upon Messrs. H. Hemson (sic), H. Cheadle, D. Davis and Miss J. Cunningham Brown”, February 11, 1974. HP. TUCSA Records, AH1426 Ac3.3.5, File 2, Bannings.

<sup>39</sup> Mercury Correspondent, “TUCSA chief hits at Mrs. Bolton”, *The Natal Mercury*, February 12, 1974.

<sup>40</sup> Mercury Correspondent, “TUCSA chief hits at Mrs. Bolton”, *The Natal Mercury*, February 12, 1974.

formed sometime in the future. In reaction to Grobbelaar's statement that she had a long standing programme of breaking away from TUCSA, she replied: "The only thing long standing is that the Garment Workers Union felt that TUCSA is not doing what it said it would do in its five year plan."<sup>41</sup> The next day, Harriet was again quoted at length in the *Mercury* in response to Grobbelaar's attack. To his charge that she was alienating herself from the rest of TUCSA unions on basic issues of principle, she agreed it was an issue of "fundamental principle" and with harsh words accused the TUCSA executive of alienating themselves from workers<sup>42</sup>:

The Trade Union Council of South Africa has become a 'spineless talking machine that has lost touch with the workers', said Mrs. Harriet Bolton, secretary of the Garment Workers Industrial Union, last night. 'It discusses things, it issues statements, it writes letters, but not once has TUCSA as an executive body physically identified itself with the recent workers' struggle in Natal,' she said.<sup>43</sup>

Harriet's repeated claims that TUCSA did not do anything to assist black workers further stirred the pot. In a report published on the same day, Grobbelaar claimed Harriet had "endangered the entire trade union movement by her antics":

Mr Grobbelaar set the tone today when he accused Mrs Bolton of "attempting to destroy the delicate fabric of interracial cooperation on which TUCSA is based" by saying that TUCSA did nothing for Coloured and Asian workers. "At best she has alienated herself from the rest of the trade union movement," he said.<sup>44</sup>

This issue was also taken up by George Munsook from the Western Province and TUCSA provincial executive. In a rare voicing from a black TUCSA trade unionist, he came out in support of TUCSA, claiming Harriet did not "represent the Coloured people as she claims." He also questioned why she had to "rope in White students to 'educate' her workers?"<sup>45</sup> Munsook also took exception to some of Harriet's comments about TUCSA trade unionists. Harriet had apparently claimed that they were "not trade unionists' backsides". The distrust that TUCSA had for the young officials, most of

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<sup>41</sup> Daily News Reporter, "Mrs. Bolton foresees – Natal's own 'TUCSA', *Daily News*, February 12, 1974.

<sup>42</sup> Mercury Reporter, "TUCSA Has Lost Touch – Mrs. Bolton", *The Natal Mercury*, February 13, 1974.

<sup>43</sup> Mercury Reporter, "TUCSA Has Lost Touch – Mrs. Bolton", *The Natal Mercury*, February 13, 1974

<sup>44</sup> Daily News Reporter, "Blast for Bolton", *Daily News*, February 13, 1974.

<sup>45</sup> Mercury Reporter, "TUCSA Has Lost Touch – Mrs. Bolton", *The Natal Mercury*, February 13, 1974.

whom incidentally were no longer students although TUCSA and the press persisted in labelling them thus, is further shown by comments made to the press by D. McBain-Charles, from the Radio, Television, Electronic and Allied Workers' Union. Apparently in response to a charge made by Harriet that TUCSA was run by "comfortable whites", McBain-Charles said she was equally implicated. He added that TUCSA was right to have reservations about students' involvement with trade unions, and echoed what seemed to have been popular sentiment amongst TUCSA unionists:

If a person has not been through the run of the mill in Trade Unionism, how can they personally understand the issues involved? Trade Unionist (sic) are born at the bench – Trade Unionism may be taught at the Universities, but without practical knowledge, theories and theory only, spell trouble.<sup>46</sup>

Out of the public eye, Harriet and Grobbelaar began a lengthy official correspondence over the bannings in general, and TUCSA's refusal to support the protest meeting. A

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<sup>46</sup> "Press release", D. McBain-Charles, February 14, 1974. HP, TUCSA AH1426, AC 3.3.5, File 2, Bannings. Amid the storm of press interest, two articles from the *Financial Gazette* and the *Rand Daily Mail* give interesting perspective on how different sections of the press, and we can assume some of their readership, saw the issue. The *Financial Gazette* article argued that TUCSA's brand of trade unionism was exactly what workers wanted, while the *Rand Daily Mail* remained broadly supportive of TUCSA, although admitting the organisation was "a bit stodgy". In the *Rand Daily Mail*, John Imrie made the point that the Bolton Hall trade unionists felt TUCSA was "insincere" and that they would have to take organising African workers into their own hands. On the other hand, TUCSA felt the Durban group were "radical, too radical": "Instead of getting employers to go along with them, they too often merely antagonised them: they constantly, and sometimes unjustifiably, attacked the police, they made tactical blunders in negotiations and in dealing with labour disputes, which TUCSA attributes to their inexperience. Imrie also pointed out that students "close to the Durban group" tried to shame TUCSA during the TUC delegation's visit to South Africa in 1973. Imrie also argued that their strengthening ties with the ICFTU made TUCSA suspicious: "Mrs Bolton's ... angry attack on TUCSA will undoubtedly harm its credibility overseas – and is a damaging blow to TUCSA's effort to get assistance for African trade union education here. TUCSA may well need a bit of gingering up – what organisation does not? – and Harriet Bolton's anger and frustration may in part be justified. But the bolts from Durban have probably done far more harm than good", he concluded. Lawrence Morgan from the *Financial Gazette* framed the issue as an attempted coup by the Bolton Hall trade unionists, led by the "volatile" Harriet. He described an "alliance" between academics, Nusas members and "dissidents", who hoped to split TUCSA's unity and ultimately create a rival organisation. He described the "intrigue" as potentially posing "a menacing situation for industrial relationships in the country as a whole." Morgan also made the point that Lucy Mvubelo and Ronald Webb, the black leader of the Motor Industry Combined Workers' Union, had defended TUCSA and rejected criticisms from Natal: "Events of the past few days have pointed significantly to the current temper of trade unionists generally – of all race groups. It is clear that they want their unions to serve primarily their interests as workers in an industrial context, and are opposed to the injection of political or any other extraneous issues into union business. The obvious irony here is that, in many ways, the emerging trade unions styled themselves as overtly 'non-political', or as they were later branded 'workerist'. This was perhaps initially dictated by the hostile circumstances under which the new unions had to operate, while later it was framed as a political position in itself.

week after the meeting, Harriet wrote to Grobbelaar requesting a detailed explanation for TUCSA's absence. She termed it TUCSA's "failure to fulfil their obligations to their affiliate members in regard to the organisation of unorganised workers," and also their neglect in upholding "the true spirit of Trade Unionism in times of hardship."<sup>47</sup> Harriet explained the information was needed because GWIU shop stewards would soon vote on whether or not to stay affiliated with TUCSA. The letter was signed by Harriet and 18 members of the Garment union executive.

The background context and reasons why TUCSA was so opposed to the organising initiatives being piloted out of Bolton Hall have been sketched in previous chapters. However, the arguments are worth repeating here. Friedman, among others, argues that TUCSA resisted the organisation of autonomous African unions because this threatened their monopoly over bargaining. Instead, they promoted 'parallel unionism', in which African unions were kept under the control of the registered union. Hence the privileges, wages and bargaining rights of the minority white, Indian and coloured workforce were protected. TUCSA would play a destructive role throughout the 1970s and in to the 1980s as far as attempts to organise independent African unions went. Indeed, Friedman argues that TUCSA sometimes seemed "as much an obstacle to them as the law and hostile employers":

Parallel unionism was not simply an attempt by one group of unions to compete with another. The registered unions' stake in the political and economic order made them junior partners with employers and the government in an alliance to preserve it and all three saw 'parallels' as a weapon in their fight. TUCSA was often able to damage emerging unions in the seventies and for a time it seemed as if the attempt might succeed.<sup>48</sup>

While the new Bolton Hall unions were certainly formed with the assistance of Harriet's registered unions, their emphasis on independent worker leadership and democratic structures set them apart from parallel unions. Their firm stance against employers like

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<sup>47</sup> Letter to Arthur Grobbelaar from Harriet Bolton, February 15, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AH 1426 Ac3.3.5, File 2, Bannings.

<sup>48</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 80.

Frame also made TUCSA uneasy. Added to this were the unions' links with NUSAS, the KwaZulu government as well as activist academics such as Fatima Meer and Rick Turner. To reiterate, while Harriet would never deem her union work as political, TUCSA's narrow definition of the role of trade unions meant that they did. TUCSA's deep suspicion and unwillingness to assist Harriet in 1974 can also partially be explained by the Bolton Hall group's public criticisms of the organisation and its policies during the course of 1973.

These issues, so well aired in the press, came to a head at the TUCSA NEC meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of February; a meeting which Harriet attended as a member of the TUCSA executive. While in my interviews her memories of this period remained vague, in an earlier interview with David Hemson she discussed some of the reaction to her arrival at the meeting from her fellow NEC members:

I took them to task, and I said, the press quoted me, they asked me what I thought of TUCSA and my colleagues' actions ... and I said "They preserve their little powers that they've built up, they are not real trade unionists." And I was really angry. I went to the meeting, and as I walked into that meeting, the important people like Johanna, Katy Gelvin, and one or two others had put up these notices: "We agree, we are not trade unionists" ... They held these up, and they just looked at me as I walked down. This did not worry me (in) the least.<sup>49</sup>

Minutes from this meeting reveal the extent to which Harriet had angered her colleagues. With the Distributive Workers' Ray Altman a lonely exception, the executive committee members condemned Harriet both for her involvement in the protest meeting, and particularly for her public criticism of TUCSA. Altman later withdrew his initial point that TUCSA should have done more, saying he was "shaken" by what he had heard

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<sup>49</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, July 16, 1993. Interestingly, in my interviews with Harriet her memories of this period remained vague compared to the detail with which she remembered particularly the 1940s and 1950s. It is useful therefore to use David Hemson's interviews, one of which was conducted in 1974 and the other in 1993, on this point. The 1974 interview is of particular interest. Harriet was obviously still very much so invested in the trade union movement and the events which were unfolding. This is attested to through the overtly political tone that much of the interview takes; a very different tone to the interviews that I did with Harriet over thirty years on. As a source, in some senses the 1974 interview is a text from the period, although issues such as how events are remembered, represented and reconstructed obviously still stand.

during the course of the meeting. Using a photograph showing NUSAS' Charles Nupen giving "the black power salute" and making the point that the chair of the meeting was not a trade unionist, NEC members claimed TUCSA's decision not to attend the meeting was vindicated. Grobbelaar added that the issue of the bannings was not "as important" as it was made out to be and that he "believed that the bannings as such had merely been used as an excuse to destroy TUCSA." Tommy Murray also warned that "outside forces" could be playing a role in trying to destroy TUCSA's "multi-racial approach to trade unionism." In a directed jibe, a widely supported item on the agenda called for a change to the constitution in order for TUCSA to take disciplinary action against its executive committee members.

For most of the meeting, Harriet remained silent as her TUCSA colleagues justified their decision not to attend the conference, and lambasted her for her "dangerous exaggerations". She did, however, defend the choice of Alan Paton as chair of the protest meeting, pointing out that he was well respected and was fluent in both English and isiZulu. When she was asked if she would like to reply to the debate, she retorted that she "would not dream of replying to people who were obviously so right." Both the GWIU and FWIU's letters to Grobbelaar, in which the unions expressed concern at TUCSA's apparent disinterest in the bannings, were also tabled during the course of the discussion. In light of the GWIU's threat to disaffiliate from TUCSA, Grobbelaar suggested that a TUCSA delegation attend the next union executive and shop steward meeting to explain TUCSA's stance. Harriet responded that this was an "excellent idea".<sup>50</sup> Following the TUCSA NEC meeting, a Durban newspaper headline declared "Union rebel backs down". As shown, Durban's press had up until then been generally supportive of Harriet and her criticisms of TUCSA and had given the protest meeting favourable coverage. This was so much so that Grobbelaar complained that TUCSA did not get a fair hearing from Durban's press. However, the *Daily News* now cast TUCSA's NEC meeting as a

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<sup>50</sup> "Minutes of the fifty-first meeting of the National Executive Committee, held in the council chamber of the South African Society of Bank Officials, SASBO House, 97 Simmonds Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, on Tuesday the 19<sup>th</sup> and Wednesday the 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1974", HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426, Ac1.1.6, Executive.

major defeat for Harriet, claiming the TUCSA “old guard” had won a victory over “the rebel Natal unionist.”<sup>51</sup>

The outcome of the meeting between the TUCSA delegation and the acting Justice Minister only reinforced the impression that TUCSA felt the bannings were in some ways justified. A statement released following Grobbelaar’s, Scheepers, and Murray’s meeting with acting Justice Minister J. Kruger could not have done anything to endear TUCSA to Harriet:

The discussion was frank and cordial. Mr. Kruger was adamant that the Government had to take action against the four persons concerned, because they were endangering the security of the State. The Government had carefully considered the alternative steps to be taken, before acting by banning them. The four persons had not been banned because of their trade union activities, he said.<sup>52</sup>

Kruger also refused to consider bringing the Bolton Hall Four before court. The statement concluded that TUCSA would try to get another interview to take the issue up again, particularly “the whole question of legitimate trade union activity vis-à-vis the security of the State.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Organising “in a state of fear”: persisting with trade union work at Bolton Hall**

While the bannings were a huge blow for the new unions, Harriet was able to find replacements for the “Bolton Hall Four” soon after, and perhaps because of the publicity the bannings received, with relative ease: she said she was able to fill their positions

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<sup>51</sup> Daily News Correspondent, “Union rebel backs down”, *Daily News*, February 21, 1974. While the meeting records don’t indicate who signed the statement endorsing the Officer’s Committee’s decision not to participate in the protest meeting, the *Daily News* reported that Harriet “felt obliged to sign a unanimous statement which effectively repudiated her own attacks on the council’s leadership”. In later correspondence with the GWIU, Grobbelaar also made reference to this, saying Harriet had agreed with the decision of the NEC to endorse TUCSA’s no show at the protest meeting, as well as the contents of the statement which TUCSA then circulated, which again justified their decision not to take part.

<sup>52</sup> “TUCSA circular re: banning orders served upon messrs. D. Hemson, H. Cheadle, D. Davis and Miss J. Cunningham-Brown”, March 4, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426 AC 3.3.5, File 2, Bannings.

<sup>53</sup> “TUCSA circular re: banning orders served upon messrs. D. Hemson, H. Cheadle, D. Davis and Miss J. Cunningham-Brown”, March 4, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426 AC 3.3.5, File 2, Bannings.



“three times over”.<sup>54</sup> The Benefit Fund meanwhile claimed they were not “intimidated or discouraged by this setback. Indeed, we now have more volunteers to help with the work than we had before.”<sup>55</sup> The new trade unions’ work continued apace, as attested to in meeting minutes and *Isisibenzi*. In the first few months of 1974, as many as 60 workers per day came in to be signed up to the Benefit Fund, while this figure swelled to 200 on Saturdays. A letter from Mike Murphy to a volunteer, only referred to as “Paddy” in their correspondence, illustrates something of the ground-breaking nature of the work they were involved in:

Don’t forget also, that none of us here are “suited” for the jobs that we’ve undertaken. We’ve just learnt to adapt somehow as the situation has required. You’ll see this very clearly once you’ve been here a bit. We are, I fear, a very motley crew.<sup>56</sup>

As the new unions continued to grow, it was agreed that a federation to coordinate their work was necessary. While union records and secondary texts disagree on the exact date of the formation of the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC), what is clear is that from at least the end of 1973 discussions about the importance of such a federation were underway. Some records make reference to the organisation forming at around this time, while others suggest it was early in 1974, prior to the upheavals at Frame factories, that the TUACC was constituted. What is clear, however, is that the TUACC only had its first council meeting in June of 1974. The TUACC continued to coordinate the unions until 1979, when the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was formed, which in turn became a significant component of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). A number of academic and popular short histories of the emerging unions give little attention to their initial close links with KwaZulu. It is interesting to note, therefore, that in a document penned by the TUACC in 1975, reference is made to TUACC’s formation specifically to liaise with the KwaZulu government on behalf of workers, and coordinate the activities of the new unions. The

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<sup>54</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Bannings a ‘slap’ for the unions”, *Daily News*, February 4, 1974.

<sup>55</sup> *Isisibenzi II*, “Around the Unions”, May 1974. HP, Karis-Gerhart Collection, A2 675 IV, File 116, *Isisibenzi*.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to Paddy from Mike Murphy, June 24, 1974. HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999/C1.13.9.13.4. 24.

reason for the former was given as: “dealings with the Kwa-Zulu Government were becoming increasingly important as African unions grew”.<sup>57</sup>

Harriet was involved in trying to resolve a number of lightning strikes and disputes between the new unions and factory owners during the months following the bannings. While most of the strikes involved the newly formed unions, there was also a rare strike by workers at a garment factory, which had refused to pay out bonuses. In a call for solidarity with Indian workers, an *Isisebenzi* article made the point that many Indian workers faced the same discrimination as African workers did, and were sometimes paid even lower wages in border areas. According to Hemson et al., the TWIU and NUTW were able to cement “excellent relations ... between Indian and African workers.”<sup>58</sup> A major victory for the unions came in July 1974, when a recognition agreement and, later, a collective bargaining agreement were signed with the British textile firm Smith & Nephew. The idea for a plant agreement came from Harriet, who had “returned from a visit to the United States with a copy of an agreement for the furniture sector in New York.”<sup>59</sup> However, *Isisebenzi* reports also pointed to the state’s harassment of Bolton Hall trade unionists during this period. This included sending “spies” to union meetings, late night visits to union officials and their families, interrogating workers and distributing pamphlets to workers which claimed the unions were working with management to keep wages low.<sup>60</sup> In an article entitled “A call for support”, *Isisebenzi* pleaded with workers to stand united in the face of this “onslaught”.

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<sup>57</sup> “A Brief History of the TUACC Unions’ Relationship with TUCSA, TUCSA Affiliate Unions and Unregistered Unions,” May 14, 1975. HP, FOSATU Records, AH1999, B12.2.2.1. See, for example, “TUACC Dealings with TUCSA Memoranda”, HP, FOSATU Records, AH1999/B12.2.2 and TUACC Constitution, HP, FOSATU Records, AH1999/B1. See also, Maré and Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power*, Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today, African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich, “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007). A later draft of the constitution, however, pared down reference to the Homeland governments considerably. Mention of links with Homeland authorities was moved down to the 11<sup>th</sup> point under “Aims and Objects”. The TUACC was now pledged to “... liaise with and keep informed any authority, Homeland Govt. or institution whose policy could affect the interest of the labour movement and the working class as a whole.” “TUACC Constitution”, undated. HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999 B1.

<sup>58</sup> Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich, “White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement” in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007), 270.

<sup>59</sup> Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, “White Activists” in *The Road to Democracy*, 270.

<sup>60</sup> *IsiSebenzi*, not dated. HP, Karis-Gerhart Collection, A2 675 IV, File 116, IsiSebenzi.

It was within this context that Garment union shop stewards and the executive committee voted to stay affiliated to TUCSA late in March 1974. Despite the union seemingly being completely set on disaffiliation only a month earlier, their decision to stay affiliated with TUCSA was perhaps not surprising. While the 18 members of the GWIU's executive committee signed the initial letter expressing dissatisfaction with TUCSA's response to the bannings, events which followed indicate that Harriet was the driving force behind it. As discussed above, Harriet had requested a full explanation for TUCSA's actions and non-attendance at the protest meeting. Grobbelaar provided this for the GWIU, persuasively arguing that it was a purely "political protest" which trade unions should not have been involved in. In the face of police harassment, this argument clearly struck a chord with GWIU officials. Added to this, Grobbelaar and Steve Scheepers were invited to the GWIU's meeting to present their case before the shop stewards. Friedman summarised it thus:

Bolton urged her unions to withdraw from TUCSA in protest and they almost did – but Grobbelaar flew to Durban and lectured them on the need to stay out of politics. They backed down.<sup>61</sup>

According to press reports, the union's 200 shop stewards as well as the branch executive committee "passed a unanimous vote of confidence" in TUCSA. Grobbelaar was, however, still relatively cautious in his summation of the meeting:

"Although I would hesitate to say relations are back to normal, I am prepared to say that the relationship between the Garment Workers Industrial Union and TUCSA is at this point very good," Mr Arthur Grobbelaar, TUCSA's general-secretary, said in an interview today.<sup>62</sup>

Harriet meanwhile made it clear that while the union had voted in favour of sticking with TUCSA, she remained sceptical:

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<sup>61</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 80. During the meeting, Grobbelaar commented that TUCSA was not approached by any union to take up the issue of the banning. This he felt obviously let TUCSA off the hook, while it was exactly this lack of initiative on TUCSA's part that had so infuriated Harriet.

<sup>62</sup> Daily News Reporter, "Garment workers mend rift," *Daily News*, March 27, 1974.

Mrs Bolton ... confirmed today that both the executive committee and the shop stewards had “reaffirmed their support of TUCSA – but not with great enthusiasm. The union has decided not to withdraw from TUCSA, and it offered its full support to the future policy outlined by Mr Grobbelaar. If TUCSA does what it has indicated it will do, then I’ll be happy. But I’ve had too many dealings in the past with them over promises which are made and never kept.”<sup>63</sup>

Her comments to the newspaper sparked more lengthy correspondence with Grobbelaar. He denied outlining any “future policy” and requested the union meeting minutes to verify this. The GWIU, however, refused to hand the minutes over. After three months of increasingly acrimonious correspondence, the issue was resolved in July, when TUCSA eventually backed down.<sup>64</sup> In a 1993 interview with David Hemson, Harriet drew links between the broader issue at hand, namely TUCSA’s role and the organising of African workers into unions, and the debates around the dissolution of the TLC in the early 1950s:

They said (the) old Trades and Labour Council had broken on pressure from the left, and there was no organisation ... They had now rebuilt to include ninety percent of the registered unions, and they did not want to break it again ... they did not want to lose their government connections which they were building up.<sup>65</sup>

Harriet must have been disappointed by the GWIU’s executive’s decision. However, in later interviews she acknowledged that the union officials faced very real threats to their safety because of the Bolton Hall unions’ association with African workers:

A lot of my Indian members were very nervous about it and very disapproving. But you can see why, as I say I could stand up ... being a white and having a certain amount of protection, not total when they harassed me, but they (Indian GWIU officials) were very nervous when their families and they were harassed at home by Special Branch. I mean I could see their point. But on the other hand, you know, I wanted them to have a bit more gumption. Some of them did but not all of them...<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Garment workers mend rift,” *Daily News*, March 27, 1974.

<sup>64</sup> Correspondence between Arthur Grobbelaar and Harriet Bolton, April to July 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AH1426 AB4.2.41, GWIU.

<sup>65</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by David Hemson, July 16, 1993.

<sup>66</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, December 2005.

A fair stack of correspondence between Harriet and various representatives of international unions and union federations from this period, illustrates the growing interest of the world in South African labour issues. That this correspondence was monitored by the state is also apparent, both from comments from Harriet in a letter to the ITGLWF's Charles Ford: "I enclose for your perusal the envelope in which your last letter ... was enclosed, it has obviously been opened, and stuck down again by someone with rather dirty fingers!" as well as their clandestine methods of correspondence, such as rarely naming anyone in their letters. Unions also preferred to channel assistance through the ICFTU as there were concerns over correspondence being censored.<sup>67</sup> The correspondence gives us insight into Harriet's situation at the time and the strictures within which the trade unions were working. A letter from Harriet addressed to Ford in March, just prior to the GWIU's meeting with TUCSA, is revealing and worth quoting at length:

I hope to attend the meeting in Ankara in May, but am watched quite closely, and many of the Staff here have been questioned by the Special Branch and Bureau of State Security. I have also been visited by the Bureau of State Security and I am now negotiating an Agreement for the Garment Workers' of Natal, under the most difficult circumstances possible – everyone in a state of fear engendered by intimidation and disagreement on all sides, mainly between TUCSA Top white officials and our Unions about the role of the Trade Unions. My workers are not white or privileged, and this probably colours my views and makes it necessary for me to be considered with injustices and discriminations not suffered by Arthur Grobbelaar, Steve Scheepers and other affluent and privileged people in Johannesburg, who have votes and rights and who seem to have lost touch with the workers on the factory floor.

There is, in addition, so much movement and action on the Durban labour scene, I think caused by the high cost of living, (highest for any city in South Africa) the low wage rates (new industries) and the speed of new industrial growth, bringing in an increasing number of workers and much growth and change. This is our assessment but of course, it is never accepted that workers express their own dissatisfaction when they strike – the Agitators have to be sought and rooted out, and all eyes are directed at Bolton Hall, 127 Gale Street – even the Trade Unionists who sit complacently and safely at the head of Unions of well-off white

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<sup>67</sup> Letter to Harriet Bolton from Bert van Hattem, secretary of Industrie Bond N.V.V, February 21, 1974. HP. FOSATU Records, AH999/C1.13.6.19, Textile Workers Industrial Union.

workers, or well paid Indian or Coloured Artisan Unions who do not appreciate the dilemma of poor Textile and Garment Workers – many of them in the “Black African” group, without the protection of registered Unions, and without the benefit of education, rights, votes or proper representation.

... We are so grateful for the Cheadles, Hemsons etc ... more replacements have come forward and the Textile Industry has thrown up some excellent black leaders, who are bearing up well, to much intimidation and harassing from the Employers, the Police and the Bureau of State Security and we are teaching and training as fast as we can.<sup>68</sup>

In the letter, Harriet also expressed concern that following the British TUC delegation’s visit to South Africa the previous year, the TUC might decide to channel financial support for organising African workers through TUCSA, which she felt would be wasted. A week later, Harriet wrote again to Ford, this time enclosing in her letter more detail about the January strikes and the bannings. She commented that a number of people from Transvaal and Cape unions had expressed interest in attending the upcoming annual meeting of the ITGLWF in Turkey. This, she suggested, was because they feared the image she might project of TUCSA to the international trade unions:

It seems as though people are afraid to let me go overseas without them, because I have taken them to task for what I consider to be their lack of Trade Union spirit, and have said that they do not subscribe to the ideas they support overseas when in Conference.<sup>69</sup>

The state’s sustained clamp-down on the Bolton Hall Unions and trade unionists also began to be felt more acutely by Harriet’s family. Towards the end of April, Peter Bolton said he had decided to leave South Africa because of his “increasing awareness of restrictions placed on individual rights”.<sup>70</sup> In a newspaper article which detailed his plans to go, Harriet also dispelled “rumours” that she too was planning to leave South Africa.

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<sup>68</sup> Letter to Charles Ford from Harriet Bolton, March 18, 1974. HP, FOSATU Records, C1.13.6.19.

<sup>69</sup> Letter to Charles Ford from Harriet Bolton, March 26, 1974. HP, FOSATU Records, C1.13.6.19. Harriet’s comments did have a basis. At the 1974 TUCSA conference, concern was raised about the “distorted and inaccurate reports that have been conveyed to trade union circles in America concerning TUCSA’s motives and activities.” Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23, 171.

<sup>70</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Peter Bolton is to leave SA”, *Daily News*, April 27, 1974.

However, for the first time, she publicly acknowledged that she was considering resigning from the Garment union, although she hastened to add that she would not leave all the unions based at Bolton Hall. She claimed that the outcome of the looming ITGLWF conference in Turkey would largely determine her course of action and that she would feel out the attitude of the international's executive committee. She said pressures on the Garment union officials from the state were in turn putting pressure on her:

“Since the visits to my organisers by the Bureau for State Security, the union has been expressing its reluctance to get involved any further with African unions, which they have been linked with because of me,” she said.<sup>71</sup>

Harriet returned to Durban at the end of May. At the ITGLWF conference in Turkey, international unions had pledged their continuing support for promoting education of workers in South Africa. According to Harriet, the unions would mostly direct their energy into pressurising corporations with South African interests into paying liveable wages. She said this was both for reasons of solidarity with South African workers struggling to live on paltry wages, and also because workers overseas feared that their hard-won gains were now being threatened by increasing investment in South Africa.<sup>72</sup> Despite these initial promises, Southall has shown that while the ITGLWF did back the struggles of the emerging unions – specifically the NUTW - to an extent, its support “was tempered by its concern not to clash with its numerically weighty TUCSA affiliates, notably Lucy Mvubelo’s NUCW.”<sup>73</sup>

In early June, the GFWBF along with the five new unions representing workers in the textile, clothing, chemical, metal and allied as well as furniture industries were forced to move out of Bolton Hall and in to neighbouring offices in Central Court. Their move was

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<sup>71</sup> Daily News Reporter, “Peter Bolton is to leave SA”, *Daily News*, April 27, 1974.

<sup>72</sup> Mercury Reporter, “S.A. faces world pressure over unions – Harriet”, *The Natal Mercury*, June 4, 1974. Daily News Reporter, “Mrs Bolton says S.A. is Target”, *The Daily News*, June 4, 1974.

<sup>73</sup> Roger Southall, *Imperialism or solidarity? International Labour and South African Trade Unions* (Cape Town: UCT Press (Pty) Ltd., 1995), 168. While at times over the next decade this irked the NUTW, Southall has also argued that the NUTW’s continued affiliation to the international meant important solidarity when taking on multinational corporations, a programme of action which was formalised at the 1974 meeting, according to Harriet. The NUTW’s continued affiliation also afforded them valuable direct contacts with European unions

at the behest of the GWIU, who – as detailed above - were getting unwelcome visits by police and being put under pressure for transgressing Group Areas legislation. For at least the next six months, however, the GWIU did grudgingly allow the unions limited use of their large meeting hall. About a week before the move, the Commercial Branch had also raided the GFWBF office, and confiscated their books on suspicion of them being an unregistered friendly society. Benefit Fund officials Joseph Ndlela and Vivian Mdima, as well as Harriet and Mike Murphy were later charged with contravening the Friendly Societies Act. Fifteen years later, Mike Murphy was interviewed about this period as a part of a history project on the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union:

Mrs Bolton ... was very keen to promote the development of trade unions for everybody, including black workers. And she allowed this office (Bolton Hall) to be used in a solidarity way to base the small black African trade unions that were starting at that time. Now the rest of the people in ... TUCSA were strongly opposed to this idea and they created problems for her, they tried to stop that development, they tried to argue for the development of parallel unions which were kind of second-class unions for black workers. And also the state, the police were against it. They agitated a lot, they even went to visit members of the executive ... to persuade them not to allow African workers to come in here and what happened as a result of all this was that round about 1974 the people trying to organise black workers were kicked out ...<sup>74</sup>

### **The KwaZulu link severed: Barney Dladla, Buthelezi and Harriet**

At around this time, escalating conflict between Barney Dladla and Buthelezi also added to the new unions' difficulties. As shown, Dladla had been intimately involved in trying to resolve the January 1974 textile dispute and received significant press coverage for his efforts. The Wages Commissions' *Isisebenzi* was also enthusiastic about the work Dladla did: the paper's authors variously described him as "a great man and leader" and "the hero of the workers". Perhaps already concerned about the influence Dladla was starting to wield, matters came to a head with Buthelezi after a letter, purporting to speak for African workers, was sent to Durban newspapers and circulated in Clermont. The letter attacked Buthelezi and praised Dladla:

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<sup>74</sup> Mike Murphy, interviewed by Reena Ramsaroop, 1990. SACTWU History Project papers. Killie Campbell Africana Collection.



All African workers (Zulu included) have the highest regard for that great son of KwaZulu, the Hon. Barney Dladla ... To Chief Gatsha I say: Inject more men of the calibre and conviction of our hero (Barney Dladla) and you will not need to do all the thinking and talking for KwaZulu.”<sup>75</sup>

At around this time too, pamphlets claiming that the KwaZulu government was against trade unions were distributed to Durban factory workers. Natal newspapers picked up the story with relish, pitting Dladla’s rising star and his support base of workers against Buthelezi. New allegations came to light in the press: there were rumours that Dladla had been planning to launch a labour party in opposition to Buthelezi. TUCSA too entered the fray with a press statement disassociating itself from Dladla and Harriet. Grobbelaar held “certain political elements”, Dladla being the main protagonist, responsible for “strenuous attempts” to drag TUCSA into homeland politics. He went on to claim in the press statement that while Harriet was “becoming increasingly identified” with Dladla, she did so in her personal capacity and not as a representative for TUCSA:

TUCSA categorically and emphatically denies that Mrs. Bolton is acting for TUCSA, or has been given any mandate for some of her recent actions in which Mr. Dladla has also been involved. She has been participating completely in her personal capacity in these matters.<sup>76</sup>

Grobbelaar rounded off by saying TUCSA had, in the past, warned that African politicians should not get involved in labour issues “because they can too easily channel the aspirations of the African work force into directions which serve only their own self-seeking political ends.”<sup>77</sup> This was an example, he said, of the consequences when they did. Harriet responded in the press, defending both her and Dladla’s position.<sup>78</sup> In a letter marked “Personal” to Buthelezi dated 24<sup>th</sup> May 1974, Grobbelaar enclosed the above

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<sup>75</sup> Letter to the Editors of: *The Ilanga Lase Natal, the Weekend World, The Natal Mercury, Daily News, Sunday Times*. Re: Reported Clash in the KwaZulu House of Assembly, signed John Dlangamandhla. HP. FOSATU Records, AH1999, B12.4 TUACC Dealings with KwaZulu.

<sup>76</sup> TUCSA circular 14/1974, Re: non-involvement by the council in the politics of the homelands, April 10, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AC 3.3.27, Homelands.

<sup>77</sup> TUCSA circular 14/1974, Re: non-involvement by the council in the politics of the homelands, April 10, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AC 3.3.27, Homelands.

<sup>78</sup> Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980”, in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007), 220.

mentioned circular which he said he issued because “I saw the direction in which the KwaZulu Minister of Community Development was moving ... which had implications for TUCSA.”<sup>79</sup> He concluded the letter with a suggestion for a meeting to discuss solutions for “common problems”, supposedly referring to Dladla and Harriet. Indicative of the links which Dladla had with SACTU at the time, SACTU’s Mark Shope wrote a letter to Grobbelaar “in defence of Harriet Bolton” amid the controversy over Dladla, as well as Harriet’s differences with the GWIU’s executive committee.<sup>80</sup>

At the TUACC’s first council meeting in June, Dladla vehemently denied he had plans to start a labour party, and further added that TUCSA’s charge that KwaZulu government officials used unions for their own political interests was untrue. He added that the pamphlets claiming that the KwaZulu government was against trade unions should be ignored. In June, Harriet wrote to Buthelezi in an attempt to resolve the issue, and judging from her measured tone, do some damage control. In her letter, she assured him that all work done “with my blessing from this office” was done with the belief that Buthelezi’s ministers were subordinate to him and were working in the best interests of his constituency. Appealing to Buthelezi as their “father”, she said both the union officials and the workers needed him and his government’s support:

At no time was there any intention to by-pass your authority or to work with anyone for any political reasons, my only interest and this applies to those people working with me, has been at all times in the interests of the workers, and their opinions have been placed first.<sup>81</sup>

Harriet continued, saying that she had investigated the matter of the pamphlets, and stated that the Bolton Hall unions had no connection whatsoever with their production.<sup>82</sup> She then appealed to Buthelezi not to let “politics” undermine the new unions:

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<sup>79</sup> Letter to Chief G.M. Buthelezi from J.A Grobbelaar, “PERSONAL”, May 24, 1974. HP, TUCSA Records, AC 3.3.27.

<sup>80</sup> Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, “The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970-1980”, in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol II*, (South Africa: UNISA, 2007), 220.

<sup>81</sup> Letter to Gatsha Buthelezi from Harriet Bolton, June 8, 1974. Harriet Bolton’s personal collection.

<sup>82</sup> It is unclear who authored the pamphlets: at a TUACC meeting in June it was suggested that BAWU might be involved, however this was later denied. BOSS was also a potential source.

I feel most strongly, that at all times we should rise above personal differences ... and, whilst assuring you again of the respect and affection and loyalty which we here feel for you, I appeal to you not to judge on hearsay. Call the people concerned if ever there is anything and let us have frank discussions, but never let the workers suffer because we disagree, if ever we do.<sup>83</sup>

Buthelezi's reply assured Harriet that he knew she was not part of "the hanky-panky campaign", and he said he did not feel that she had by-passed him. However, he said he could not take for granted anyone's loyalty "merely because he is working with or under me", and felt that both Harriet and he had been used "by some ambitious characters":

I do not mind personal differences but I cannot forgive anyone for using me and then undermine me. (sic) This is a Communist technique for which I despise Communists. No! I agree with you we will be failing in our duties if workers suffer as a result of a politicking spree by anyone of us.<sup>84</sup>

Despite Harriet's pleas and an emergency meeting called between TUACC and the KwaZulu Cabinet, Dladla's wings were clipped by Buthelezi. Buthelezi gave him the Justice portfolio, and assigned Solomon Ngobese, the KwaZulu urban representative, to liaise with the unions.<sup>85</sup> Dladla resigned from the KwaZulu cabinet shortly thereafter. Ngobese intervened in a number of industrial disputes following Dladla's dismissal but records suggest he did not wield the respect from employers that Dladla had, nor was he as willing to give of his time. Workers were also not satisfied with his approach. Friedman suggests that while Dladla would always involve the union in talks with management, Ngobese often did not.<sup>86</sup> Contacts between the unions and KwaZulu from the latter half of 1974 became "very loose and informal", an issue which was taken up in a TUACC memorandum sent to the homeland government in 1975, and again in 1976.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Letter to Gatsha Buthelezi from Harriet Bolton, June 8, 1974. Harriet Bolton's personal collection.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to Harriet Bolton from Gatsha Buthelezi, June 19, 1974. Harriet Bolton's personal collection.

<sup>85</sup> "Report on relationship between the Kwazulu Govt. and the IIE", May 14, 1975. HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999 B12.4, TUACC, Dealings with Kwazulu.

<sup>86</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 88.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to The Hon Chief Gatsha Buthelezi from John Copelyn, August 11, 1975 and Letter to The Executive Council, Kwa-Zulu Territorial Authority re: Recent Developments Concerning Our Relation with the Kwa-Zulu Government from TUACC, May 11, 1976. HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999 B12.4 TUACC Dealings with Kwazulu.. Among other issues, the unions were anxious to maintain contacts because they felt the KwaZulu authorities could assist them with meeting spaces, such as school halls, which fell under their jurisdiction.

Maré and Hamilton argue that from this period on, “the most frequent KwaZulu interventions in worker affairs were vague threats to withdraw labour”.<sup>88</sup> Significantly, at his address to the first IIE graduation ceremony in August 1975, Buthelezi encouraged the unions to affiliate with Inkatha.<sup>89</sup>

### **Harriet’s resignation from the GWIU**

Harriet made her resignation from the Garment union public at the beginning of July. In the newspaper interviews which followed, she emphasised that her resignation was voluntary. However, she also acknowledged that she had reached an impasse with the Garment union executive over the question of organising African unions:

... she admitted that most of her colleagues on the union’s committee – all Indians and Coloureds – were in conflict with her as they were in favour of adopting a more cautious approach to trade union affairs, particularly on the ticklish and potentially “hot” issue of involvement with African unions. Their move in this direction had become more evident since the Government’s bannings earlier this year of the four unionists ...<sup>90</sup>

In an interview with the *Business Times*, Harriet also said that she intended resigning from both the textile and furniture unions and leaving the trade union movement altogether by the end of the year. This, she said, was because she was faced either with “dropping her principles” or being alienated, and therefore not being able to do her job properly. She felt she couldn’t accept either course since it was a “half measure”. Harriet also used the opportunity to return to one of her favourite themes: that of the role of union registration and industrial legislation being in the favour of the state, white workers and capital. Two years previously, at the 1972 TUCSA conference, she had suggested to delegates that they consider the possibility of deregistering their unions and organising

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<sup>88</sup> Maré and Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power*, 124.

<sup>89</sup> “Words of Appreciation by the Hon. M.G. Buthelezi at the first diploma-awarding ceremony to the first batch of grandaunds (sic) of the Institute for Industrial Workers: Michan House: Durban”, August 10, 1975. HP, FOSATU Records, AH1999/ B.12.4. Tuacc dealings with KwaZulu.

<sup>90</sup> Julian Kraft, “Unions strangle Mrs Bolton”, *Business Times*, July 7, 1974.

genuine non-racial trade unions. In this, she claimed, she had the support of her union.<sup>91</sup> Now she commented to the *Business Times* that registered unions should deregister and join African unions and “meet problems on the same basis as the Africans had to”.<sup>92</sup>

In this country, she said, everyone operated on the basis of “Is there a law?” or “Have you got a licence?” not on the basis of what was right or wrong. Most Whites took their “White privileges,” including their political privileges, for granted.<sup>93</sup>

She added that TUCSA was in desperate need of “new blood” if it hoped to survive. She said the “tragedy” was that she felt Grobbelaar was a sincere man, but he seemed to have reached “the limit of his vision” and was more concerned about preserving TUCSA than protecting workers:

I have brought young people into my offices and they are doing a lot to help the trade union movement here. But it seems that in TUCSA they don’t want to associate with anybody but themselves, and most of them are well on in years. It’s like a closed club, a dying concern...<sup>94</sup>

In a *Sunday Tribune* interview, the GWIU’s new secretary Mothilal Stanley confirmed that going forward the union would “have nothing to do with African workers.”

Not for anything in the world will I do exactly what she did. It’s not worth the trouble. I’m not a politician and I don’t want to get involved with the police like Mrs Bolton did ... Security Police visited me constantly at work and at home. But they soon got tired and left me alone. This is when they turned to Mrs. Bolton. I warned her time and again, but she refused to listen. She told me she fought for the underdog and did nothing against the law. Well, I don’t want to be in trouble like her. All I want to do is stay in the union and fight for the rate for the job.<sup>95</sup>

The *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB) meanwhile cast Harriet’s resignation from the union as a “capitulation” by the GWIU. The SALB argued that in the context of police

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<sup>91</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Trade Union Council of South Africa 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held at Cape Town, August 1972. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1972). HP. TUCSA Records, AH 1426, Ad 1.21.

<sup>92</sup> Julian Kraft, “Unions strangle Mrs Bolton”, *Business Times*, July 7, 1974.

<sup>93</sup> Julian Kraft, “Unions strangle Mrs Bolton”, *Business Times*, July 7, 1974.

<sup>94</sup> Julian Kraft, “Unions strangle Mrs Bolton”, *Business Times*, July 7, 1974.

<sup>95</sup> *Sunday Tribune*, February 2, 1975 cited in “Garment Union Capitulates”, *The South African Labour Bulletin*, 1/8 (1975): 3.

harassment, the duty of the union was obvious. “It was to reaffirm the right of African workers to organise, to reject police interference, and to do all in the power to get it ended. Instead, they forced Mrs Bolton out of the union.”<sup>96</sup> The records alone do not give us a comprehensive sense of how Harriet was viewed by the majority of GWIU members, and how her decision to leave was received. An interview with shop steward Margaret Rajbally nearly two decades on does, however, allow us a glimpse of insight:

Mrs Bolton was a general secretary and I must tell you she was very powerful but as I told you that you could have powerful officials but you didn't have the support of the workers because of their conservative ways of thinking too - of looking after the jobs. She used to ... she never had any mercy to talk with any employers, no she would go straight to them, if she had to bang the table she'll bang the table. But being individual you'll never become a union, you've got to have the workers' support. To show your strength is only the workers. You've got to convert your workers, you've got to educate them and if you haven't got their support, you are very weak as a person or a union.”<sup>97</sup>

### **The 1974 TUCSA conference**

Harriet played a less vocal role at the 1974 TUCSA conference than she had in the past. She did, however, criticise TUCSA and particularly Grobbelaar for his handling of the dispute between Barney Dladla and Buthelezi, detailed above. Harriet said that the “attacks” that TUCSA levelled against her regarding this issue were the kinds of criticisms which led to people being banned. Grobbelaar, however, dismissed Harriet's concerns as “another emotional and hysterical outburst”.<sup>98</sup> The conference was predictably dominated by debate over whether African unions should be allowed to affiliate to the council, or not. Ultimately, all but two unions voted in favour of amending the constitution. While TUCSA would prove to be less than sincere in its efforts to support the formation of autonomous African unions, the 1974 decision in itself was significant, and reflective of South Africa's vastly changed labour landscape. Indeed, in

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<sup>96</sup> “Garment Union Capitulates”, *The South African Labour Bulletin*, 1/8 (1975): 3.

<sup>97</sup> Margaret Rajbally, interviewed by Jean Fairburn, Bolton Hall, May 14, 1990. SACTWU History Project, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

<sup>98</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23,414.

his speech in support of the amendment, Grobbelaar pointed out that “the situation had changed quite considerably” since 1969, although he defended the decision TUCSA unions had taken then to exclude African unions as “a step of expediency”.<sup>99</sup> He also reassured unions “that had expressed fear about the nature of the African unions that might seek admission”, that all unions would have to meet the same criteria as the unions already affiliated to the Council. Rhetoric such as “a hand of friendship”, and “new bridges of co-operation” was bandied about, although a number of union officials expressed apprehension about the state’s response.

Clearly indicating that they had little faith in TUCSA’s new promises of cooperation, a number of officials from the new non-racial unions, who attended the conference as observers, questioned what benefits they would gain from joining TUCSA. MAWU’s Alpheus Mtetwa, for instance, used the recent engineering industry negotiations as an example where African workers were entirely disregarded by the registered TUCSA union. He said while TUCSA spoke of friendship, very few of its unions were doing anything to help the emerging unions.<sup>100</sup> Lucy Mvubelo, apparently under pressure from her union’s executive committee, made what was for her a rare criticism of TUCSA in her speech, saying the NUCW would choose not to affiliate but would rather form a consultative body with other African unions.<sup>101</sup> Several registered union leaders then responded, and defended their positions. In particular, M. Haniff from the GWIU spoke to “clarify” the position of the registered unions based at Bolton Hall, specifically because of the criticism they had received for forcing the new unions out of the Bolton Hall. Haniff said they had given assistance “cash and in kind” to the new unions, but he claimed “the position was getting out of hand and they were falling foul of the authorities under the Group Areas Act and had to control the position.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23, 446.

<sup>100</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23, 470.

<sup>101</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23, 451.

<sup>102</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23, 471.

The TUACC and the NUCW later released a prophetic joint statement detailing their concerns that the problem was not so much “organising the unorganised”, but the relations between the registered and unregistered unions. They requested that TUCSA call a conference specifically to discuss this issue. The South African Labour Bulletin also took up the issue, stating that “... the real problem for African trade unions remains their relationship on the practical level with individual, registered trade unions.”<sup>103</sup> The following year, in a statement justifying their decision to pull out of the 1975 TUCSA conference, the TUACC claimed that the previous year “none of your (TUCSA) office bearers commented on the issues raised by us, in fact so little importance was attributed to our proposals that they have not even been recorded in the minutes of that meeting.”<sup>104</sup> By the end of 1974, the registered Bolton Hall unions had for all intents and purposes barred the unregistered unions from any use of their facilities, including the meeting hall. As already pointed to, over the next decade relations between TUCSA and TUACC, and ultimately FOSATU, as well as between the individual unions, worsened. Ironically, the initially good relationship between the NUTW and the TWIU became particularly acrimonious. This was to such an extent that the TUACC unions’ initial close ties to registered unions in the Bolton Hall are often glossed over in histories of the unions.

While Harriet was at the TUCSA conference in Port Elizabeth, she received a telephone call from her son Peter and daughter Pat, who had been arrested. This was after they attended a rally held at Currie’s Fountain to celebrate the institution of a FRELIMO-dominated transitional government in Mozambique. The 25<sup>th</sup> September rally was banned, but SASO and the Black People’s Convention went ahead with it anyway.<sup>105</sup> According to the *Daily News*, Peter was arrested at work and then charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act and questioned for two hours at the Fisher Street police station. Peter commented to the newspaper that police were arresting anybody who they could identify in photographs taken at the meeting: they showed him three photographs of

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<sup>103</sup> “Comment”, *South African Labour Bulletin* 1/6 (1974): 2.

<sup>104</sup> “Memorandum submitted to the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual General Conference of TUCSA by the affiliates of the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council”, HP, FOSATU Records, AH 1999 B 12.2.2.

<sup>105</sup> Rob Davies, Dan O’ Meara and Siphon Dlamini, *The Struggle for South Africa. A Reference Guide to Movements, Organizations and Institutions. Volume Two*. (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1984), 307. Also see Michael Lobban, *White Man’s Justice. South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).



himself in the crowd. The meeting was to be a major blow for the Black Consciousness movement; following it, nine prominent leaders were arrested and sentenced to lengthy jail terms. Peter paid an admission of guilt fine while Pat soon after left for Britain after promising to return to face charges. This was perhaps more indication for Harriet that her decision to leave South Africa was the right one. All along she maintained that she wanted her children to live in a “less disturbing” environment.<sup>106</sup> In later interviews, she also commented that the impact her work was having on her children was an important factor in her decision to leave:<sup>107</sup>

I suppose you know, really, looking back on it it's a pity that I didn't just stay there and persist you know ... but, I just thought, I was so harassed by the police and my children were beginning to get involved. My son and my daughter were both arrested at that meeting at Currie's Fountain and I just thought “oh God they're gonna” ... my son just paid the fine but my daughter refused, and she said “I want to go to court and say why I was there and what I was doing” ... and I thought they're only all going to get into trouble, and it's because of the job I do, you know. So, I took the whole lot of them overseas...<sup>108</sup>

At the time, Harriet pointed out that should she also be banned, it would be impossible for her to submit to the restrictions with two young children still entirely dependent on her.

## Conclusion

People ask: “Why are you leaving? What about your job, your home, your family and friends? I hadn't thought out the reasons. I just knew I had to go. My nature is that of a reactor. I react to my environment, to the stimulus of my community. My own community has, for 30 years, been the workers – the real people of South Africa. On their behalf and in their defence I have suffered the painful abrasions of ‘public life’.”<sup>109</sup>

Harriet's above comment is one of the only references in the records to the distressing consequences of her ‘public life’. In later interviews too, Harriet did not dwell on this

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<sup>106</sup> Daily News reporter, “Black unions don't need Whites - Bolton”, *Daily News*, August 26, 1974.

<sup>107</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, February 23, 2006.

<sup>108</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, April 2006.

<sup>109</sup> Harriet Bolton, “Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton”, *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

issue. Instead, as touched on in this chapter, she seemed to dismiss the harsh criticisms levelled at her in the press by her TUCSA colleagues. This obscures the fact that her alienation from the established trade union movement, of which she had been an invested member for thirty years, must have made it nearly impossible for her to continue with her work, and life, as she had known it. In the context of the state's intensified persecution of union members, Harriet's "community" - Durban's black garment workers - had made it clear that her vision for the union's future was vastly different to theirs. Harriet also felt that her work was impacting negatively on her children's lives. Pushed both by the state's action and the reaction of the established trade union movement, "Durban's rebel trade unionist" ultimately felt the only solution was for her to leave.

For TUCSA's part, Harriet's departure signalled a welcome opportunity to cut all ties with the independent unions. Indeed soon after she left, Durban's emerging unions lost all the support that they had received from the registered Bolton Hall unions. As I have shown, TUCSA had long called for government to recognise African unions. Thus, as Arthur Grobbelaar pointed out at the 1974 TUCSA conference, it was a "curious anomaly" that TUCSA did not allow these same unions membership.<sup>110</sup> However, the 1974 decision to accept affiliation from "bona fide" African unions would ultimately not mark an important turning point for the federation. As I have argued, TUCSA's apathy in the face of the new organising initiatives from as early as 1972 was symptomatic of a federation which was desperate to maintain the bargaining privileges of its white, coloured and Indian membership. It could only do this through parallel unions which remained under the control of its constituent unions. For the next decade, TUCSA would play a destructive role in opposing the formation of independent unions. At the height of its powers in the early 1980s, TUCSA claimed a membership of 478 420. The vast majority of these were African workers organised in to parallel unions. However, as Friedman details, few workers joined TUCSA parallel unions voluntarily; TUCSA had to rely on coercion from employers. When employers and the state removed their support

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<sup>110</sup> Trade Union Council of South Africa, Report of Proceedings 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference 1974, Port Elizabeth. (TUCSA: Johannesburg, 1974) TUCSA Records, HP, AH 1426 Ad 1.23,446.

for parallel unions, “they were swept aside”.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, Harriet’s fight to redefine TUCSA’s role failed. Indeed, forced by Harriet’s criticisms to explain their stance publicly, their responses to Harriet and the emerging unions in many ways laid out the parameters of their position. This position would not change considerably, despite the upheavals and transformations which the trade union movement would witness over the next decade.

In some ways Harriet’s decision to leave at this point makes her a more complex ‘heroine’ for the historian or biographer. She left seemingly just as the work of the new trade unions began in earnest. Through her international connections, Harriet would stay in contact with the trade union movement, and would do some important work for it during the 1980s. However, what had been an all-consuming role as a hands-on activist, closely involved with pressing for change in South Africa through her trade union work, was largely over. Harriet made the point during one of our interviews, stressing that in the years which followed she had no choice but to “move on” from the upheavals and activism of the 1970s.<sup>112</sup> Ultimately she had to make a choice between two tensions in her life, her trade union work and her family. Harriet’s legacy, however, lived on through the emerging unions. The organisational structures which I have argued that she played a vital role in laying would ultimately prove strong enough for the unions to survive.

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<sup>111</sup> Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, 81.

<sup>112</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

**Conclusion: “The rich life of a defiant heroine”.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Stevens, “The rich life of a defiant heroine”, *Sunday Tribune*, January 19, 2004.

I've said my few lines in the drama – perhaps they have had some effect, I hope so. I can do no more. I think – if there is still time – that it is absolutely imperative that all races come under the umbrella of the trade unions – an organised, peaceful, negotiating force. Any other path can only lead to disaster.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Harriet Bolton announced her departure from TUCSA, her trade unions and South Africa. The immediate years following the 1973 strikes were tough ones for the fledgling trade unions. The state continued its crackdown, detaining and sometimes torturing union officials and workers. Police were increasingly called in to handle industrial disputes. As David Lewis puts it, “there was still a long road to travel”.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1970s, however, the unions had begun to gain a toe-hold. This was particularly so in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, which Lewis argues the independent unions were able to take advantage of in important ways. The Wiehahn reforms finally entrenched into law what Harriet had long fought for: the redefinition of African workers as ‘employees’ in the labour legislation, therefore granting their right to form registered unions. It would take another three years, however, before the right of ‘non-racial’ unions to register was granted.

Therefore, by the end of Harriet’s tenure at the head of the GWIU in 1974, the foundations from which a powerful non-racial trade union movement would ultimately emerge had been laid. The first few years of the 1970s, in which Harriet had provided an important base, some protection and financial and practical assistance, were a vital leg-up to the new worker organisations. This was despite the TWIU and GWIU withdrawing the assistance they had initially offered soon after Harriet’s departure. The nearly forty years since the 1973 strikes allow us to see the importance of these first efforts to build the independent unions in perspective. In 1974, however, Harriet took leave of South Africa’s trade union movement feeling defeated. In an article outlining her reasons for leaving the country, she began by articulating her frustration with her TUCSA colleagues. She felt, in her own words:

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Bolton, “Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton”, *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> David Lewis, “Black Workers and Trade Unions” in *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), 204.

Undermined by some of the entrenched ‘oldies’ in the trade union movement ... The movement here could do with an injection of new blood, preferably workers’ blood, to replace some mini-capitalists who have no idealism, little spirit and absolutely no courage at all ...<sup>4</sup>

Harriet went on to dismiss capitalists’ unwillingness to challenge the state’s labour policies as cowardly, and commented on the selfishness of South Africa’s white middle class. She also condemned white South Africans’ convenient acceptance of the state’s vilification of people who questioned this race and class hierarchy as ‘communist’. She said she felt:

Sickened by the gutlessness of the majority of employers who know that works committees don’t work, that job reservation is a farce, that restrictive laws for labour are a bind, that their workers often suffer bad housing and poor transport which seriously hamper productivity – but they meekly keep quiet, support the system and wait for the Government ‘to do something about change’. Saddened by those of my friends, relatives and my rich fellow South Africans who judge any person who cares actively for his fellow human beings to be a ‘communist’. After all, they feel, people should busy themselves with their ‘own affairs’, which means making money ... Depressed by the fact that three-quarters of my fellow South Africans do not have recognised citizenship ... they are condemned without much question by the other one-quarter of the population to a voteless, voiceless, stateless, rightless, rootless life ... Amazed at the arrogance of so many of the ‘haves’, who accept that they, the minority, control the majority, the ‘have-nots’ ... The rich people don’t give a damn about anything but their money, and would rather die defending their cash than even consider the rights of a fellow human being.<sup>5</sup>

Harriet then broadened her rejection of the South African status quo to comment on the extent of state political censorship and control. However, she returned again to comment on her disillusionment with the “average” South African:

Insulted by the Government’s assumption that I am so feeble-minded that I must have my newspapers controlled, my films, books, and literature censored, my entertainment veiled, my meetings muzzled and my news slanted on radio, screen and on paper.

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<sup>4</sup> Harriet Bolton, “Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton”, *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Harriet Bolton, “Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton”, *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

Embittered by the average South African's acceptance of the 57 varieties of intimidation by police, Boss, Special branch, Group Areas, paid spies and informers ...

Dispirited by the bannings of decent men and women who are idealistic enough to care about their fellows. They are the voices of conscience which South Africans do not want to hear ...<sup>6</sup>

Harriet then outlined the increasingly repressive context in which the Bolton Hall unions had been functioning, saying she was "weary of hearing that there are changes, improvements and so on":

I dispute this. I contend that in the past two years there have been more restrictions, more controls, more threats, more oppressive laws, greater arrogance from authority, more intimidation, more neurosis, greater concern with self and less caring for others than at any time in the past 25 years. More fear, too, in the past six months.<sup>7</sup>

Harriet concluded that it was "time for a White liberal like me to go".<sup>8</sup>

### **Harriet Bolton's 'other lives'**

In one of our earliest conversations, Harriet described her involvement in South Africa's trade union movement as "a life's work". This thesis in many ways supports Harriet's assertion through its almost exclusive focus on her life as a trade unionist. When reflecting on the eleven extensive interviews conducted with Harriet as a totality, however, it becomes obvious that while she committed over thirty years to the trade union movement, and was in many ways still invested in this identity, the decades following her initial departure from South Africa in early 1975 led her in different directions which suggest that her "life's work" was not solely trade unionism, but rather her ability to turn her hand to a number of different jobs to provide for herself and her children. For nine years in England, unable to legally take up permanent employment, she

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<sup>6</sup> Harriet Bolton, "Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton", *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Bolton, "Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton", *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Bolton, "Why I am leaving South Africa – by Harriet Bolton", *Sunday Tribune*, November 10, 1974.

at times worked several casual jobs at once to see her two youngest children through school. She took work as an agricultural labourer, picking apples, planting cabbages and pruning trees. She also ran a youth hostel and worked as a cook for several businesses in London, as well as for a farmers' club in Norfolk. At the same time, Harriet kept her 'hand in' with South Africa's trade union movement and activist circles through her links with the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which saw her attending a number of international conferences hosted in Europe, as well as travelling between South Africa, Botswana and Lesotho. A priority of the ITGLWF was to encourage the garment and textile unions to unite into one national union, a project which Harriet was tasked with. "She acted as a conduit for funds, monitored meetings here and 'nagged' her contacts to combine their strengths."<sup>9</sup> In the late 1970s, Harriet helped ex-Robben Island prisoner Judson Khuzwayo to escape South Africa by driving him over the border to Botswana.

Harriet returned to South Africa in 1984, according to her at the behest of the ITGLWF who wanted her to intensify efforts to coordinate a better working relationship between the different textile and garment unions. She was also asked to help out part-time with the GWIU's bookkeeping. As discussed, the relationship between the GWIU, TWIU and the NUTW had soured from 1974. However, the unions eventually joined up individually to form a federation, the South African Federation of Textile, Clothing and Leather Workers Unions, which affiliated to the international in 1987. One of the major purposes of this federation was to push for all the unions to combine in to a national union of clothing and textile workers. Apart from her work for the International, for several months during 1987 Harriet also stood in as acting general secretary of the GWIU, following the resignation of the general secretary Frank Hansa. Interestingly, she did not volunteer this information in our interviews, and it was only when I stumbled over the union's annual report for 1987 that I realised the extent of her involvement. That she had no intention of staying on for a second tenure, however, was illustrated in her message to workers in the GWIU's annual report:

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<sup>9</sup> Anne Stevens, "The rich life of a defiant heroine", *Sunday Tribune*, January 19, 2004.



The position of General Secretary is a demanding and stressful job and in my opinion should be held by a young, forward looking and energetic person of great integrity who will carry this Union into the exciting future which awaits our workers' movement.<sup>10</sup>

The late 1980s represented a considerably changed labour context from the period this thesis has focussed on, and this was illustrated in the tone of the annual report, and particularly Harriet's message to workers, which she concluded with the struggle rallying call: "Amandla! Awethu!". In December 1987, the Cape and Natal unions combined to form the Garment and Allied Workers Union (GAWU), and members voted in favour of joining the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Harriet called for the new union to "carry as our banner the ideals of human rights, non-racialism, equality for women and a living wage for all workers."<sup>11</sup> Harriet saw the formation of the GAWU as a culmination of her work for the trade union movement: "I'd done my job".<sup>12</sup> Still wearing her GAWU tee-shirt, she boarded a bus straight after the rally to join her daughter Pat in Zimbabwe.

Once in Zimbabwe, Harriet worked for over a decade as a bookkeeper for various Non-Governmental Organisations as well as farmers. However, the deepening political crisis there meant Pat left with her children for England. With work opportunities rapidly drying up, Harriet decided to return to Durban in 2001. By this stage well into her 70s, Harriet found a job at a Chinese take-away, where she worked night shifts behind the till. Despite moving houses in Durban at least a dozen times, as she put it Harriet had a "steady" life from the time she was married up until she left South Africa in early 1975. From that time, however, she said her "nomadic instincts came to the fore", and she moved around continuously, so much so that some of her friends referred to her as the "gypsy trade unionist".<sup>13</sup> In 2008 Harriet made an extended visit to England, where all of her children live, reasoning that seven years in one place "is long enough". Harriet's 'nomadic' life has interesting parallels with her parents' itinerant lifestyle when Harriet was a young child. As I have noted, Harriet had great respect for her father's ability to

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<sup>10</sup> Garment Workers' Industrial Union (Natal), Annual Report 1986/87, SAMA Database, HP, AL 2457, M5.42 GWIU.

<sup>11</sup> Inaugural Congress Focus, GAWU – the true voice of Garment Workers in South Africa, December, 1987, FOSATU Records, HP, AH 1999, E 16.1.

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Stevens, "The rich life of a defiant heroine", *Sunday Tribune*, January 19, 2004.

turn his hand to “anything”, and similarly takes pride in her adaptability. This is an attitude, or perhaps principle, which she says she has in turn instilled in her children:

I might have had a trade union job for a few years ... you know there I had to work, and had the responsibility and the onus on me for everything. I mean certainly wherever you go, you can't eat if you don't work (laughs) and I mean I *know* because I've had to take all kinds of work in order to feed my two younger children and myself and pay my rent. In England ... I *worked* I mean, I worked all the time ... .. I mean amazing though how, we were actually like gypsies you know really when you think of it. Although we always worked and we always found jobs to do and we did whatever came to hand, you know, that's why I am so glad because all my children *can*, they can all do that. They can all do whatever comes to hand .... and it is a very good thing to be adaptable. I mean ok, it's a wonderful thing to have your one job which you're trained to do, and do it, and do it well. But it's also good in case you're ever dislodged (laughs) to be able to turn your mind to something else, God ja.<sup>14</sup>

### **A woman's 'life' as history**

This thesis was initially envisaged as an oral history project which would document Harriet's 'life history', primarily through the use of her personal narrative. While her 'life history' remains the core theme of the thesis, it has also – perhaps inevitably - evolved in to something quite different. The thesis is part biography, part life story, and partly a history of the unions and workers which Harriet both served and led. It also interrogates some of the history of the Trade Union Council of South Africa and its role, particularly around the crucial period of the early 1970s. The rich TUCSA archive and the contemporary press' avid interest in Harriet's activities as a trade unionist have provided detailed contextualisation for the interview material, and opportunity to gain some perspective on questions of memory and of Harriet's own relationship with history.

Taking seriously Harriet's claim that she learnt “everything” about her trade unionism from her husband, the first two chapters have provided a thorough discussion of Jimmy Bolton's politics and his legacy. I have argued that Jimmy's roots in a particular tradition of British trade unionism, transplanted to South Africa, as well as his position as a

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<sup>14</sup> Harriet Bolton, interviewed by Hannah Keal, August 22, 2006.

skilled, white artisan had important consequences for the trajectory of his unions. Indeed, I have argued that not only Harriet and Jimmy's trade unionism, but TUCSA's too, is better understood as closely bound to an identification with British 'orthodox unionism'. However, I have also made the point that Harriet's trade union work was informed by a 'spontaneous' sense of right, wrong and injustice, some of which can be traced to her father's influence. The initial two chapters provide some early history of the GWIU (Natal), contrasting this with the histories of the garment unions in the other major centres of Johannesburg and Cape Town. I have sought to position Jimmy's Durban unions in South Africa's trade union movement, at the time dominated by the Trades & Labour Council. Thus this thesis has made a small contribution to the relatively unstudied history of Natal's garment workers. Through this broader history and context I have woven Harriet's upbringing in post-Depression and World War II Durban. I have argued that Harriet's entrance into work as a clerk was typical of a generation of white women who went out to work during World War II. However, her decision to continue working after marriage was unconventional for the time. Considering how she negotiated her life between home and work, and her memories of this time, gives the historian deeper insight into what it meant to be a working woman of her generation. Chapter Two has also provided a detailed account of the upheavals in the labour movement caused by the rise to power of the Nationalist government and the changes which it entrenched in labour legislation. A significant section of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the formation and politics of TUCSA and SACTU. This grounding, I argue, is vital in order to better comprehend and position Harriet in South Africa's trade union movement.

Following Jimmy Bolton's death, Harriet was appointed secretary of both the GWIU and FWIU in 1964. Chapter Three considers how Harriet negotiated the challenges of her life as a single, working mother who was also actively involved in community organisations in Durban. Her relationship with a small network of other TUCSA women trade unionists is also discussed. The extant literature on women in South Africa's trade union movement focuses, in the main part, around the white Afrikaans garment workers during the 1930s, and the SACTU affiliated coloured food and canning workers of the Cape. The role of women trade unionists in the Trade Union Council of South Africa, particularly

for the 1960s and 1970s period, is less explored. Indeed, TUCSA's role as a whole has been identified as a gap in the historiography of trade union organisation.<sup>15</sup> While certainly not comprehensive, this thesis has gone a small way in redressing this through a discussion of the role of women within its male dominated structures. By considering Harriet's experience as head of a TUCSA affiliated union, a member of the TUCSA executive, but also someone invested in pushing TUCSA's boundaries and redefining the organisation's character, this thesis has provided further evidence of the role that TUCSA played.

The 1960s is a decade during which the trade union movement faced its nadir. Despite this, Harriet's unions were able to overcome, in small ways, some of the strictures they worked within. Chapter Three considers the position of Durban's Indian garment workers and their relationship to the industry, to the union and to Harriet. This is particularly within the context of the increasing number of Indian women entering the industry. I have argued that, in taking leadership of the union, Harriet initiated a number of significant changes with the GWIU's past practices, while at the same time paying tribute to Jimmy Bolton's contribution and legacy. In particular, the 1971 strike at Currie's Fountain was a show of strength and solidarity by Indian workers reminiscent of a period of activism thirty years beforehand. This strike has thus far received little, if any, attention in the literature. Chapter Three provides a detailed discussion of the background to the 1971 Currie's Fountain strike, the strike itself and its aftermath. I argue that it had some important, and largely unacknowledged, consequences. The chapter makes a link between the activism and interest that the strike precipitated, and the nascent non-racial worker organisations which would soon form out of the Bolton Hall.

Both Chapter Four and Chapter Five are concerned with a discussion of Harriet's role in assisting these new worker organisations. The reaction of the state and the established trade union movement both to the new "Bolton Hall unions", and to Harriet's involvement, is considered. Vital to this is the impact that the 1973 strike wave had in

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<sup>15</sup> Jon Lewis, "South African Labor History: A Historiographical Assessment" *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990).

South Africa, as well as internationally. I have shown how the strikes provided much needed momentum to the burgeoning worker organisations operating from the Bolton Hall. They also stimulated international interest, and from around this time Harriet began to play an important role in motivating for international funds to be channelled through avenues other than SACTU. While Harriet preached the TUCSA line of representation for African workers through trade unions, I have shown that she was already well out of step with her TUCSA colleagues. Central to Chapter Five is a consideration of the enormous pressure that Harriet came under, both from the state and from her registered unions, because of her involvement with the non-racial unions. I have argued that the strain this put on Harriet's family life was an important factor in her decision to resign from all her positions in the trade union movement, and emigrate to the United Kingdom with her children. However, I have shown that the distress caused by her alienation from the established trade union movement, as well as her frustration with her colleagues' obduracy, also played a significant role in her decision to leave.

In Harriet Bolton's obituary, David Hemson describes her as the "guardian of the rising union movement of the 1970s".<sup>16</sup> This thesis goes some way in considering the important role that she played in laying the foundations of South Africa's democratic trade union movement. Through the course of this thesis I have argued that a consideration of her life and work in South Africa's trade union movement offers the historian new perspectives on some of the labour movement's most tumultuous and significant years. Harriet's story does not fit neatly into the available labour historiography and nationalist discourse, much of which is concerned with the contribution of the left to the country's trade unions. However, I argue that it is the complexity of Harriet's politics and her role as a white woman organising black workers 'within' TUCSA structures which makes her story even more worthy of investigation. It is also, I would suggest, history which gives hope for the utopian ideal of 'non-racialism' for the future.

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<sup>16</sup> David Hemson, "So long to a fiery spirit", *The Mail and Guardian*, November 27, 2009.

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