## ***Publication: Class action and consciousness of migrant workers, Durban dockers***

Hemson, David (1979) Class consciousness and migrant workers: dock workers of Durban. PhD thesis, University of Warwick.

This thesis is the product of exile but it was developed in the hothouse of internal resistance during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has a wide ambit and covers a period from the 1870s to the mid-1970s; from early colonial intervention against togt (day) workers to the challenges to the cheap labour system to unionization. The material for the earlier sections came from archives of the colonial and apartheid period. That for later sections came from notes on working together with the stevedoring workers in building united action and a union; then the Transport and General Workers Union.

##### The time

It was conceived in the worst of times. The subject and themes were cast during “high” apartheid when apartheid was somewhere near its zenith. 1969 was almost precisely at the height of apartheid; the Bantustans were established to make Africans “foreigners” in urban areas, the Physical Planning Act 88 of 1967 (incredibly) set the upper limits of the numbers of African people in urban areas, and it was proposed that all urban rights would be removed. All Africans living in "white" areas would only be allowed to exercise political rights in their "homelands”. The regime was consolidating its rule aiming to legislate for all African people to be citizens of a “homeland” and not a citizen of South Africa. Apartheid, the reviled and tortured political system, it was at its peak. There were horrors without end with more to come.

The critique of the apartheid political economy then was that investment and totalitarian controls were leading to rapid economic growth. It was argued South African economy was one of forced labour and super-exploitation; this was a period in which the cheap labour system became managed by a monstrous bureaucracy. Its key components were the compound, the influx control and the reserves; interlinking bureaucracies made up the system. The compound concentrated and controlled migrant workers separately from the urban environment; influx control limited access to work for rural work-seekers and ensured their rightlessness; and the reserves or Bantustans represented both the remaining though shrinking basis of subsistence and the regime of rural despotism under traditional authorities. They were the labour reservoirs of capitalism in South Africa.

Capital sought out more amenable labour in rural areas further distant from the urban centres; this was maintained through the influx control apparatus and recruitment by traditional authorities. These three nodes of cheap labour appeared to make an invincible system of labour exploitation on which the national oppression of African people was based. Such perpetual migrancy would suppress industrial and class consciousness: forced labour could not countenance consciousness.

John Rex concluded that the apartheid labour system achieved the “most efficient system of labour exploitation yet devised”. Resistance among black working people was at a low level. At about this time Steve Biko captured the mood as follows: "All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.” The apartheid regime appeared to have come close to perfecting the exploitation of black workers through the apparatus of migrancy and control.

This thesis was initiated against this mood and background in trying to understand the dynamics of united class action by a harshly oppressed but vitally productive set of migrant workers.

##### The strike

We were in a backroom in a suburban house in Johannesburg. The discussion was how to channel funds to Cos Desmond for travel and research into forced removals and dumping of people made landless in rural areas to starve or survive. Lawrence Schlemmer and Josie Adler of SACHED discussed sources of funds; I was waiting for a lift to Durban with Lawrie.

The discussion involved confidences; although I was trusted, I did not want to know the details. I was absorbed in the newspaper: the front page headline in the ***Sunday Times*** on 6 April 1969 was “2,000 dockers strike in Durban”. I was thunderstruck and excited by what this strike which paralyzed South Africa’s major harbour revealed about the two poles in opposition in south Africa – the mass of oppressed black people and the then granite mountain of state power. These workers had broken out of the vice-grip of a total institution maintained by the police, management, compound indunas, the induna home networks and informers.

Migrants were living in constant rotation and continuous change. Migrant contract labourers were limited to less than 12 months employment at a time, forced to live in compounds and to return to the Bantustans every year, and living under detailed surveillance at work and at rest were not expected to strike and develop organized resistance. When there was resistance, deportation from the urban areas was the standard response. Or the consciousness leading to class action.

The docks were a critically strategic node of the economy vulnerable to strike action by workers housed in hostels in the most oppressive controls. While the apartheid state was eliminating every right available to black people and piling on detailed controls over daily life, this opposition from below showed a network of workers’ leadership; an undisclosed underground. Even if this was vulnerable to repression it could be widened and threaten the rule of racial capitalism.

Here was magnificent resistance at the height of apartheid rule when the regime was considering scrapping the provisions for permanent residence for African people in urban areas and reducing all African people to foreigners in their own land.

##### Research, action research

The strike demonstrated that in the midst of perpetual migration and ruthless controls, workers had retained a memory and could exercise collective power. How could such memory, consciousness and collective action arise in conditions of “total control” and super-exploitation? What were the prospects for collective action available through contradictions within the cheap labour system? How could genuinely independent unions arise within the context of police harassment, bannings and uncertain support internationally?

I had started to gather material for research on the dictatorship of apartheid; the horrific intention of removing all rights from African workers to life in the city, the prospect of a totalitarian state maintaining white supremacy and the cheap labour system indefinitely. And just when the intentions of the regime were clear, here was the living movement of the most vulnerable striking back at the system; prepared to sacrifice everything they had at work to be forced out of Durban under the gun. This appeared a spectacular defeat but at the same time it was a declaration of strength and potential power. It could act as a magnet to migrant workers in and around Durban, the gold Reef, the East Rand and elsewhere in South Africa.

I exchanged these ideas with Lawrie during the ride back to Durban. The more I thought about it the more I was convinced that here lay the point to the resolution of the impasse of South African society and to turn the tide which had been running so devastatingly against the people. Lawrie had a different perspective; he was more interested in the internal contradictions of the structures of apartheid leading to change. Could such strikes bring Bantustan leaders into recognized political leadership in a federal arrangement of power? The strike itself seemed a small exception to the general powerlessness and relative apathy of black working people.

The question was how to approach the task of organizing without experience, the theoretical understanding and the practical means. I resolved to make the study of the Durban dockworkers the subject of my thesis and to come to a better understanding of what would lead to the organization of the black working class. A paper to the NUSAS seminar in 1971 sought to set out the theoretical basis for students to link to the black working class by transforming the Wage Board hearings into events for mobilization and organization. The initial chapters of my thesis were exploratory. After the possibilities for mobilizing students crystalized into Wages Commissions around the country, these became the background materials or manuals for action research.

By the 1970s workers were employed by the Durban Dock Labour Supply Company (DLSC) which was an extraordinary exemplification of an apartheid mechanism. It was a corporate monopoly established to manage the compounds for stevedoring companies and concentrated employer power and police controls over the workers. The dockers were subject to a particular form of labour migration, virtually all workers had some links to the land and were subject to traditional rule. The Company exhibited a form of class rule integrated with the Bantustan; through the surveillance and control was conducted by J.B. Buthelezi in the compound, a relative of Mangasuthu Buthelezi. When he spoke for the stevedores at the wage investigation he received the furious repudiation from the workers.

This confrontation arose from the Wages Commission focusing on the coming stevedoring wage investigation; the workers’ paper ***Isisebenzi*** was distributed at the Point and guided workers on how to attend. On 17 July 1972 hundreds of stevedores crammed into the small hall in the Department of Labour building used for the hearing. The partitions between this hall and the adjoining room had to be removed to allow all the workers to hear the proceedings and to speak. The employers and state officials shifted uncomfortably as the crowd of workers pressed against their seats around the U-shaped tables. After more than a decade of quiet, the stevedores spoke for themselves.

From this activity came some of the resources and human reserves needed for the emerging labour movement of the 1970s which culminated in the formation of COSATU in 1985.

The regime’s response to the emergence of independent worker led trade unions after the 1973 strikes throughout Durban and beyond put a certain endline to union work. When I was banned early in 1974 from any work in union organizing or teaching, there was time enough to collect documentary material and think through the work. The kind women municipal librarians put up with my requests for historic documents and warned me of Security Branch visits. This material was the eventual documentary reserve I drew on at Warwick University where my doctoral work was supervised by Prof Martin Legassick. The writing and analysis were shaped, in part, by the political and theoretical debates of exile over the nature of apartheid society and the perspectives for resistance. We shared a perspective for growing resistance from below weakening the regime and driving to a democratic revolution growing over into an impending socialist revolution. Far from this perspective leading to a predictable line of analysis, there is a close examination of the facts and conclusions based on the evidence.

##### The theory

The elements of theory are evident or sometimes latent, but not explicitly developed. The scope includes broad subject matters which are closely interrelated: the rise of colonial racial legislation in response to togt (day) workers and rising wages, the “Durban system” of generating revenue for the policing of African people, the resistance and repression leading up to systemic national oppression under apartheid, and the stevedoring labour supply company as living case study of the inter-linkages of employers, police and Bantustan authorities. And then the resistance to this order.

This subject matter covered a wide historic swathe which could be included by broad theoretical approach such as that of Harold Wolpe’s *Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid.* Reference ismade to Harold’s work. In a sense this thesis is a case study in Apartheid which Wolpe described as the “specific mechanism for maintaining labour-power cheap through the elaboration of the entire system of domination and control and the transformation of the function of the pre-capitalist societies”. I was, however, acutely aware that the evidence on the wage subsidy in “pre-capitalist societies” was passing and that the Bantustan leadership and apparatus were now a critical part of the rule over the majority. My focus on class consciousness and action would place agency at the centre.

Agency could be latent or active. As well as describing the mechanisms of apartheid, the molecular processes among productive migrant workers is the subject matter. Many of the studies of migrant labour have focused on the compounds and the hidden struggles; this work attempted to take the analysis beyond compound practices and resistances to identify manifest agency and the emerging path of class organization. This involved capturing the ebb and flow of class action in response to the hardening oppressive order. More precisely, it explored the possibilities of organization and change through deliberate interventions such as the mobilization around wage hearings.

Very broadly the history of the developing cheap labour system and the resistance is articulated in the terms of race and class. Since race analysis is well established the intention (as set out in the Introduction to the thesis) was to “turn away from analyzing South African society as a ‘race relations situation’ with fixed caste/race characteristics maintained by a corporatist state, towards one which attempted to unravel the class factors at work in a dictatorial, though socially dynamic, regime.” This approach intellectually marked “resistance to the pervasive strength of bourgeois categories over social categories....of the study of race rather than class relations, and of an emphasis on nationalism as the only ideology of the oppressed rather than an investigation of the specific nature of class consciousness.”

The underlying hypothesis was that working class action and consciousness would arise among oppressed migrant workers despite conditions of control, coercion and the continuing link to the land which makes them vulnerable to deportation from the cities. The evidence in the growth of the cheap labour system and resistance is explored empirically over a hundred year period. Although capital sought increasing numbers of workers furthest from the urban area, these too had the same levels of solidarity as those from other areas.

##### Post apartheid crisis in transition

I returned from exile to the docks in 1990. Then and thereafter, the apparatus of cheap labour system was in decline and its infrastructure in disrepair, the compounds were becoming derelict buildings, eventually nothing remained. The oppressive labour bureaux became the KwaMuhle apartheid museum.

Change was coming but it was coming from above. Dock workers and their unions were not involved in the planning for Point; they were gradually frozen out of the area as the compounds closed and excluded by policing. Maybe they would have liked to have had waterfront houses and placed their children in local schools; this was never considered. Luxury accommodation in the Point was being built to attract the newly rich as the workers were being displaced from the waterfront.

Market forces rather than state bureaucracy were let loose and at play. Casual labour in a labour market of a daily surplus of workers meant continuing cheap labour. Capitalism now sought to free itself from the entanglements of the bureaucratic cheap labour system. As the compounds were demolished, migrant workers found a place in Cato Manor and walked over the ridge to work. Democracy came in a package: with pacts between elites, new divisions, casualization and rising inequality.

Globalization is only part of the issue, a lack of investment to achieve economic growth, lack of planning and genuine reforms to provide more regular work in the docks has marked a crisis in transition from apartheid. In many ways the casual workers of the early 1990s were in worse conditions than in the 1970s; still largely migrants suffering increasing redundancies. Many were sleeping rough while a smaller core remained in declining compounds and were organized by TGWU, now SATAWU. The old waterfront had gone; stevedores and their families were now based in the urban settlements in and around Durban; an eventuality that apartheid sought to deny them.

Stevedoring in Durban has not stood still since 1990. As a port Durban now has its position strengthened as the busiest harbour in South Africa and one of the busiest in the Southern Hemisphere. The harbour is more efficient and operates as a hub for trade along African coasts and between the global east and west. The dense clustering of ships waiting off shore has now declined and turnaround times are shorter.

Postcript: Since completing this thesis I have contributed some 18 papers, chapters or peer reviewed publications on aspects of stevedoring as well as a photographic exhibition on workers in the industry. I’m now consolidating this work, revisiting the historic themes and post-apartheid experience.

*Note: The k… word appears in the text in quoting the statements of the ruling strata at the time and they knew it was offensive and often intended to offend. I had considered removing this word and substituting another, rephrasing it or reducing it to k…. This would, however, possibly disguise or neuter the language of oppression and render the text ahistorical. All use of the word is in quotation marks, I acknowledge there will be different perspectives and judgments on the issue.*

##### Chapter headings; Class consciousness and migrant workers: dock workers of Durban.

INTRODUCTION and methodology p1

CHAPTER 1

The colonial economy and togt labour, 1870-1899 p9

CHAPTER 2

Togt workers and the formation of the Durban system, 1900-1917 p45

CHAPTER 3

The ICU, beer and bureaucracy, 1918- 1929 . p160

CHAPTER 4

Pass burning and the Communist Party *I* 1930-1939 p253

CHAPTER 5

Class struggles and decasualization, 1940-1959 p316

CHAPTER 6

National oppression, migrant labour, and the dock labour pool, 1960-1969 p382

CHAPTER 7

Forced labour, strikes, and resistance to the apartheid state p505

CHAPTER 8

Trade unionism and mass strikes p603

CHAPTER 9

Class action and consciousness p700