South African Sugar Mill Labour during the 1970's

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During the last decade the material conditions for labour in South Africa's sugar mills have undergone significant changes. The concessions afforded to workers in South African mills have formed a part of the efforts of the milling companies to rationalize in the face of deteriorating conditions for the accumulation of capital in sugar production. Notable features of this rationalization process were the centralization of ownership and production; technological developments and appropriate worker training; and programmes of investment diversification and expansion of output. By examining these aspects of the rationalisation process it is possible to build up a picture of the context in which organized labour has operated.

Changing Conditions for Labour

It is pertinent to introduce this brief outline of changing conditions for labour by remarking that the work-force in sugar mills constitutes a diversified grouping of workers. The majority, who are Africans and migrant, are mainly employed as unskilled labourers. Indian and white workers, on the other hand, are generally engaged as semi-skilled or skilled workers. Whereas Africans are usually accommodated and fed as seasonal contract workers in compounds for single men or, in some cases, in married workers' quarters, and have their economic fortunes determined in large measure by their actual or supposed recourse to the Reserve economies, the Indian and white workers are permanently resident with their families in company houses in the vicinity of the sugar mill. Certain of these structural features are being eroded, but now only a small proportion of sugar mill workers are free workers, proletarianized in the pure sense of the term. This has practical implications which go beyond the realm of abstract conceptualization. The cleavages among these workers on "ethnic" and material grounds, fostered by the state, have prevented the growth of a pervasive and cohesive consciousness among workers. Therefore, despite their common class position, workers have responded as a dismembered group to the differential policies applied by capital to the various component elements of the work-force.

Wage rates for sugar mill workers are ostensibly determined on the basis of skill rather than "ethnicity", and until 1979 Rates 1 to 12 were stipulated by the Industrial Council for the Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Industry for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, while Rates 13 to 16 applied to skilled workers. During the period under review, wages were first increased in April 1972,[2] with further revisions following the worker strikes in Natal in 1973. Although the strikes did not directly affect the sugar mills, under a new Industrial Council agreement made immediately after the strikes, it was proposed that unskilled and semi-skilled workers would get a 50% increase in minimum wages over three years from 1 May 1973.[3] This agreement was reached between the Sugar Manufacturing and Refining Employers' Association and a number of workers' representatives, namely the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the South African Electrical Workers' Association, the Sugar Industry Employee's Association (all three being white unions, the last one having a membership of 32 refinery workers), the Natal Sugar Industry Employees' Union (an Indian and "coloured" union),[4] and Department of Labour "representation" for African workers. The characteristic suppression of African labour organizations by the state, and statutory exclusion of Africans from Industrial Councils was only eased, and marginally so, in 1976.

Beset by extensive cane fires (mainly unintentional, but caused recurringly as acts of worker sabotage) and drought during the 1974/75 season, sugar producers were further rocked by confrontations with labour late in 1974. In mid-October that year about 800 black workers at the Felixton mill struck after management had curtailed their private beer brewing. Armed police and riot vehicles stood by until the strike had been broken and work was resumed.[5] Less than a fortnight after the Felixton strike, over 600 black workers struck at the Empangeni mill. Police broke this strike within two days. Tear gas and dogs were used to disperse congregated strikers who were routed from their compound.[6] A few weeks later, on 14 November 1974, over 500 workers struck for higher wages at the Darnall mill. White women and school students in the village of Darnall were sent to the white staff's recreation hall guarded by police. The strike was broken and production resumed after an ultimatum by management that workers should return to work or face dismissal.[7] Two days later, about 200 workers struck for higher wages at the Melville mill. Again, clashes with armed police broke the strike after strikers who refused to return to work were threatened with immediate dismissal.[8]

Adverse conditions for capital in sugar production were exacerbated when gold mining companies increased black miners' wages on 1 December 1974. This increase was critical for sugar producers because the mining companies were expanding their recruiting in source areas for sugar industry labour.[9] The immediate response was to raise field workers' wages.[10] In May 1975 the minimum wage for unskilled mill workers was raised to R59,80 a month, while artisans received a minimum wage of R225,90 a month with shift allowance, plus holiday bonuses not paid to less skilled workers.[11]

In April 1976 worker representation on the Industrial Council took on a new form. Under provisions made by the Bantu Labour Relations Regulation Act as amended in 1973, the liaison and works committees which already existed in the refinery and sugar mills nominated six non-voting black delegates to the Industrial Council.[12] If they have no voice through Department of Labour representatives, black workers had little more power on the Industrial Council following this display of apparent magnanimity by the state. An analyst of collective bargaining procedure sanctioned by sugar industry managers at the time of this pragmatic statutory change, has remarked appositely that these new African delegates were not legitimized worker representatives, and that workers remained subject to a coercive structure of authority in the formulation of Industrial Council "agreements".[13] The newly constituted Council approved further wage increases for all workers which would be effective from 1 October 1976. Minimum wages were raised to R76,74 a month, with workers paid on Rates 1 to 12 scheduled to receive a further 10% on 1 April and 5% on 1 October in each of the next two years. For the first time these unskilled and semi-skilled workers were to receive an annual December bonus. Initially this bonus would be 2,5% of the basic annual wage, and 5% from December 1977. In addition, these workers were to have their annual two-week leave increased to three weeks after completing five, as opposed to ten years service. A common 7,5% shift allowance for all workers was to be introduced on 1 April 1977, and workers paid on Rates 13 to 16 were to receive an increased call-out allowance.[14]

In September 1979 the Industrial Council arrived at another agreement concerning wages and service conditions which would be operative until 31 March 1981. The Council now had as party to its decisions the "mixed" South African Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Workers, Shipbuilders, and Welders Society. The entry of this newcomer, with white, "coloured", and Indian members, still did nothing to establish direct and representative participation by African workers on the Council. This latest agreement was based on a revision of the system of grading wage rates. Henceforth, wages would be determined according to occupational Grades A1 to A3, requiring the least skills; B1 to B5 Grades for occupations requiring certain skills; and C1 to C3 Grades for qualified skilled artisans. The minimum monthly wage was stipulated as R110,63, to be increased to R121,59 from 1 April 1980. A 7½% shift allowance was now payable to workers at all grades. This apparent advance towards "de-racialization" was offset by disproportinate bonus and leave conditions applicable to the various strata of workers. The annual bonus for workers on Grades A1 to B5 was set at 5%, and for skilled workers on Grades C1 to C3 at 10% of annual salary. Annual leave conditions were also reviewed, but with more advantages for skilled workers.[15]

Aside from the limited impact which the 1973 strikes made on wages, owners and managers reacted pragmatically to further developments within the sugar milling industry. Their reaction (superficially a progressive trend amongst the milling companies) was accompanied by a growing awareness of the necessity for maintaining cordial relations with emergent worker organizations. This sensitivity was demonstrated when the Industrial Relations Manager of the Huletts Group observed that

> . . . . the unionsation of Blacks is inevitable – it is just a question of what form it will take. As unions are soon to become a permanent part of industrial life, let us accept them with good grace and learn to live in harmony with them.[16]

Centralization of Ownership and Production

After the initial proliferation of sugar mills in Natal during the late 1800's, rationalization and technological modernization specific to capitalist development in the colony led to the culling of smaller and more obsolete mills. Fewer centralized mills then operated with greater productive capacities. More factories were erected after 1905 when Sir J L Hulett submitted the successful tender for the construction of sugar mills in Zululand. While new sugar cane growing areas have been exploited and a few new factories built since the turn of the century, the trend has been towards centralization and elimination of peripheral mills. Centralization of production has generally been preceeded by the centralization of control and ownership in the hands of a few companies which have absorbed the smaller milling companies.

The complex development of contemporary structures of ownership may be briefly traced from 1950, when the Reynolds, Crooke, Saunders, Smith, Hulett, and other families exercised control over sugar milling. These family groups descended from the most prominent owners in the nascent industry, and in 1950 they owned, either individually or jointly, most of the eighteen mills then operating in Natal's narrow coastal belt north and south of Durban. In 1952 Reynolds Bros' Esparanza mill on the Natal south coast was relocated to Pongola, eastern Transvaal, where it began production in 1954. In 1962 the Hulett family lost direct control over their empire, without any alteration to existing milling operations. The Gledhow-Chaka's Kraal Sugar Co closed its Chaka's Kraal mill in 1961 and was reconstituted as the Gledhow Sugar Co in 1964. During 1964 Illovo Sugar estates, which already had one mill, bought both the Doornkop mill (the major shareholder until then had been General Mining and Finance) and the Noodsberg Sugar Co, which built a mill at Jaagbaan in the Natal midlands. In 1966 another mill opened in the midlands at Dalton, under the ownership and control of the Union Co-op Bark and Sugar Co, and the Malelane mill in the Transvaal lowveld came into production. The Malelane mill is owned by the Transvaalse Suikerkorporasie in which Volkskas has a 60% stake and General Mining the balance. The Noodsberg, Dalton, and Malelane mills, as well as the reconstructed Pongola mill were established in new sugar cane growing regions. Thus by 1970 the number of mills had increased to twenty, three more than in 1950.

In 1970 Tate and Lyle, the British-based multi-national sugar company, acquired a 49,25% share of Illovo Sugar Estates. Through a merger in 1975 with Reynolds Bros (which owned Umzimkulu Sugar Co, by then, and which had bought the Gledhow Sugar Co,and Crookes Bros sugar mills), C G Smith came to control seven mills. One of these, at Doornkop, was simultaneously sold to Hulett's which closed it down, as it was interested only in the milling rights involved. C G Smith's Renishaw mill was also closed in 1976 and in 1977 this company bought the controlling share in Illovo formerly held by Tate and Lyle.[17] In 1978 the Melville mill (originally owned by Stafford Mayer who relinquished control to S A Board Mills, in turn acquired by Anglo American Industrial Corp. in 1974) was bought jointly by Tongaat and C G Smith and closed, with cane diverted to two of their other mills. There are now seventeen mills in operation. While C G Smith owns six mills directly; Hulett's five mills and its Rossburgh refinery; and Tongaat one mill each, C G Smith and Tongaat jointly control Hulett's.[18]

Although on the face of it, the Smith-Tongaat consortium would appear to have ultimate control over the bulk of sugar milling in South Africa, negotiations begun late in 1979 have culminated with the acquisition by Barlow Rand Limited of 84% of voting rights in C G Smith.[19] While C G Smith and Tongaat have equitable control over Huletts, C G Smith derives 2/3 of Hulett's income and 1/3 goes to Tongaat. Because Anglo American has a one-fifth interest in Tongaat, making it the largest single shareholder, the struggle for ownership of the sugar companies is, in the final analysis, between Barlows and Anglo American. The influence of pioneer families however has not been completely eliminated, but is a diminishing force, subordinated to two of southern Africa's primary industrial powers.

Centralization of production has a bearing on labour which should be self-evident: the closure of mills means a cut-back in labour requirements of the companies concerned. A few data serve to illustrate some of the effects of closures on labour during the 1970's. When the Doornkop mill was closed at the end of January 1975, about 350 workers were affected. Although some workers were transferred, others were given severance and compensatory pay and allowed to remain in company houses for three months, until the end of the normal milling season.[20] Before the closure of the Renishaw mill at the end of the 1975/76 season, all white workers were offered alternative employment. Of the 95 Indian workers at the mill, 25 had fewer than four years of service and 10 were due to retire, and the company sought only to find alternative employment for the others. Those who did not want to be transferred and those for whom jobs were not found were paid, and allowed to remain in company houses, for three months. Before their dismissal about 200 African migrant workers were paid a gratuity for each season they had worked at the Renishaw mill.[21] Finally, when the Melville mill stopped production about 125 workers were directly affected (28 white and about 100 African and Indian workers).[22]

Technology and Training

The modernization of South Africa's sugar technology has been rapid in the ambit of global sugar production. Whatever the repressive conditions in South African mills, from the outset labour has been exchanged for wages. As a result, local sugar production achieved competitive status on the international market without indulging in slavery *per se.* The virtually synonymous association of slavery with sugar production in the early sugar producing regions – Cuba and the West Indies, Mauritius, Madeira, southern colonies in America, etc – is remarkable, and the observation by the Cuban historian Moreno Fraginals emphasizes the character of the relationship: In the mid-eighteenth century, he writes,

> The production process posed few problems from a technical standpoint. Hardly any machinery existed in the mills . . . .In fact, the only real problem was labor. The number of slaves decided the volume of production . . . . The growth of sugar manufacturing was determined by the ability to employ labor on a grand scale. In other words, *sugar development depended on the slave trade.*[23]

This dependence of sugar manufacture on slavery had as its corollary the impediment which slavery imposed on technological development. So long as slavery persisted, argues Moreno Fraginals, so long was mechanization retarded. With the elimination of this constraint through the abolition of slavery and consequent proletarianization of labour in sugar, Cuba and other sugar producers were poised to mechanize in the wake of the metropolitan industrial revolution.

Sugar milling in Natal, however, developed without having to transform its labour from slaves to rural proletariat. This advantage was enhanced by the relatively late entry of Natal into sugar production which permitted local millers to draw from the already considerable technological experience accumulated by millers elsewhere. Of course, this advantage should not seem to imply that the local industry possessed modern manufacturing techniques from its inception: on the contrary, local sugar mills evolved in a similar way to those abroad; with hand- or animal-powered crushers pre-dating mechanical milling and processing. What is of significance is that this technological evolution was rapid, with the capital/labour ratio in sugar milling rising (given the added impetus of adequate local capital) over a relatively short period.

Modernisation, however, is dependent on more than the availability of sufficient capital; its success hinges on the capacity of the industry to attract and train technologists.

Scientific competence in the South African milling industry derives from an indigenous source as well as from strong links with other sugar producing countries. Locally trained engineers and chemists are perhaps numerically predominant in the South African mills, but the steady stream of Mauritian technologists and, to a lesser extent, Dutch technologists from Indonesia, has always brought with it a wealth of expertise. In a few instances, capitalists such as Sir J L Hulett personally recruited sugar technologists from Mauritius to establish and manage mills in

South Africa. More recently specialised training has been re-instituted by the Sugar Milling Research Institute to prepare South African technologists.

As a revival of a pre-war programme, since 1964 white males have been accepted by the Sugar Milling Research Institute as trainee sugar technologists who receive a diploma after a three-year course. The inability to attract sufficient whites forced a revision of the scheme so as to offer courses also to Indian students. Thus, from 1978 white students have enrolled for a three-year diploma course and Indian students for a two-year certificate course, and they could presumably be offered different positions in mills on the basis of this differential training. The South African Sugar Millers' Association has also contributed R150 000 to Anglo American Corporation.s Umlazi Training Centre which will train African sugar technologists, *inter alia*. The first course at this institution will commence in 1981 with ten African students.[24]

Technological transformations are being replicated in the training of mill workers, and as the traditional boundaries in South African industry become blurred there will be a growing preponderance of skilled black workers in sugar mills. Initially organized as a training school for white artisans, the South African Sugar Industry Industrial Training Centre at Mount Edgecombe has begun taking on Indian and African students training for a variety of trades. In mid-1979 the Centre had on its books 79 white, 120 Indian, 17 'coloured', and 52 African trainees, most of them preparing to enter the sugar industry as skilled or semi-skilled artisans (31 of the 268 students came from companies not engaged in sugar production).[25]

Diversification and Expansion

In contrast to many other sugar producing regions, the sugar is manufactured in South Africa under conditions of national economic diversity. Thus, the South African sugar industry has been spared the social and political pressures for diversification as experienced in the West Indies, for example. Here Jamaican academics in 1968 confronted the government and sugar companies over the stranglehold whch Tate and Lyle had on their monocultural economy. At the time Tate and Lyle marketed the entire sugar crop of Jamaica and Trinidad, while sugar exports were carried by two shipping lines, one of them a subsidiary of Tate and Lyle's. The company virtually controlled sugar refining in Britain, so that it was able to sell refined sugar in this country at over 50%more than the price paid to the West Indies for unrefined sugar.[26] Clearly diversification implies more than attempting to reduce dependence on a single crop. It can also relate to a struggle against monopolistic corporate control over an economy; implying a struggle against the state, which acts as a functionary of multinational corporations in this respect.

South African sugar milling companies have been engaged in the production of commodites other than sugar for a number of decades now. The various areas in which the three largest companies have acquired controlling interests are too numerous to list here, but what is evident is this pattern of diversification is that capital derived in sugar production is being spread over a wider surface without in any way diminishing interest in sugar milling. In the South African instance then, sugar production does not create structures of dependency as portrayed above and diversification emanates not from the lobbying of dependants of the industry but from the specific requirements of capital in sugar.

The 1973 Natal strikes have already been referred to. The first industrial plant affected was Coronation (brick and tile manufacturer), where 1 500 struck for higher wages. Although their demands were not met, with management arguing that wages were constrained by price control, workers were enticed back to work with minor increases.[27] That Cornation is a subsidiary of the Tongaat Group is of some significance. What can be inferred is that although sugar millers as a group have boasted of good and ever improving conditions of employment for their workers, they do not have a consistent disposition towards labour; production costs, including wages and other costs of labour power appear to be minimized differentially in each field of investment.

Diversification of investment interests in activities other than sugar production has not reflected attempts by the sugar companies to extricate themselves from their original commitment to sugar. Although there has been dissent for some years now over the state's control of the domestic sugar price, ideas of vast expansion of sugar production have been entertained by producers. While quotas and aid are being granted to KwaZulu farmers for small-scale sugar cane cultivation (which will stimulate cane growing without jeopardising the status of owners of existing plantations), more extensive expansion is envisaged in the eastern Transvaal and KwaZulu. Talk of new mills has recurred during the 1970's and C G Smith recently announced its intention of expanding its three south coast mills[28] and the Noodsberg mill.[29]

Discussion

The 1970's have been critical years for capital in sugar. Compelled as it is to satisfy the domestic market before selling sugar on the world market the industry has its income limited by local price control, and it is also forced to absorb 20% of it increased annual production costs out of revenue. With the local market accounting for over half of sugar sales, and at a price well below the cost of production, the industry's own price stabilization fund was depleted in 1979, and an initial loan of R25 million[30] was raised to maintain the fund. Moreover, sales of sugar abroad, which generate most of the industry's income, are affected by international contracts, increased subsidies to European sugar beet producers, and the development of corn sweetners and synthetic sugar substitutes.

Under the exigencies of the period (which include bio-climatic constraints, fires, and an array of issues not directly dealt with here), sugar companies have been forced, *inter alia,* to accelerate the rate of change in the composition of capital in sugar, so that constant capital acquires increasing importance *vis-à-vis* labour power in the production process. Increased costs of labour power and attendant tensions have hastened the rate of this change, and numerous statements have been voiced which testify to the attitude of producers in this respect.

In his 1972 annual address, the chairman of the South African Sugar Millers' Association argued that

> With a changing socio-economic pattern, a greater sophistication is becoming evident among most Africans, and with it, increasing demands for higher wages. As a result, the African . . . . . .is becoming more reluctant to engage himself as a cane cutter. . . . . We must take positive and active steps now to establish mechanized harvesting in South Africa, as soon as possible, and certainly within the next ten years.[31]

Similarly, the president of the South African Sugar Technologists' Association stated that

> . . the main task we face is that for political and social reasons people might not be willing to cut cane in the long term.
> We can be complacent when in the relatively short history of our industry we have seen this happen in the case of the Indian and the Zulu?[32]

In his 1976 address the chairman of the South African Sugar Association mentioned that limits imposed on returns to sugar companies have meant that

> . . . greater freedom to improve conditions of employment have been denied to us.[33]

The following year he reiterated that continued price fixing would have a bearing on wages and that the earliest victims were always the lowest paid workers.[34]*
The practical and ideological underpinnings of sugar manufacturers' strategies in the face of a growing crisis are intimated in these selected statements. The implications for labour require clarification.

Indications are that the unionization of African sugar mill workers is imminent. Be that as it may, these workers have demonstrated a rising consciousness and a capacity and readiness to confront management outside the framework of bureaucratized and officially sanctioned organizations. Such "spontaneous" mobilization, exclusive of white and, in most cases, Indian workers, may well be harnessed by unionization; a development which could expand the vision of workers beyond the mill to areas of concern at the level of the industry as a whole, or beyond.

So long as closures, for example are dealt with on a mill- instead of an industry-basis the elimination of a mill deprives those affected of any opportunity to defend their interests from a materilaly significant position. Unionism would offer a basis for pre-emptive planning regarding such eventualities. That the problem persists

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*(If the mechanization of harvesting has not always advanced in correspondence to developments in the mills, the cause is not technological laggardliness, but, as the chairman of the South African Cane Growers' Association has indicated,[35] the high rate of unemployment since the mid-1970's which has ensured exceedingly cheap cost of labour for field work.)

in reflected in an attempt made in 1978 by C G Smith to buy Union Co-op Bark and Sugar Co's mill at Dalton,[36] and a bid made by Huletts in 1979 for Umfolozi Co-operative Sugar Planters' mill.[37] Success in the first venture would have enabled C G Smith to close the Dalton mill and transfer cane supplies to its own Noodsberg mill. Union Co-op refused the offer for various reasons, including the detrimental social upheaval it envisaged would follow the closure of their mill.[38] Umfolozi Co-op also turned down the offer for their mill,[39] and whether a take-over by Huletts would have led to the closure of the mill is questionable. Nevertheless, the threat still hangs over other peripheral mills at Glendale (a Lonrho investment) and Entumeni (under Premier Milling).

The increasing soiphistication of skills held by sugar mill workers together with technological developments have rewarded capital well. Between 1952 and 1977 the number of personnel in all areas of sugar production per 1 000 tons of cane produced has fallen from 15 to 6.[40] In the mills specifically, the 1968/69 crushing capacity of all the mills of 3 100 tons/hour was increased to almost 4 000 tons/hour in the 1976/77 season, despite the closure of two smaller mills[41] Equal opportunities on the factory floor which stem from current training facilities may of course lower the sugar company's labour costs, if black artisans do not acquire all the benefits now accorded to white artisans (such as superior housing).

Finally, it is evident that investment diversification by the sugar companies represents expedient measures in capital accumulation (measures which sometimes fail, as in the cases of C G Smith's venture into paper production, or Huletts' chipboard enterprise, for example) and policies towards labour rest on the principles of minimizing production costs and maximizing dividends to parent companies and other shareholders. Sugar mill workers are thereby drawn into a larger arena of concerns which are implicitly shared with workers outside the sugar industry, although the bond is not manifested in practice. With the entry of Barlows and Anglo American into the uppermost tiers in the structures of sugar company ownership, workers are distanced even further from the superordinate organs of control. Wherever they are in the hierarchy of companies, they have common cause with workers in the numerous constituent companies (Barlows now employ some 60 000 workers in Natal[42]). However, a universal characteristic of sugar mill workers is that they are removed from the urban interface between industrial capital and labour, and the consolidation of a working class consciousness among them is impeded. In the South African case, even solidarity between mill and field workers is hampered because most of the latter workers in the sugar industry are migrants recruited annually on 180-day contracts, so that mill workers are distinctly isolated.

Concessions to sugar mill workers during the 1970's in the form of wage increases and improved conditions of service have not been insignificant, and management has responded humanistically to many of the material needs of workers. But the domestic sugar price was also raised in 1978 (and by association the prices of other commodities), and it is this and the issues discussed above which tend to undermine the significance of the concessions for labour.

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