Breaking the Buffalo: The Transformation of Stevedoring Work in Durban Between 1970 and 1990[*]

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The appropriation of living labour by capital is directly expressed in machinery. It is a scientifically based analysis, together with the application of mechanical laws that enables the machine to carry out the work formerly done by the worker himself [...] hence we have the struggle of the worker against machinery. What used to be the activity of the living worker has become that of the machine.[1]

Karl Marx

The contemporary maritime world offers little in the way of reassurance and nostalgic anthropomorphism, but surrenders instead to the serial discipline of the box. The cargo container, an American innovation of the mid-1950s, transforms the space and time of port cities and makes the globalization of manufacturing possible. The container is the very coffin of remote labor power, bearing the hidden evidence of exploitation in the far reaches of the world.[2]

Alan Sekula, "Freeway to China"

INTRODUCTION

In Durban, South Africa, stevedoring workers were the most physically powerful workers of all, and were known as *onyathi* in Zulu, or buffalo, which aptly described the physical and collective nature of their work. Throughout the century, the stevedoring industry was especially labour-intensive, necessitating teams of workers. As in most industries in South Africa, African workers built and maintained the docks. These buffalo developed the linkage that made Durban a thriving city and sustained the apartheid economy. Yet today the buffalo are all but gone, replaced by onboard warehouses known as containers. Machines have replaced the men once so integral to the survival of the city.

This paper presents an account of the transformation of work in Durban harbour between 1970 and 1990. At the most basic level, I discuss the

1. Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, David McLellan (ed. and trans.) (New York, 1971), p. 140.
2. Alan Sekula, "Freeway to China", in Jean and John Comaroff (eds), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC, 2001), p. 147.

development and the impact of containerization in a local context, and attempt to engage with the responses of the stevedores, whose working conditions and lives were dramatically shaped by this technological innovation. Through a presentation of variety of sources, I attempt to come to grips with the complex relationship between global technological change and a particular local context: working in South Africa during the late apartheid period.

In this paper, exploring the tensions between global innovation in a particular industry and local conditions provides a framework for a deeper theoretical engagement. At the heart of this engagement is an investigation of the extent to which technological change simply homogenizes societies, and a discussion of the importance of understanding both local political conditions and historical legacy. What is also at stake is how the "information economy" is to be understood and interpreted.[3] Whilst I will focus on the occupational and economic changes that occurred in Durban, I will not assume that this narrative represents all workers' experience of this economy. It is precisely in the particular industry and in the particular political space that the stevedores in Durban worked that informs my analysis of the transformation of work in South Africa.

An ancillary problem revolves around the nature of work in South Africa and the possibilities of considering whether a different scenario, other than the predicament that stevedores currently face, could have been possible. As my introductory paragraph hinted, stevedores in Durban were, by the early 1990s, predominately casual or flexible workers without any job security. The key actors in this problem are thus the trade unions in the stevedoring industry, and their positions and decisions vis-à-vis other trade unions in South Africa and throughout the world.

Allied to all these considerations is a discussion of the manner in which we characterize the position of the Durban stevedores today. A core argument of this paper is that, while these workers have suffered an entirely different fate to their European counterparts in the same industry, they do share the fate of many industrial workers throughout the world. Here I will engage Pierre Bourdieu's recent work, and suggest that the stevedores of Durban are in an important sense typical workers of the postindustrial, neoliberal, or information age. Yet this comparison also has its limits, which I will discuss below.

Given that these concerns are central to this paper, it is necessary to

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3. Frank Webster argues that the definitions of the "information society" are as a whole vague and incoherent, and that in examining different evidence, theorists disagree about whether it represents rupture or continuity. See Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society* (London, 1995), pp. 4–6, 29. In this paper, I will privilege those theorists of the information age that I consider relevant to the discussion of the transformation in Durban. The point here is not to provide a new theory of the information society, but rather to understand how these global changes were dealt with in the local arena.

emphasize that I have not been comprehensive in treating the precise mechanisms of apartheid control, which are fundamental to understanding the specifics of the transformation I describe. I have also not discussed the historiography of the relationship between work and culture in South Africa. I have dealt with these in other places.[4] However, before proceeding with the main narrative, I will present an brief analysis of the shipping industry and containerization which informs many of the terms of my subsequent discussion.

DOCK WORK, THE SHIPPING INDUSTRY, AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Throughout the twentieth century and before, there was a constant drive to improve the pace and efficiency of the stevedoring operation, and thus technological change occurred frequently in this industry.[5] Yet unitization (of which containerization was the most significant manifestation) was the most dramatic change in the industry in at least sixty years, in the sense that it reordered the entire operation of work on the docks. Before containerization, commodities were stored in the hold of ships in a variety of boxes, crates, and packages of different sizes. The primary function of stevedoring workers (or "longshoremen" as they are known in the United States) was to load and offload goods from ships to shore. A stevedoring gang, made up of between eight and sixteen workers, coordinated this process amongst themselves. In the early twentieth century, nets were used to secure goods in the hold by some members of the gang, while others operated simple cranes. These cranes were later replaced by mechanical winches. Goods were then placed onto trucks, or alternatively stored in warehouses.

Work-gangs were not only at the heart of the work operation, they were groups where intense solidarities developed. Workers would normally remain in the same gang for a considerable period of time. As a social group, the members of the gang protected one another, protested together, and often used the gang as a mechanism for the theft of a limited amount of goods.

The idea of containerization was pioneered in the mid-1950s by a US truck owner, Malcolm MacLean, who became frustrated at the long

4. Bernard Dubbeld, "Labour Management and Technological Change: Stevedoring in Durban, 1959–1990", (M.A. dissertation, University of Natal, South Africa, 2002). It is also worth mentioning that the thesis contains wider accounts of the role of ethnicity on the docks, and the politics of production within the workplace.

5. Peter Linebaugh's discussion of the development of the panopticon in the London docks is a good example of such technological innovation developed to ensure more efficient labour control. See Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 371–401.

turnaround time that trucks spent waiting for cargo and developed the idea of a standardized box which could carry different kinds of cargo. Initially operating between a few ports in the United States, this technological change was to spread to the world's harbours during the following thirty years. What containerization essentially became was a mechanism not only to speed up turnaround time, but also one that prevented theft and pilferage. Containerization was part of a broader process of unitization that standardized cargo into 20- and 40-ton units that could be carried on the decks on ships rather than in the holds, and be quickly transferred from ships to trucks and trains. A good example of the type of ship that developed as a result of containerization was the roll-on roll-off vessel that required almost no physical labour to unload. Not incidentally, the revolution in the telecommunications sphere and the development of information technology facilitated even greater efficiency in container transport.

Containerization had huge implications for stevedoring. No longer would large gangs of workers be required to coordinate intricate loading and unloading operations. Furthermore, the inevitable idle time that existed when stevedores were not actually unloading was substantially curtailed. While some dock work is still available in harbours (approximately just over half of Durban's total cargo was containerized by the early 1990s), stevedores are substantially less important for harbour operations.

Besides the actual ports themselves, international shipping lines are important actors in maritime transport. Before the 1960s, shipping lines had very close ties with local stevedoring companies. These links ensured that their liners would be serviced as fast as possible. In South Africa, for instance, the Union Castle line owned African Associated Stevedores, a major stevedoring operator in Durban.[6] During this period, shipping lines were more or less bound to traditional ports of call and well established markets. As in local companies, an international tradition of dockworker militancy and a high level of unionization meant that their turnaround times were often severely affected. In addition, time losses due to the limits of human endeavour and the regularity of pilferage and theft severely hampered their operations. By the mid 1960s, Frank Broeze noted that liner shipping faced a massive financial crisis, unable to sustain turnaround times and severely affected by both worker militancy and theft.[7]

Broeze suggests that containerization saved liner shipping, but also

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6. Mike Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers' Union, Part 1", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11 (1986), p. 90–114, 91.
7. Frank Broeze, "Containerization and the Globalization of Liner Shipping", in David J. Starkey and Gelina Harlaftis (eds), *Global Markets: The Internationalization of the Sea Transport Industries Since 1850*, special issue of *Research In Maritime History*, 14 (1998), pp. 1–24, 2.

fundamentally changed it. Since the mid-1960s, following on from high-powered take-overs and mergers between companies, shipping lines have become part of the global service economy. The industry has "de-nationalized" entirely by breaking links with traditional "home" ports and countries and sometimes moving into ownership, of or partnership with, rail and road companies.[8] But this is not to say that containerization occurred uniformly in every port around the world. Worker-controlled unions, and to an extent state initiatives (such as the Devlin Report in London), shaped the specific form of changes that containerization would bring to the dock labour force. In this context we now turn to Durban, before the containerization which would arrive at the port in 1977 when the container terminal was completed.

STEVEDORING WORK IN DURBAN

Durban was established as a harbour in the nineteenth century and became the dominant port in South Africa in the early twentieth century. Primarily, this was a result of its relative proximity to the gold fields on the Witswatersrand and to the sugar-cane fields of Natal. By 1955, Durban was handling approximately 48 per cent of the country's total cargo.[9] From the late nineteenth century, there was a constant demand for labour in the port to cater for the increasing amounts of cargo in the harbour.[10]

Until the end of the 1950s, the port relied almost exclusively on casual labour. This was not merely a peculiarity of Durban harbour – Stephen Hill has shown that in London dockyard employers refused to de-casualize workers until the late 1960s – but it was not common in other industries in South Africa.[11] Owing to influx-control regulations, it was unusual for African casual workers to be permitted in the city during the 1920s and 1930s. The majority of African workers were migrants, residing only in the city for the duration of their contracts. Yet stevedoring employers argued, like their London counterparts, that in as unpredictable an industry as stevedoring – where the demands of work could vary enormously on a daily basis – they could not employ a fixed workforce.

The unique position of stevedores meant that, despite their status as casual workers, they enjoyed a fair degree of permanence in the city, and by the 1940s the casual stevedores working in Durban numbered in excess

8. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
9. Trevor Jones, *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*, Research Monograph, Economic Research Unit, University of Natal (Durban, 1997), p. 14.
10. David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dock Workers of Durban", (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1979), p. 35. According to Jeff Guy, rebellion against the colonial state in Natal was often punished by forced labour in Durban harbour.
11. Stephen Hill, *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London* (London, 1976). p. 15.

of 3,000. In an important way this set them apart from other industrial workers in South Africa. Casual workers found themselves in a paradoxical position. While they were not guaranteed any work, there was a constant demand for workers, and stevedores could literally move between different stevedoring companies in search of the best wage on any particular day. They were also surprisingly well organized and recognized their permanence in the city. During a strike, stevedores claimed Durban as their home when told "to go home to rural areas" by white officials.[12] David Hemson notes that casual dockworkers had a long history of struggles to improve wages and working conditions, and engaged in wider political and economic struggles.[13] A 1956 report on the conditions of stevedoring workers by Sergeant Mentz of the Central Native Labour Board noted that workers were able to embark on strikes and go-slows on the issues of wages and work categorization.[14] Other authors emphasized the relative freedom that casual workers enjoyed, in being able to determine when and where they worked. Of course, it must be noted that these casuals existed at a time when work was in abundance and workers were in short supply.[15]

As in many countries throughout the world, the war economy of the 1940s resulted in many structural changes in the labour market in South Africa. In general, state officials turned a blind eye towards influx-control legislation and allowed African workers into the city to replace men who had gone to war, and to meet the increased demands of production. After the war, however, the ruling United Party did not reimpose influx control, and many African workers began to live permanently in cities throughout the country. Yet this was short-lived; the National Party swept to power on the apartheid ticket – largely by appealing to the fears of the white electorate that Africans posed both a moral and economic threat to their security. A basic cornerstone of early apartheid policy was the need to reverse urbanization and control African entry into the cities even more tightly than before. The 1950s saw sustained effort by the National Party government to enforce this promise by the promulgation of the Population Registration Act (1950), the Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of

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12. David Hemson. "Dock Workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban, 1940–1959", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4 (1977), pp. 88–124, 93.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.
14. South African National Archive Depot (SAB), ARB 3317 1196/5/4/1, vol. 1, Sgd. S Mentz, Central Native Labour Board, "Report on Conditions of Employment of Stevedoring Workers".
15. For interesting reading on this form of casual work in South Africa and elsewhere, see Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH [etc.], 1994); Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic in Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (Portsmouth, NH, 1993); Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (London, 1982), pp. 37–41.

Documents Act (1952) and the establishment of the Bewysburo to administer passes and regulate influx control.[16]

The implementation of these new apartheid policies in the harbour was met with resistance by stevedoring employers. For almost a decade, the stevedoring industry in Durban remained as a unique space in the city for casual workers. Yet, the evident militancy of workers was a cause of increasing concern for employers and finally, following a strike by 1,400 workers in February 1959, and under tremendous state pressure, employers agreed to reform the labour system in the docks.[17] The five major stevedoring companies met government officials over the following month, and by the beginning of April 1959 had refashioned the conditions under which stevedoring workers were to be employed in Durban. The companies decided that a central system of labour should be introduced, requiring workers to be recruited on a weekly basis, reside in company compounds and be signed on to work when necessary.[18] Weekly labour agreements soon became ten-month contracts of employment, approved by traditional leaders in African areas (mostly in Zululand) and by representatives of the Department of Native Affairs. The central system controlling the recruitment and administration of all African labour in Durban was known as the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company.

The development of the Labour Supply Company fitted in with general apartheid labour policy, and was known as the Labour Bureaux system. Under this system, codified by the 1964 Bantu Labour Act, in order for Africans to work in cities, they had to register as work-seekers with traditional authorities in designated tribal areas. Only through a certain kind of patronage with local chiefs could Africans ever hope to work in the cities. This apartheid policy aimed to create areas and places of work according to a nineteenth-century European conception of inherent tribal and cultural difference. As David Hemson notes, "What the national network of labour bureaux sought to achieve in relation to thousands of companies, the Labour Supply Company worked out in relation to the stevedoring companies."[19] The key functions of the Labour Supply Company were to control recruitment, to remake authority, and to regulate and administer work itself. African casual stevedores, for so long a feature of Durban harbour, disappeared.

But the maintenance of this centralized system of control required a great deal of money. The administration of the Labour Supply Company

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16. Two notable pieces detailing this process are Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961* (Oxford, 1991), and Keith Breckenridge, "From Hubris to Chaos: The Makings of the Bewysburo and the End of Documentary Government", (n.p., May 2002).
17. SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959; Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal), "Notes of a Meeting Held at 150a Point Road, Durban on 25 February 1959".
18. SAB MAR vol. 81, file A2/44; Memorandum by Department of Labour, 16 May 1959.
19. Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers", p. 388.

was costly, not only in employing bureaucrats but also in maintaining a certain guarantee of wages for workers. Despite difficult power relations, workers thrived on the security of a fixed wage and the bonus of lots of overtime work during the economic boom period of the 1960s.[20] Contrary to the state's belief that the intricate measures of power and authority present in the Labour Supply Company, based on "cultural" practices, were responsible for relative industrial tranquility, what maintained stability within the Company was the relatively good wage levels, which were high even in comparison to some other forms of work available to Africans in cities. And despite the celebration of the Company as a model of labour control by the state during the 1960s,[21] it would be the period following 1968 and the slowdown of the South African economy that would prove a real test. After this, and especially after 1970, it would be increasingly difficult for the Labour Supply Company to survive.

THE CRISIS IN PRODUCTION AND THE MOVE TOWARDS CONTAINERIZATION

The boom in cargo-handling in docks slowed down after 1966, and by 1970 the level was as low as at the beginning of the decade.[22] Because there was less work available, the stevedores suddenly found themselves earning less. In addition to this, the final wage determination of 1969 based its recommendations on 1966 figures of average earnings, grossly over-estimating the actual wages of the workers.[23] A combination of this overall economic decline and the refusal of stevedoring companies and the state to recognize the real decline in stevedoring wages led to a strike on 4 April 1969 by almost 2,000 stevedoring workers. The method for dealing with the strike was immediate and left little doubt of the state's commitment to urban order. More than 1,000 workers were dismissed and sent back to perceived "homes" in rural areas.[24] The strike was the first major one in over ten years and, at the very least, showed the workers' determination to be paid properly.

In the aftermath of the strike, the Department of Native Affairs, in conjunction with the Labour Supply Company, set up new and stricter controls of recruitment. By 1972, the emphasis of recruitment had shifted to predominately traditionally Zulu areas such as Nongoma and

20. *Ibid.*, p. 526.
21. SAB BAO 2401, file 31/3/336; letter from P.J. Kemp (General Manager) to Dr P. van Rensburg (Dept of Bantu Administration and Development), 22 April 1966.
22. Statistical Year Book 1976, quoted in Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers", p. 512.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 516–517.
24. *Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1969, "Half Durban's Dockworkers Set Off Home".

Mahlabatini, and away from Pondo areas such as Mount Ayliff.[25] While labour recruitment had always favoured a Zulu labour force, the move entrenched this supply of migrants from areas that were known for being conservative and having especially strong links with the Department of Native Affairs.

The strike was viewed more ambiguously by stevedoring companies. It led to a bottleneck of ships in the harbour, and many of the companies supported the call to reinstate many of the dismissed workers. But there were more serious long-term implications. Because the government viewed stevedores as unskilled, it was possible to simply replace strikers with more "disciplined" workers. Yet many of those dismissed workers had gained skills while working during the boom of the 1960s. There was a dramatic increase in the incidence of injury to dockworkers through accident in 1970.[26] This was undoubtedly due to the recruitment of a whole set of new workers who were expected to work as productively as those of the 1960s. The productivity of stevedores underwent a sharp decline in the early 1970s, causing major port delays.[27]

As I suggested earlier, an intimate relationship existed between South African stevedoring companies and international shipping lines. Towards the end of the 1960s, goods began to be carried in containers, and many predicted that it would make the stevedoring industry substantially less important in ports world-wide. The shipping lines were aware of the coming technological changes, and demanded a change in method of payment from a cost-plus-rate standard contract to an all-in-rate structure, irrespective of the cargo handled.[28] This change meant two things: firstly, the cost-plus-rate structure was based on set amounts, depending on what kind of cargoes were handled, and made allowance for more difficult cargoes for stevedores; secondly, breaking the standard contract allowed for stevedoring companies to set their own rates. This meant that the companies continually undercut each other, and shipping lines always chose the cheapest option. Independent operators (outside the Labour Supply Company) employed casual labour, despite government regulations, and actively competed to provide better rates for the shipping lines. This caused vigorous protest from the local Bantu Administration Board.[29]

Competition and undercutting went on for about five years, and by 1976 the major shipping lines had pulled out of stevedoring altogether, either

25. Interview with Dreyer by David Hemson, quoted in *idem*, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers", p. 581.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 534.
27. *Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970, "Mechanisation the Answer to Port Delays, Say Agents".
28. Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1", pp. 91–92.
29. Durban Repository Archives, PNAB 2/3/7/1 (sub committee of Labour and Transport); "Minutes of a Meeting Addressing the Labour Problems in the Point on Harbour Areas", 20 November 1974.

disappearing or transporting new containerized cargo.[30] The first five years of the 1970s were critical, because they represented a change in the dominant form of cargo transportation internationally from break-bulk to containers. Captain Gordon Stockley, whose involvement in stevedoring in South Africa stretched for twenty years (1974–1994), and who became a prominent actor in the liberalizing of labour relations in the stevedoring industry during the 1980s, explains what the tactics of the shipping lines were:

> What these guys in the shipping industry knew about was the effects of containerisation. This made me a little bitter, because they knew what was going to happen to the labour and that we would have a massive problem, but they weren't too interested in helping or showing us the direction to go. They just ripped the guts out of it to get better profits and to hell with the future of the industry.[31]

Given these near impossible conditions of operations, stevedoring companies had to decide the best way forward. The previous five years of bitter competition had not done any of the companies much good, and it was clearly impossible to continue in this manner. In 1976, the twelve stevedoring companies operating in Durban, including many of the old companies previously owned by shipping lines, either merged into four main companies or dissolved entirely. At the end of the 1970s, the four main companies operating in Durban were South African Stevedoring Services Company (SASSCO), Aero Marine, Rennies, and Grindrods. The dominant company was SASSCO, occupying 60 per cent of the market.[32]

The exploitation of the stevedoring market and merger of stevedoring companies was perhaps the first tangible effect of containerization. The second was on the labour front. As companies merged, and the stevedoring trade became increasingly difficult to make profitable, remaining companies looked at ways of cutting costs. In the late 1970s SASSCO, as the dominant stevedoring company, found that it was investing the most in the Labour Supply Company and not getting any real material benefits from doing so. Furthermore, smaller companies were using the large labour pool of the Labour Supply Company whenever they needed it, which caused SASSCO to feel as if it was providing the labour for these smaller companies. SASSCO also felt that it was important to give workers a company identity and bring workers closer to management.[33] The traditional hierarchies maintained in the Labour Supply Company were

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30. Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers Union, part 1", pp. 92–93.
31. Interview by the author: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001. Captain Stockley had been involved with the Union Castle line in the 1960s and came to stevedoring in Durban in 1973. He was the Operations Manager of South African Stevedores until his retirement in 1994.
32. Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers' Union, part 1", p. 95.
33. Interview with Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

expensive, and for a SASSCO management far more interested in surviving as a stevedoring company than maintaining apartheid, the decision to withdraw from the Labour Supply Company proved quite simple. In 1979, the Labour Supply Company was wound up without any real protest, in contrast to its difficult and contested beginnings.

THE DECLINING INFLUENCE OF THE STATE AND THE RISE OF TRADE UNIONS

It was not coincidental that the Labour Supply Company disappeared without a struggle. Instead it reflected the growing crisis in apartheid administration. The economic prosperity of South Africa during the 1960s was not sustained in the 1970s. After 1976, the apartheid state began to face not only a weaker economy, but also the growth of internal opposition and sanctions from abroad. By the dawn of the 1980s the state was in crisis. Both from within the ranks of the business community, and from within the state itself, doubt emerged as to the long-term sustainability of the project of grand apartheid. Many within the business community believed that they could no longer afford to rely on cheap African labour.[34] In addition, the growth of resistance among African workers, especially in the form of politicized trade unions, suggested that the apartheid government no longer possessed the administrative strength to maintain an intricately controlled migrant labour system. By the time that government reform loosened control over the pass-law system and allowed African trade unions to organize in 1979, these were already a *de facto* reality. The recognition of African trade unions was a last-ditch cynical attempt on the part of the state to try and depoliticize these unions, premised on the hope that the trade unions, once they had gained access to lawful methods of protest and negotiation, would become depoliticized and would not provide yet another avenue of opposition to severely faltering government control. While the actual violence and brutality administered by the state in the 1980s seems to suggest its control of the forces of coercion, it belies its actual weakness in maintaining a system that had become both unsustainable and generally despised. Unlike the confident and well-organized state administration of the 1960s, the 1980s would see state administration over labour in total disarray, intervening at arbitrary and ad-hoc intervals in order to disrupt worker organization.

While there had been some degree of loosely defined union organization amongst stevedores in the 1940s and 1950s, this had been stamped out by the Labour Supply Company.[35] The two strikes by stevedores in Durban

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34. Dan O' Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948–1994* (Athens, OH, 1996), pp. 176–178.
35. Hemson, "Dock Workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban", pp. 95–100.

in 1969 and 1972 had not been organized by any formal union body
because African unions were illegal. During the early 1970s, benefit funds
and advice bureaus were established across the country and were
peripherally involved in the 1972 stevedore strike and the wider 1973
Durban strikes, when they attempted to highlight the immediate
exploitation of workers in their particular workplaces.[36] Yet these
organizations were not unions, and consisted primarily of white leftist
intellectuals whose position was always to advise workers on the best
course of action. These intellectuals had little experience of the realities of
working under the difficult conditions that apartheid had constructed.
While the intentions of these activists were often noble, their real
significance in worker consciousness and action was limited. Furthermore,
the danger of overemphasizing their role in the strikes removes much of
the agency that workers themselves displayed both in organizing and
leading the strikes.

The mid- to late 1970s witnessed not only a resurgence in worker
militancy but also the beginnings of a new union movement in South
Africa. Unions began to form tentatively in many workplaces, and a new
trade-union federation, called the Federation of South African Trade
Unions (FOSATU), formed in 1977. Although these unions often bore the
hallmarks of the older benefit funds, unionists became more adventurous
and open in their practices of organizing until their *de jure* recognition in
1979, following the Wiehahn Commission.[37] The Wiehahn strategies
enjoyed very limited success, even in the early 1980s, and instead allowed
trade unions to become a platform for anti-apartheid organization and
widespread resistance to apartheid.

In the docks, trade unionism spread in the late 1970s. Senior manage-
ment in the major stevedoring companies almost encouraged the develop-
ment of trade unionism as part of a broader strategy to modernize the
labour force.[38] Middle management were not comfortable with the

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36. Another example of this type of involvement with the African working class was the wages
commissions set up at white "liberal" universities across South Africa. A typical wages
commission document would advise workers of their positions and encourage them to strike for
high wages. These documents were available in both English and Zulu. For a University of Natal
wages commission document on the stevedoring industry in Durban, see University of the
Witswatersrand, Fosatu Collection, AH 1999 C3.19.12.1 Wages Commission, University of
Natal. Also see Hemson's somewhat exaggerated account of the role of the Benefit Fund in the
1972 stevedore strike in *idem*, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers", pp. 605–670. For an
account of involvement in the 1973 Durban strike, again somewhat overemphasized, see
Gerhard Mare (ed.), *The Durban Strikes 1973: "Human Beings with Souls"* (Durban, 1976). pp.
69–76.
37. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p. 273.
38. Interviews: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001; Siza Makhaya, 11 June 2001. Makhaya
commented that many in middle management regarded senior management as taking "crazy and
radical" steps in reforming the workforce.

development of trade unions during this initial period, with a number of recorded disciplinary incidents, and one in particular where a white foreman told union members "to collect their wages from the union".[39] Despite these incidents, the two early unions in the docks, the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU) and the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) were hardly able to claim anything near majority membership in the stevedoring industry. In 1980, the latter could claim a mere 300 members out of a possible 2,500 stevedores.[40] It was only in 1981 with the development of a relationship between SASSCO and a new union, the General Workers' Union, that unionism would become significant in the harbour at the same moment that containerization was beginning seriously to alter the harbour landscape.

LIBERAL COMPANIES AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

With the economic burden of the Labour Supply Company gone, and the influence of state policy significantly smaller, the remaining stevedoring companies set about forging a new system of industrial relations on the docks. For senior company officials, such as Stockley, it was critical that the industry became sustainable in the long term, and negotiated the technological change already at hand.[41] Central to this process was an attempt by SASSCO, and later SAS, to build a strong identity with its workforce. This was not simply a gesture – Stockley realized that the stevedoring workers in Durban had been "over-exploited", and that they were not equipped to deal with the new skills required for containerization. Of course, by developing a strong sense of identity in the company among the workforce, Stockley also hoped, and ultimately ensured, that he would not have to cope with a great deal of industrial strife. Contrary to many other workplaces in South Africa during the early 1980s, the major companies in the stevedoring industry also brokered deals and developed good relations with trade unions. Perhaps this was motivated to some extent by the power that European and American dockside unions had displayed through their independence – which Stockley and others in the companies must surely have known about – but it was also motivated by Stockley's self-proclaimed commitment to ensure a stable and well represented workforce.[42] At this particular time in South

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39. University of the Witwatersrand Dept of Historical Papers, FOSATU Collection, AH 1999 C.1.9.12.8.3, Grindrods Discipline.
40. Jeremy Baskin, "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers", *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, 8 (1982), pp. 18–33, 20.
41. Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.
42. *Ibid*. By this time, Stockley was entirely in charge of operations in stevedoring nationally. He was determined to make stevedoring work, and declared at a speech at the Durban Country Club in 1982 that he was not prepared to move at the speed of the slowest ship.

Africa many industries were suspicious of trade unions and still had state support, at least in principle, to clamp down on any "trouble" that might have arisen.

Yet Stockley's embrace of the General Workers' Union was only one aspect of his drive to modernize the stevedoring industry in South Africa. A primary component of this policy was the introduction of "multi-skilling" within the company. This involved teaching every member of the work-gang new roles, in order that each could function in any place within the gang, as specific work required.[43] While the company proclaimed "multiskilling" as a progressive measure, eliminating "idle time", it set the conditions in place to reduce the size of the gang and retrench workers. As containerization developed in South Africa, the number of workers needed in a work-gang would decline, as the skills required for securing a container were substantially less labour-intensive than for loading break-bulk cargo.

In addition, SASSCO aimed to reform the workplace and alter the power relations by introducing two measures. Firstly, it attempted to change the accommodation arrangements for stevedores. Stevedores lived in company compounds that had been critical in the functioning of power within the Labour Supply Company. By changing worker accommodation, the company could be relieved both of these older structures of power and of the cost of maintaining them. Workers actually rejected the company's attempt to move them into subsidized housing, with many workers tending to remain in the compound until the 1990s.[44] The second aspect of the company's liberalizing initiatives was to introduce language classes in English in an ostensible attempt to prepare workers for the new kinds of "open management" of the company. Part of the language initiative was also to destroy the older hierarchical arrangement of power within gangs that had developed during the time of the Labour Supply Company. Yet the language policy was also a way of clearly individualizing workers, which was to be very useful in identifying particularly productive or skilled workers, critical during a time of retrenchment.

Alongside these processes was the computerization of all stevedoring work, showing which shifts had been worked and the various skill levels individual workers possessed.[45] During the 1970s and before, this process

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43. *Ibid.*

44. Lawrence Schlemmer *et al.*, "Future Dwelling Preferences of Hostel Dwelling Migrants", a study of the housing needs of stevedores in the Durban metropolitan area and interviews with Themba Dube, Les Owen, Gordon Stockley, and Mike Morris.

45. Interviews: Captain Gordon Stockley and Hugh Wyatt. Processes of surveillance at work are nothing new, and even the gang structure of the Labour Supply Company monitored individuals' performance, by the use of time clocks and rubber bands heatsealed on to workers' wrists. Compare Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974). p. 57.

had been coordinated by foremen through time cards, and subject to infinite abuse. It is crucial to understand the dual nature of this computerization process: on the one hand, it introduced perhaps a fairer system of industrial relations into the port. But on the other, it was very much part of a process of control, intimately connected, as Castells would suggest when referring to work in the information age generally, as "the individualization of work and the fragmentation of societies".[46] In this instance, the society undergoing fragmentation would be the work-gang.

In 1981, an agreement was negotiated between SASSCO and the GWU that introduced a guarantee system to the stevedoring industry. This meant that all workers employed in stevedoring in Durban would be paid for a certain number of days of work, regardless of whether there was actually work to be done. This agreement was fundamentally important since, following the collapse of the Labour Supply Company, there was no guarantee of permanent employment, especially in the context of the retrenchments that had begun in 1979. The guarantee initially provided for three and half days wages, and subsequently moved up to four.[47]

A further change to the structure of the stevedoring industry was the merger of the two remaining stevedoring companies. SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod entered into negotiations on a possible merger in late 1982.[48] At the end of the year, they submitted an application to the competitions board to create a single stevedoring company in the docks. In their submission, the two companies recognized the need for a stable and well-paid labour force, and the need for capital investment in the stevedoring industry that could only really occur with the suspension of the competition between the two companies for relatively meagre resources. A stable workforce could be trained and developed to meet changed industrial demands, and with the total cost of labour amounting to 40 per cent of both companies' costs, it seemed that continued competition would destroy any future for stevedoring. An additional factor in this decision was based on the decline by 6.3 million tons of break-bulk cargo, handled nationally, between 1976 and 1981.[49]

The merger brought immediate benefits and problems. Casual labour was once again eliminated throughout the port and workers were all given four-day guarantees. Through negotiations with unions, wages in the

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46. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* vol. 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (London [etc.], 1996).
47. Interview: Les Owen, Senior Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO and SAS 1979–1984, 5 June 2001.
48. In 1981, Rennies and Grindrods Cotts had merged into Rennies Grindrod, leaving only two stevedoring companies on the docks.
49. SASSCO and Rennies Grindrod, "Rationalisation of the Stevedoring Industry: Memorandum to Competitions Board", August 1982. This document does not come from an archive but rather was given to me by retired management of South African Stevedores.

industry increased at the end of 1982.[50] The merger also resulted in an oversized staff of both management and workers. Almost as soon as South African Stevedores (SAS) came into existence in August 1982, both management and workers were retrenched.[51] After the merger, almost there were almost two years of relative stability on the docks in Durban. As a monopoly, South African Stevedores ran a very efficient operation and there were few retrenchments. When there was a particular shortage of work, stevedores would take short periods of unpaid leave, but neverthe-less did not lose their jobs. Although there were still too many stevedores employed by the company, a quick solution would have destroyed the balance that the company and union had created in the harbour. And this would not simply have meant retrenchment, but ultimately a retreat from the industrial relations system itself.

THE HIDDEN HAND OF THE STATE: INTRODUCING COMPETITION

Yet this situation would not endure. As has been noted already, the early 1980s had seen the state undergoing tremendous strain in an effort to stay in power. Its retreat from the arena of workplaces had allowed South African Stevedores, in negotiation with the General Workers' Union, a relatively free hand in controlling stevedoring work in Durban. With a trimmed labour force, the company lasted through 1983 without competition. SAS management believed that the future was in their hands, and that they could build long-term sustainability in the industry.[52] But there was a crucial dimension that I have not yet mentioned: the state still owned the physical area of the harbour and controlled port operations and the railways. Although the state no longer had the capacity to intervene directly in stevedoring companies, state officials grew increasingly concerned about the "liberal" practices of SAS.

The 1983 Industrial Relations Report of the SAS Corporate Plan acknowledged the difficulties of the relationship and the potential for conflict with the South African Transport Services (SATS).[53] The report specifically highlighted the fact that SAS could not afford to intimidate SATS, which had sole control over stevedoring licences and protected the fact that SAS had no competition.[54] Even before the end of 1983, a major conflict had arisen between the two bodies. The General Workers' Union

50. *Daily News*, 23 December 1982, "Wage Increases for Stevedores".
51. *Ibid.*, 25 August 1982, "Managers Axed after Stevedoring Merger".
52. Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.
53. South African Transport Services replaced the old South African Railways and Harbours in the early 1980s.
54. South African Stevedores Corporate Plan 1984–1987, Industrial Relations Report.

had attempted to expand and organize all workers in the harbour at Port Elizabeth. SATS had brought in the police to prevent any kind of unionization spreading beyond the stevedores, and forcefully told the GWU that in no way would it allow any kind of union organization to occur.[55] When a radio station interviewed Les Owen, the industrial relations officer of SAS, about the strike, Owen had explicitly said that South African Transport Services was in the wrong and that independent unions must be allowed to operate in the docks. Shortly after the interview, the directors of SAS were summoned to Pretoria and threatened with the loss of their stevedoring licence.[56]

While the state did not remove the operating licence, it did begin to issue a number of new licences to smaller operators, thus reintroducing competition into the port. The most significant of these occurred when the major iron and steel conglomerate in the country, ISCOR, publicly complained about the high rates that SAS was charging as the sole stevedoring provider. Keeleys Stevedoring was issued a stevedoring licence and specifically cut out a niche in the steel market by becoming the sole provider for ISCOR.[57] Keeleys employed casual labour "off the street" and paid these workers substantially less than SAS.[58] By having much smaller labour costs, Keeleys was also able to gain a foothold in many of SAS's other markets. GWU tried to organize in Keeleys and found that it had no conception of liberal industrial relations, and even attempted to make GWU a "sweetheart" union.[59] The union even complained to the state that, under the prescribed wage determination, Keeleys was paying its workers below the minimum rate.[60]

Crucially, the state had succeeded in recreating the casual labour system. As Keeleys developed, the guarantee system, the single most important measure of stevedore security, was undermined and SAS abandoned it as too costly. Furthermore, the added material pressure on the company and

55. Mike Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers' Union, part 2", *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11 (1986), p. 108.

56. Interview: Les Owen, 5 June 2001.

57. ISCOR, the major iron and steel conglomerate in the country, imported and exported large amounts of irregular-sized pieces of steel during the 1980s through Durban. Its relationship to the state stretched back to its formation in 1928, when the state considered it impossible to industrialize South Africa without an iron and steel industry. It was strongly tied to national (as opposed to colonial) capitalist interests and protected white workers. See Ari Sitas, "African Worker Responses on the East Rand to Changes in the Metal Industry, 1960–1980" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witswatersrand, 1984), pp. 68–77.

58. Morris, "Stevedoring and the General Workers' Union, part 1", pp. 112–114.

59. Interview: Mike Morris, 28 June 2001. Morris was an organizer for the GWU in Durban from 1981 to 1985. Company management, such as Stockley, concurred with Morris's description of Keeley's stevedoring. Stockley also suggested that many of those employed by Keeley's were retrenched stevedores.

60. *Financial Mail*, 3 August 1984, "Wage Determination: Payment Problems".

the growing emphasis on container trade saw the company retrench a further 600 stevedores in February 1985.[61]

THE FAILURE OF THE UNION MOVEMENT AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF CASUAL LABOUR

The General Workers' Union stood on a knife-edge in early 1985. After four years of maintaining a fragile but progressive industrial relations system in the docks, building a guarantee system and controlling the retrenchment of workers, suddenly it was all falling to pieces. As the GWU's main organizer in Durban, Mike Morris, expressed his helpless position:

> We couldn't actually deal with it. It drove me out of the union in the end. It was constantly disheartening, we tried to negotiate the best deal we could, and it was never good enough [...]. It was an impossible situation and I did not realise, until I did the research afterwards, what a worldwide trend this was [...] we spent our time negotiating retrenchments.[62]

The withdrawal of the General Workers' Union from the docks would prove to be a decisive turning point. Although formally it merged with the Transport and General Workers' Union, solid union support for the workers was never the same. Morris claimed that its strategy as a union proved incorrect, that it should that made a more sustained effort to incorporate all harbour workers at every port.[63] Yet the union was fighting a losing battle against technological change. Moreover, the union failed to transcend its origins as a noble, yet ultimately paternalist structure. Officials in the General Workers' Union were predominately white intellectuals, and unlike other industries in South Africa, notably the mining sector, there was never a transformation in the administrative structure of the union towards a greater representation of workers among the officials. It was only possible for the union to withdraw from the workplace because its leadership was largely made up of people who did not depend on stevedoring for their long-term security or livelihood.

The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) was a much larger national union, which had little experience of organizing stevedores. It had always played a key role in the national organizations of trade unions, first within the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), and from 1985 in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The TGWU had a wide range of experience in the transport sector, but was hamstrung not only by its lack of familiarity with conditions in the harbour, but also by COSATU's overtly political aims of

61. *Natal Mercury*, 18 February 1985, "600 Durban Dockworkers to Lose Jobs".
62. Interview: Mike Morris, 28 June 2001.
63. *Ibid.*

overthrowing apartheid. In addition, like any other union in South Africa during this time, it had simply no idea of how to organize casual labourers.

The difficult political climate in South Africa during the later 1980s would also become a feature in the docks. Largely because of the political stance of TGWU, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) formed a union that came to the docks in the hope of claiming the allegiance of the migrant workforce. What followed between 1987 and 1991 was a disastrous rivalry between the two unions, with both trying to claim political ground in a struggle that increasingly involved the intimidation of workers' families and threats to their rural homes. There were a number of instances where violence occurred, and even a couple in which workers were killed. The end result was that management was left essentially unchallenged. More retrenchment of stevedores followed in May 1987, seemingly unchecked by either union.[64] At the end of the political fracas, in July 1991, the majority of the stevedoring labour force found themselves casualized, unequipped in the latest technical skills, and often struggling for regular employment.

In contrast to the woes of the stevedores, Durban harbour was booming. In 1994 containerized cargo made up more than 30 per cent of the total operations of the harbour, and this percentage rose steadily.[65] In its framework for new port developments, the new government hardly considered the position of the stevedores at all, despite deliberate emphasis on redressing the imbalances of the past. It was far more concerned with issues of customer satisfaction, building new container terminals, and overall growth of the industry.[66] In government reports, the casual stevedoring industry was blamed for past inequalities. The government did make one serious attempt to regulate casual labour by recommending the establishment of a common labour pool for stevedores.[67] Unfortunately, this only functioned successfully for a year before employers withdrew, claiming the pool was too big, too expensive, and ultimately inefficient.[68]

Besides the obvious effects of retrenchment, the destruction of the gang structure that had for so many years been central to the labour process on the docks also affected worker morale. Stevedores no longer felt part of a

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64. David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control", *Transformation*, 30 (1996), pp. 83–114, 97–99.
65. Jones, *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy*, p. 17.
66. Dept of Transport, "White Paper on National Transport Policy, 20 August 1996". This can be found at www.gov.za/whitepaper/1996/transportpolicy1996.htm, accessed on 19 June 2002, 12.00; Dept of Transport, "Moving South Africa: A Transport Strategy for the year 2020". Located at www.transport.gov.za/projects/msa/msa.html, accessed on 18 June 2002, 14:00.
67. Best described in Simon Stratton, "The Implementation of the Dock Labour Scheme in the Port of Durban", (unpublished, 1999).
68. To some extent, employers were correct. The register of the pool was manipulated and even unionists admitted it was too big. Interview by the author: Tony Kruger, Chairman of Durban Stevedores' Association, 28 November 2000.

team of strong "buffalo" who made the harbour work. In a series of interviews with stevedores conducted by David Hemson in the early 1990s, he found that workers no longer had any pride in their work, and felt that the mechanization of the port made them "weak".[69] Even before the 1990s, many stevedores realized that the prospects of a long-term future in the industry were small. Their responses were to turn back towards the only area that they had any promise of security within the migrant labour system. For instance, Mr Ntshangase, an established stevedore who had been working in the industry since the 1950s, suggested, when interviewed in 1982, that the only thing the union could do was ensure a retrenchment package and then he would "go back home [...] to look after my cattle".[70] The majority of remaining stevedoring workers were over forty years old, a consequence of the Last-In-First-Out, (LIFO) policy of retrenchment negotiated by both the GWU and TGWU, and felt that the rural areas offered the only alternative for them after forced retirement or retrenchment.[71]

These views represented one of the bitter ironies of the migrant labour system in the stevedoring industry in Durban. In the 1950s, stevedores had claimed Durban as their home and engaged in a losing struggle against influx control with the apartheid state. By the end of apartheid, stevedores had so little hope left in the industry that they turned back towards the homeland areas that the apartheid state had designated as their homes.[72] Over a period of twenty years, the number of permanent workers in the industry had shrunk from 2,800 in the early 1970s to 1,200 in 1985 and to 300 in 1991. About 1,000 workers occupied the ranks of casual stevedores, but had absolutely no guarantees of work or security of employment whatsoever. Given that stevedores were highly exploited throughout the century, the final decade of the century saw their humiliation; they had become marginal and peripheral workers.

It is important to emphasize the form that casualization has taken in Durban. In most ports the trend has been away from de-casualization. As Klaus Weinhauer has suggested in his study of de-casualization in ports, this move has depended on the ability of the state and employers to "secure disciplined work", and has involved an intensification of control over the

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69. David Hemson, "The Global Imperative? Containerization and Durban Docks" (n.p., 1996), pp. 10–12. For a more complete account of the interviews see *idem*, *Migrants and Machines: Labour and New Technology in the Port of Durban* (Pretoria, 1995).

70. Mr Ntshangase interviewed by Tina Sideris on 19 November 1982; Wits Historical Papers, SAIRR Oral History Project, interview #44.

71. Hemson, "The Global Imperative? Containerization and Durban Docks", pp. 8–14.

72. In a different context of industrial decline, Ferguson has shown that a "return to the land" is by no means unproblematic. See James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), pp. 123–128.

stevedoring labour process.[73] In Durban, the state crudely attempted to control stevedoring work in the 1960s and early 1970s in order to fit the industry into its model of racial exclusion and "culturally defined" practice. When this model failed, stevedoring companies sought to recreate the industry in terms of new technologically defined imperatives and safeguard the future of the industry. Yet they failed – and casualization became the dominant mode of stevedoring work in South Africa.

THEORIZING THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORK IN DURBAN

How are we to situate the radical transformation that occurred in the stevedoring industry in Durban? Despite the fact that the evidence presented shows a particular story of the changing practices of labour administration over three decades, this is not merely a local story of change. By its very nature, a harbour is a connection to the rest of world. In an important sense, that connection is in constant dialogue with the rest of the world. In this case, the dialogue demanded a radical technological remaking of the port, which altered the manner in which work in the port was done. The denationalization of shipping lines in the 1970s, and the increased privatization in the port sector internationally, are additional factors that influenced both the speed of the move towards containerization and the shape that it took.[74]

There are also broader connections. Fordism around the world suffered a crisis in the mid-1960s, and the 1970s and 1980s were times of economic and political turmoil that marked an attempt to resolve the problems created by the rigidity of Fordism. What emerged, in David Harvey's terms, was a new regime of flexible accumulation that sought to create new sectors of production, new markets, and intensify the speed of technological innovation.[75] Flexible accumulation also created new working conditions, undercutting organized labour in areas with no well-established labour traditions, and rolling back the power of trade unions throughout the globe. Containerization was one such technological innovation. As Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin demonstrate, the rapid expansion of communication networks and the transport sector developed as necessary elements in this expanded consumer market. They show that flexible labour markets are key to this

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73. Klaus Weinhauer, "Power and Control on the Waterfront: Casual Labour and Decasualisation", in Sam Davies *et al.* (eds) *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History*, 2 vols (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 581–602.
74. Broeze, "Containerization and the Globalization of Liner Shipping", pp. 24–25.
75. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 147, 150–153.

expansion.[76] Given that four important features of containerization are the standardization of port facilities, the rapidly accelerated turnaround time of cargo, a flexible labour force, and the coordination of container ships through the use of integrated computer networking systems, it becomes clear that containerization was a key technological innovation in this global transformation.

If we consider the position of the stevedores in Durban, we find further parallels. They underwent processes of "multiskilling", saw their gang units destroyed, and became flexible workers. By 1990, the vast majority of the stevedores had no union organization, were super-exploited casual workers, and had lost all pride in their work and all faith in the future. This position, while not shared to the same extent by other dockworkers world-wide, is shared by many industrial workers, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown. In his edited volume of essays, *The Weight of the World*, he and other contributors probe the difficulties and suffering of contemporary society.[77] In an important section on the decline of industrial work, the book's contributors present first-hand accounts of the difficulties of flexible employment and the impossible task that trade unionists face in organizing under these conditions.[78]

While Bourdieu's book was largely based on conditions in France, his general conclusions about the nature of casual work can be extended to other societies. In an important sense, it reflects the position that stevedores find themselves in. We could say that they share the fate of workers in information societies whose struggles are not merely about the conditions of work, but the possibility of regular work itself. This parallels the suggestion, by Manuel Castells, that "the new economy does not create or destroy work, but rather reshapes the conditions of work".[79] Yet this reshaping has come with more of a loss that Castells acknowledges. Following Bourdieu, it is important to realize that the number of young computer experts is insignificant when compared to the number of industrial workers who face uncertain and difficult futures. Flexible work may have its advantages for the highly qualified technicians of the information age, but it has extremely serious repercussions for industrial workers.

The development of containerization thus carries important features of the contemporary world economy within it. Yet the transformation of work in Durban is not merely about machines replacing men, it is also

76. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places* (New York, 2001), pp. 40–41, 286.
77. Pierre Bourdieu (ed.), *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Oxford, 1999).
78. See articles by Michel Pialoux, Stéphane Beaud, Louis Pinto, and Bourdieu in *ibid.*, pp. 255–419.
79. Castells, *Rise of the Network Society*, p. 265.

about how this process happened. And a consideration of the effects of this transformation shows that a uniform result in every port simply did not occur. Instead, global technological innovation coincided with the local conditions of a port in South Africa, that is a port in a place where workers had a significantly different history, and a fundamentally weaker position. Where well-organized dockworkers in certain ports in the United States and in western Europe managed both to limit retrenchment and prevent casualization, in South Africa, containerization in conjunction with poorly organized trade unions, an unsympathetic government, and a legacy of racist and super-exploitative labour relations, produced retrenchment and casualization.

What is important about this consideration is that it prevents us from broadly characterizing the changes in ports world-wide as a process of "globalization" or in generalizing the nature of work in the "information age". Indeed, important recent work has signalled the difficulty of using these terms at all. In her study on the connections between Taiwanese investment and local communities in South Africa, Gillian Hart powerfully demonstrates that popular and academic discourse on globalization proves disabling, since it assumes the coherence of the notion of "globalization" itself.[80] Instead, she argues that new spatial interconnections develop within this moment of neoliberal capitalism in an entirely inconsistent manner, as a reflection of local contingencies. Above all, this study challenges the notion that it is possible to test "the level of globalization in any single economy". Frederick Cooper goes further by arguing that the discourse on globalization is entirely superficial, ignoring both the extent to which long-distance connections were forged over history and the endurance of uneven spaces of power in the global arena.[81] Citing a range of examples from the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean from the eighth century, the Atlantic slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the decolonization of Africa in the postwar period, Cooper suggests that globalization theorists offer an entirely ahistorical picture of networks and connections that privilege the present as "unique" and malign the past.

To underscore the value of Cooper's argument, I present two important conclusions. Firstly, that containerization as a global process has produced different consequences: that Rotterdam has not followed the same trend as Durban suggests that these processes do not create homogenous results. Secondly, and crucially linked, is the suggestion that the reason why

80. Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Durban, 2002), pp. 14, 290.
81. Frederick Cooper, "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective", *African Affairs*, 100 (2001), pp. 189–213.

differences occur has much to do with local conditions, and within this, the particular choices made by states and bodies such as trade unions. Indeed, the particular trajectory of trade-union organization in Durban has not, except for a brief period, dealt with casualization in any satisfactory manner. But this is the result of the historical legacies of division, difference, and misunderstanding, and the decisions that have been made. In short, the local is decisive in the global. Technology changes environments, but the shape of these changes is decided by particular conditions in any given society.

CONCLUSION

In October 2002, longshoremen on the west coast of the United States, from Portland to Los Angeles, engaged in a three-week strike that crippled port operations.[82] The fact that dockworkers can still bring harbours to a standstill, and raise the attention of the entire country, shows that union organization can still be effective in the containerized shipping world. However, this stands in stark contrast to the position of the stevedores in Durban. Because of both fractured unionization and the legacy of apartheid, stevedoring workers in Durban have been entirely out-manoeuvred, casualized, and divided as a body of workers. While the occasional strike in Durban upsets operations, companies have no obligation or contract with casuals and can simply hire alternative workers. A major problem, as I have illustrated above, is that trade unions were not controlled by workers at any stage in the history of stevedoring in Durban. On the west coast of the United States, the legacy of strong worker-controlled organization has meant not only solidarity but also higher wages in relation to many other industrial workers.

In this paper, I have discussed the development of containerization and its implications for the stevedores working in South Africa. While in an important sense this development represents the emergence of the new economy, the experience of these workers suggests that we must not be too hasty in generalizing about the effects of technological change or claim that the new economy simply homogenizes difference. In many ways, dock-workers in Durban are today further from their European and American counterparts than they were before containerization. Because of their shared historical experience, the stevedores do in many ways resemble other industrial workers in South Africa. However, since the 1920s period when they enjoyed a privileged place in the city, the stevedores' experience has never been quite the same as that of other workers either.

Despite this, I have suggested that the experience of Durban stevedores

82. *New York Times*, 6 October 2002, "A Union wins the Global Game", pp. 1–3.

is not entirely unusual in the contemporary world. In the last twenty years, they have experienced precisely the disillusionment felt by workers in France described by Bourdieu. The dockworkers in Durban suffer from poor morale; they realize that their skills are worth less and less, and that their prospects in the new economy are extremely limited. Moreover, they no longer enjoy the benefits of full employment. Neither they themselves nor established trade unions have been able to organize them. They have become casual workers in an economy with an oversupply of workers and an undersupply of work. Perhaps we could say that the similarities are due to an experience of work in the "information age". Nevertheless, this paper has suggested that to stop at these similarities is misleading, since it would be to forget the historical circumstances in the development of these working conditions in different places. While in both contexts, workers are "flexible", it would too superficial to claim that their conditions are really the same.

It may appear here that I am valorizing the conditions of work that existed in the past. This is not my purpose. Throughout the world, both industrial and dock work were often highly exploitative, and many of the struggles throughout the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were attempts to improve the difficult conditions of industrial work. Instead, my purpose is to show the relationship between past conditions and present ones. This is especially salient in the South African context, where the exploitation of workers was amplified by the racial policies of the apartheid state. The particular administration of stevedores in Durban was part of a wider form of societal exploitation of cheap African migrant labourers. At the height of apartheid, the Durban stevedores worked for low wages and were forbidden from organizing their workplace or protesting against the state. They enjoyed little protection from the dangers of harbour work and were frequently injured. These workers were not part of an industrial-relations system or a society that recognized their rights as citizens, but were instead part of an industrial relationship where they were treated more like subjects.

What is especially tragic about this part of the history of South Africa is that at the moment that workers began to gain rights at work similar to their European counterparts, global economic changes began to undermine the position of industrial workers as a whole. These changes were felt particularly acutely by the stevedores working in Durban, both because the harbour was a frontline of the new economy, and because the harbour could never really be as isolated as the rest of South Africa during apartheid. Mass retrenchments happened a decade earlier than in other industries. The changes to the industrial-relations system in South Africa, and the unionization of the stevedores came precisely at the moment when containerization threatened to, and ultimately did, decimate older forms of work. Unionists with little practical experience were confronted

simultaneously with the impossible task of remaking the working relationships of the past and the spectre of mass retrenchment. The story of that failure makes a broader point about understanding work in the "information age": that this understanding can only be gained through both an analysis of general features such as flexibility and a coming to terms with local history and politics, which always play a significant part in global change.