

RÉSUMÉ

Les études Sud-africaines du travail dans une perspective globale, 1973-2006

Edward Webster

Cet article se veut une réflexion portant sur le programme de recherche qui émergea des grèves générales de Durban en 1973, et du rôle qu'a joué Travail, capital et société en vue d'accroître son impact. L'analyse du mouvement ouvrier Sud-africain a généré de nouveaux concepts et des approches méthodologies fraîches. Les sociologues, en particulier, ont dépassé l'étude du milieu de travail et du syndicalisme pour se consacrer aux relations sociales qui entourent et déterminent les conditions dans lesquelles les ouvriers vivent et travaillent. Cet article suggère que la restructuration du travail au niveau mondial a mené à une révision des problématiques théoriques des études du travail. L'espace géographique de la théorisation du travail est en expansion, de telle sorte que les particularismes européens ne sont plus considérés comme étant universels.

South African Labour Studies in a Global Perspective, 1973 - 2006

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Introduction

In January 1973 over 100,000 workers went out on strike in the coastal industrial city of Durban, shattering a decade of industrial acquiescence. These strikes, along with other examples of industrial action at that time, were to trigger off a process of rapid union growth. Within a decade, the South African trade union movement had become the fastest growing trade union movement in the world.

At first, sociologists were ill-prepared to explain the rapid rise of a militant labour movement in a country such as South Africa. The coercive capacity of the Apartheid State appeared so powerful to Heribert Adam that, in his celebrated book *Modernising Racial Domination* published shortly before the mass strikes in Durban, he predicted that they were not possible in South Africa.

Within the field of labour studies, theorizing about labour movements had been drawn from Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America. In these Eurocentric theories of the labour movement, unions were seen to inevitably evolve from militant social movements into 'mature' conservative bureaucracies (Lester, 1958; Panitch, 1976). By postulating the existence of 'stages of development', the Northern world had taken the particular and turned it into the universal. Indeed some sociologists such as Herbert Marcuse had abandoned altogether as an object of study, the industrial working class. Instead they focused their theories of

social transformation on marginal groups such as students. Others kept their classical Marxism intact, insisting that labour struggles are essentially economistic and could only be transcended by a vanguard political party.

Students of the developing world offered a version of 'dependency' theory, which focused on the claim that imperialism blocked national economic development. This conception of change relegated labour, at best, to a secondary position. At worst, workers were identified, with little by way of evidence or argument, as a privileged 'labour aristocracy' aligned to metropolitan capital.

To understand and explain the rise of labour a new generation of sociologists stepped outside the classroom. We began to interview workers and learn about their past. Initially such work also had a didactic aim, responding to a demand from the new unions for educational material. We developed a relationship with the workers' movement, which emerged in the early 1970s among industrial workers in South Africa. In the midst of this turmoil Richard Turner, a lecturer at the University of Natal and banned under the Suppression of Communism Act at that time, began to write a book on these historic strikes (Institute of Industrial Education, 1974). It was to become the first sociological study of the new type of industrial worker, the semi-skilled machine operator, setting a new research agenda for labour studies in South Africa.

To record, analyze and promote this emerging movement we established the *South African Labour Bulletin (SALB)* in April 1974. The *SALB* was to provide a unique record of the organizational innovations introduced by these emerging unions. Where possible, these unions sunk deep roots on the shop floor, transformed as it was by the dramatic economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s. The introduction of the shop steward committee and the recognition agreement in factories in Durban at this time was the key institutional innovation through which shop floor power was built. On the shop floor, unions could develop a strong factory-based leadership, less prominent than head-office activists, and closely tied to their members. With the strong backing of their members, factory leaders had the power to push concessions from management, which not only created space for further advances, but

also won concrete improvement in workers' conditions, thereby reassuring them of the efficacy of direct action.

This article is a reflection on the research program that grew out of the 'Durban moment'.¹ It arises out of an invitation by Rosalind Boyd to contribute to the 25th Anniversary edition of *Labour, Capital and Society (LCS)* by reflecting on 'labour studies then and now'.

I have divided my reflections into two parts:

- Firstly, I argue that in trying to understand the South African labour movement, new concepts and methods emerged. Sociologists were drawn beyond a study of the workplace and trade unionism, to the social relationships, which surround and shape the conditions under which labour lives and works.
- Secondly, I suggest that the restructuring of work worldwide is leading us to recast labour studies.

Reflecting on this research program twenty-five years later helps one identify the gaps and develop a new research agenda. The World Congress of Sociology is to be held in Durban in July 2006. This is the first time the International Sociological Association has held its four-yearly congress in Africa. The Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC44) has developed a program of thirteen sessions around the theme of Global Restructuring and the New Worlds of Work: Rediscovering the Power of the Labour Movement.² The Congress provides an ideal opportunity to revisit the 'Durban moment' and assess the intellectual achievements of the new labour studies. It is also an opportunity for the Global South to foreground more firmly its research agenda thus facilitating a genuine North-South intellectual exchange.

¹Tony Morphet, in his 1990 Richard Turner Memorial Lecture, referred to the period 1970-1974 as the 'Durban moment' because of the extraordinary range of innovative intellectual and political projects (such as Steve Biko's formulation of the Black Consciousness philosophy) that emerged in Durban during that time (Morphet, 1990) I identified, in the 1993 Richard Turner Memorial lecture, an additional project generated by the 'Durban moment', the new labour studies (Webster, 1993).

²The mission of RC44 is to encourage international research on labour movements, with a focus on their role both in industrial relations and in the political arena. Membership is open to any person engaged in research into Labour Movements or in Labour Movement activities.

Part One: The Emergence of a New Labour Studies

At the centre of the new labour studies was the emergence of class theory in African studies. Class analysis of contemporary Africa has had a shaky history (Cohen, 1972). Before the Second World War, most scholars who wrote about Africa scarcely took Africa seriously enough to use so European a concept as class. A small group of orthodox communists transposed class categories mechanically and were soon discredited because of their failure to identify the specific characteristics of proletarianization in Africa. The growth of liberal modernization theory in the 1950s led to an emphasis on national integration and the social scientific community of North America declared the concept of class irrelevant. For the successful nationalist politicians who followed in the wake of decolonization, class was a dangerous and divisive concept that threatened their delicate political project.

Disillusionment with the 'classless nationalism' of African politics propelled intellectuals, such as Samir Amin in an article in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* in 1972, into pursuing a class analysis of Africa by drawing on new Marxist concepts such as the notion of peripheral capitalism (Amin, 1972). Similarly, Robin Cohen challenged the 'myth of classlessness' in an article in the *Socialist Register* (Cohen, 1972). Systematic critiques of modernization theory were mounted by a new generation of radical scholars influenced by the theory of underdevelopment. The establishment of the *Review of African Political Economy* in 1974 provided a forum for these scholars. It was published with the express purpose of 'providing a counterweight to that mass of literature on Africa which holds that Africa's continuing chronic poverty is primarily an internal problem and not a product of her colonial history' (ROAPE, 1974: 1).

From within this paradigm, studies emerged in the 1970s that emphasized the differences between the working class in Europe and Africa. In Africa, it was argued, industrialization had not been as thoroughgoing. This has resulted in a number of important characteristics of the African working class: the industrial working class is very much a minority of wage earners, who are not growing as fast as the population, and class divisions have not been as simplified as in Europe. Workers are divided by a multiplicity of vertical cleavages such as race, ethnicity, language, region, religion,

kinship, and, above all, by links to the countryside. Not surprisingly these characteristics have created problems for trade union organization and any notion of a working class politics.

Bill Freund has provided an excellent account of the literature that emerged from this new paradigm in his book, *The African Worker* (1988). Freund shows how labour studies in the colonial era concentrated on labour supply questions. This managerial problematic dictated the nature of much research and led to a concern with labour migration in particular. With the struggle for independence the emphasis shifted to trade unions, examining their political role in the national struggle and their economic role in the modernization process (Berg and Butler, 1964).

This was to change in the early 1970s. "By the mid 1970s", Freund argues, "a new generation of scholars had discovered the working class and, armed with more flexible means of considering the application of class consciousness, they began to change the way labour in Africa was being written about" (Freund, 1988: 22). Two key books reflect this "new class paradigm by academics": Sandbrook and Cohen's *The Development of the African Working Class* as well as Gutkind, Cohen and Copan's *African Labour History*.

This was to be the hey-day of African labour studies with path-breaking studies on the African worker appearing regularly (Cohen, 1974; Jeffries, 1975; Lubeck, 1975; Moorsom: 1979; Peace, 1979; Sandbrook, 1975; Van Onselen, 1976; Waterman, 1983). Importantly, Freund adds, this new paradigm did not assume that the working class would form a particular kind of political party; it was critical of African Nationalism, de-emphasized colonialism while increasing attention was paid to capitalism, and focused on "hidden" forms of worker consciousness. "The reality", he comments, "requires us to make sense of how labour is organized in agriculture as well as industry, of what actually goes on in the many facets of what political economists call the informal sector of the economy" (Freund, 1988: 24).

It was against this background that Rosalind Boyd, the founding Editor of the newly-named journal *Labour, Capital and Society (LCS)*, together with members of the Labour Studies Group at McGill University's Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS) organized a program of seminars for the academic year 1979-1980

on international labour issues.³ The seminar series culminated in a three-day Conference on 1-3 May 1980 at the McGill's CDAS in Montreal. This was an important event in the development of new labour studies as the Conference and the journal, *LCS*, began to provide a forum and a network for what was to emerge as a new paradigm.

On a lighter note, the Conference coincided with May Day and we adjourned our discussions to march in the streets with progressive organizations in Quebec. I remember the event well, as it was the first time I had participated in a May Day march. Two years later the struggle for May Day to become a public holiday began in South Africa; a demand that was won *de facto* by the end of the decade and *de jure* in 1994.

LCS had a special significance for us in South Africa at the time, as publishing outlets for the new labour studies were limited. A number of editions of the *South African Labour Bulletin* had been banned by the apartheid government's Publications Board. Articles that cited banned authors or discussed their activities could not be published inside South Africa. I discovered this when the University of the Witwatersrand Press refused to publish an article I had presented at the Institute of African Studies because it cited banned literature. I decided to submit it instead to *LCS* and it was published in their April 1981 edition (Webster, 1981).

For me this was the beginning of a relationship with the *LCS* that continues into the present. It was to lead to a Special Issue on South African Labour edited by Roger Southall in 1985, the first time that an academic journal had given the new labour studies in South Africa such prominence. As Southall argues in the Introduction to the Special Issue, the five articles in the issue demonstrated that the "vibrant trade unionism which emerged amongst black workers in the 1970s ... (had) firmly established itself as the major vehicle of working class defence, action and organisation in the 1980s" (Southall, 1985: 229).

³*LCS* grew out of the Newsletter *Manpower and Unemployment Research in Africa* (the 'Africa' was dropped in 1976), which was started by three anthropologists in 1968 and carried a range of articles including the living conditions and community life of the unemployed. Rosalind Boyd became the regular editor of the Newsletter in 1976 and gradually transformed it into the academic journal *LCS* by 1979.

The Special Issue captured the main themes of the new labour studies. Drawing on labour process theory and the transition to monopoly capitalism, Johann Maree, Roger Southall and I demonstrated, in three separate contributions, how the concentration of workers in crowded assembly lines provided the basis for unity of purpose and organization of workers into mass-based industrial unions (Southall; Maree; Webster, 1985). I argued that capitalism had in large part deskilled the craftsmen (white) and created a new category of employee – the semi-skilled machine operator drawn largely from the newly proletarianized Black population. In a large integrated manufacturing operation such as the auto industry, Southall argued, a relatively small group of workers could cripple an entire system by shutting down a part of the line. It also led to the dramatic growth of semi-skilled workers – who were to provide the organizational base for industrial unions. A relatively homogenous workforce was created that was technologically linked within the labour process. The combination proved exceptionally favourable to building industrial unions with strong shopfloor structures.

Maree provided a detailed organizational analysis of the strategies pursued by the emerging unions and their struggle for recognition and consolidation. He provided five reasons why these unions succeeded in establishing a permanent presence where previous unions had failed: the creation of favourable conditions for large industrial unions as a result of economic expansion and concentration; the resurgence of Black opposition and mobilization against economic exploitation and political oppression; the astute strategies adopted by the unions; the growing international pressure against apartheid; and the fact that the state had conceded legal recognition to African trade unions for the first time in the country's history in 1979.

Two further approaches to the new labour studies were published in this edition; the first by Ari Sitas and the second by Rob Lambert (Sitas; Lambert, 1985). While research on the labour process provided the starting point of the new labour studies, studying the labour process alone could not provide a complete explanation as to “why workers join trade unions”. To answer this question it was necessary to follow workers into their rooms in the hostels and their shacks in the townships, to identify their

associational membership, their ties of kinship and their village origins. The readiness of workers to accept collective organization and to combine into trade unions and other forms of worker organization rested essentially on this wider web of social networks.

A theoretical approach emerged during the 1980s that identified the distinct cultural formations created by workers. This was to avoid the economism of labour process studies. Sitas called this second direction taken by labour studies, 'the analysis of cultural and working life'. The psychological approach identified in earlier research focused on "the Black worker" as an individual rather than as a member of an ethnic group or a social class. Culture itself was suggested as a disabling force explaining Black workers' inadequacies — their high absenteeism, their lack of motivation and their low productivity. In the "new labour studies", culture became a concept that was used to explain supportive social networks. These formed the bedrock on which workers collectively resisted their oppressive work and living conditions.

In this way the culture of Black workers ceased to be seen in negative terms: instead it became a way of empowering and mobilizing workers. The traditional Zulu praise-poet, the *imbongi*, for example, was now seen as a grassroots intellectual, educating workers about past struggles and at the same time offering interpretations of how the past can affect the present (Bonnin, 1999).

The key point to emerge from Sitas's research was that the men who joined the union came from similar districts in Zululand, lived together in Vosloorus hostel and consequently shared a common set of grievances. They were, in other words, rooted in networks of mutual support. Sitas described this process best when he writes: "Migrants are already combined the moment they enter the hostel or the factory. People from the same region or clansmen will immediately organise their lives on group lines" (Sitas, 1985: 383). He called these cultural formations, 'defensive combinations', as it was these informal social networks that were to provide the basis for collective mobilization of migrant workers.

Rob Lambert was to challenge both approaches arguing that it was not possible to explain the rise of labour in South Africa by focussing on conditions of work or cultural formations alone. He introduced a third factor, namely the existence of powerful political traditions of resistance among Black workers by focussing on the

South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), an earlier attempt at organizing Black workers in the 1950s that was aligned to the African National Congress (ANC). This approach – the political traditions approach – forced sociologists to confront the ‘hidden world’ of African nationalism – its traditions, political culture and consciousness.

The exploration of these different approaches to labour studies involved not only new concepts but also new ways of doing labour studies. The first of these was the use of oral and visual evidence.⁴ The second was the emphasis on participatory or ethnographic research (Burawoy, 2000).

Labour studies had not, in the past, reflected the innovative labour movements emerging in the South. Nor had it recognized the new labour studies, which had developed in isolation from the mainstream sociology of labour movements. The new labour studies, in the words of Robin Cohen, Peter Waterman and Ronaldo Munck, had reached the status of a new paradigm by the late 1970s (Boyd, Cohen, and Gutkind 1987; Munck, 1988; Waterman, 1984). But its links were to area studies and postcolonial studies, rather than to the sociology of labour movements.

This is best illustrated by the very valuable *Newsletter of International Labour Studies (NILS)* produced by Peter Waterman at the Institute of Social Studies at Den Haag in the Netherlands. It was designed to “facilitate an exchange of information among scholars concerned primarily with the working class of Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East”.⁵ As its readership was drawn largely from scholar-activists concerned with labour developments in developing countries, its penetration into the mainstream social sciences was limited.

What we saw emerging in the 1970s in certain semi-industrialized authoritarian countries such as Brazil, South Africa,

⁴Luli Callinicos used photographs to both illustrate but also to provide additional evidence in her trilogy on working people, titled a People’s History of South Africa, published in 1981, 1987 and 1992.

⁵According to my records the last Newsletter was Numbers 42-3 in July – December 1989. They are an extraordinarily rich and informative collection of newsletters consisting of reviews, publication news, audio-visual aids, research resources, events, organizations, projects and periodicals over the ten-year period from 1979 –1989 when the new paradigm was arguably at its most influential.

Korea and Poland seemed to be a new kind of unionism, what we called “social movement unionism” (Webster, 1988). This form of unionism goes beyond the struggles over wages and working conditions, to include campaigns over the living conditions of the working class as a whole—over housing and health, education, transport and clean running water. In other words, it was a struggle for both bread and roses. These campaigns linked workplace structures to communities, and they led to challenges to governments as well as employers, linking state and capital in the struggle. The result is that strikes over factory issues received strong community support, and unions campaigned for full (or social) citizenship, redefining their constituencies to include the broader working class, and weaving trade unions into broader movements for fundamental social change. This has been captured best in Gay Seidman’s pioneering comparative study of social movement unionism in Brazil and South Africa in the 1980s (Seidman, 1994).

Part of this new paradigm was a challenge by Southern labour movements to ‘trade union imperialism’ or ‘trade union neo-imperialism’. The transfer — or imposition — of Northern union models to the South was often driven by the Cold War and peddled by Northern unions, pursuing at once the obsolete imperial dreams of their national states and the neo-imperial aspirations of their multinational enterprises (Southall, 1988). Northern unions ‘bought’ ideological loyalty from the South with infrastructure aid, education, and leadership training. The way trade union imperialism was challenged by the South African labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s has been convincingly demonstrated (Southall, 1995).

Let me turn now to a discussion on contemporary labour studies.

Part Two: Labour Studies in the Era of Globalization

The rapid growth of economic liberalism over the past twenty years has led sociologists to define the current period of world history as the Second Great Transformation (Munck, 2002). The theoretical work of Karl Polanyi has emerged as the most influential author in the constitution of sociology of the Second Great Transformation (Burawoy, 2003). In Polanyi’s classic study of the industrial revolution, in what he called the Great Transformation, he showed how society took measures to protect itself against the

disruptive impact of the unregulated market. This he called the 'double movement' whereby ever-wider extensions of free market principles generated counter-movements to protect society. Against an economic system that dislocates the very fabric of society, the social counter-movement, he argued, is based on the 'principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature' (Polanyi, 2001: 33).

What implications does the Second Great Transformation have for the labour movement and what are the possibilities of a counter-movement led by the labour movement? Union organizers and labour scholars face a complex challenge in the era of globalization, one not that different to the one faced in the United States by the Committee for Industrial Organisations (CIO) generation in the 1930s when the nature of work under capitalism changed from craft-based production to the Fordist assembly line. They were faced with the challenge of constructing a new solidarity on the shopfloor and in the community.

That challenge involved an historic tension between competing forms of unionism: on the one hand, between 'pure and simple' trade unionism seeking to obtain the best deal for labour understood as commodity, centred on trade unionism narrowly understood as a service organization; or, on the other hand, a 'social unionism': a commitment to labour as part of a larger movement willing to take risks for a broader working class project in which workers identity as workers are blended with their status as consumers, members of a community and a polity.

Resolving this tension is not easy as it involves labour thinking of itself again as a social movement rather than a secure mutual benevolent society. But in thinking of the social movement character of labour, we may need to think, I suggest, quite differently about the concept of social movement unionism (SMU). Instead of trying to develop the concept of SMU into a model of a particular progressive form of trade unionism appropriate to globalization, as Kim Moody seeks to do, it is better to conceive of it as a reassertion of the movement dimension of trade unionism under new conditions (Moody, 1997).

The crucial challenge then, as Karl Von Holdt suggests, is not that of prescribing a model of SMU, as Moody tends to do. The really interesting question is how trade unions with different

histories and traditions combine – as most of them do – movement dimensions (mobilization) with institutional dimensions (participation in industrial relations institutions and the negotiation of order), how the tensions between these different dimensions are manifested, and how they change in response to changing historical conditions and vary in different national contexts (Von Holdt, 2002). Answering these questions requires contextual comparisons rather than sweeping generalizations.

With an increasingly globalized economy, organized labour in the North can no longer ignore Southern workers or treat them as international scabs.⁶ Trade liberalization may threaten the hard-won labour rights and standards of the North, but protectionism is no answer. In the North, the historic class compromise between powerful unions and national employers in large-scale firms has been eroded through the international transfer of production, the proliferation of small and medium-sized enterprises, and the casualization of work. Competition from the South, particularly Asia, contains within it the threat of levelling downwards — what some have referred to as ‘a race to the bottom’. Above all it challenges the structures of welfare-state era trade unionism — bureaucratic, limited of vision, and dependent on a strong state. But it also opens up the possibility of the revitalization of labour in the North through North-South labour alliances, and the creation, in the North, of movement style unionism. This possibility is illustrated in the American case study of public sector workers in Pittsburgh USA organizing into the equivalent of social movement unionism (Lopez, 2000), and in Paul Johnson’s *Success While Others Fail*, which contrasts public and private sector social unionism (Johnson, 1994). Indeed Dan Clawson makes a powerful argument in his recent book that the United States labour movement may be on the verge of massive growth. For there to be a new upsurge, Clawson asserts, labour must fuse with social movements concerned with race, gender, and global justice (Clawson, 2003).

⁶It is important to qualify this generalization and acknowledge that, in certain countries in the North such as Canada and the Nordic countries, there is a long tradition in sections of the labour movement (Canadian Steelworkers, for example) of progressive solidarity with trade unions in the South. It is important to also mention the range of progressive NGOs who identified with the cause of labour in the South.

Hyman captures this changing context by arguing that what has occurred in the North is a crisis of a specifically narrow type of trade unionism. Will Third World workers, once relegated by labour studies to the status of exceptions to the rule, now provide models of how the North can revitalize Northern welfare-state era trade unions? Will the issues that separated North and South, bring them together, as labour worldwide faces the challenge of an increasingly internationally integrated world? Could it be that theories of labour and strategies of labour action will now travel in the other direction—from South to North? Will labour in the North return to its origins as a social movement anchored in the community—in response to the unparalleled threat of the new forms of capitalist internationalization? Clearly, the twin issues of creating new forms of international labour solidarity, and creating new forms of ‘knowledge transfer’ are coming on the agenda.

What implications do these changes in the global economy have for labour studies in the new millennium? Carla Lipsig-Mumme and I have suggested the need to reconceptualize the relationship between the world of work and the labour movement (Webster and Lipsig-Mumme, 2002: 258-65).⁷ The powerful managerial impetus to restructure work along ‘flexible’ lines needs to be placed at the centre of our research agenda.

This is a daunting intellectual task. It involves no less than a recasting of our theoretical problematic, and a reaching out to several areas of sociology, as well as other disciplines, from which we have been distant. Our agenda will need to examine the following:

- Identify the new actors and institutions that are shaping our global civil society – the NGOs and the environmental movement, the women’s movement and the human rights groups – and then ask how their vitality impacts on the union as actor, agent and formal organization.
- The institutions of the global economy, which have been previously placed outside the purview of labour studies, need

⁷Carla Lipsig-Mumme is vice-president and I am the president of the labour movements research committee (RC44) of the International Sociological Association (ISA). We developed this agenda as part of an attempt to recast labour studies for our research committee, RC44. I would like to thank her for permission to reproduce extracts of our original article.

to be brought back in. We need to ask: what would a labour-friendly world order look like? Issues of trade and investment become central to this more expansive approach. The question of labour standards is emerging as a key challenge to all actors – North and South – in the world of work.

- What are the new demands facing workers? In the context of globalization we have to identify the impact of new forms of work organization, the growth and spread of precarious employment, and the call not only for new skills but also for constantly renewed skills, on individual futures and collective priorities.
- The new forms of labour internationalism that are emerging need to be identified. Their relationship to the older forms needs to be analyzed, with attention paid to continuity and rupture. Does the new technology allow labour to free ‘knowledge transfer’ from its imperialist legacy?
- The changing nature of the state-labour relationship needs to be examined in a new light, contrasting Northern and Southern parameters and possibilities.
- How are trade unions to reach the unorganized and the marginalized? What can the North learn from the South?
- Above all, the geographical scope of labour theorizing needs to be broadened, so that the European particular is no longer taken for the universal.

To what extent is a new research agenda on labour studies emerging? If you read back numbers of *LCS* over the past decade, you will see regular articles on the impact of globalization on labour. Indeed *LCS* has called for papers for a Special Issue on Labour and Globalisation: From New Organizations of Production to International Labour Solidarity. Beverly Silver has recently published her study on workers’ movements and globalization arguing for the need to ‘recast labour studies in a long-term and global framework’ (Silver, 2003). Ronaldo Munck has provided a masterful overview of labour and globalization (Munck, 2002). Last year the International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched a Global Labour University (GLU) with academic partners in Germany, Brazil, South Africa, Canada and Malaysia providing trade unionists with a master’s degree in Labour Policies and Globalization. The aim of GLU is to analyze the challenges facing

the labour movement in the era of globalization and to assist workers and their organizations engage more effectively with rapid social and economic change. The globalization process, they argue, is undermining existing industrial relations institutions and the social fabric of many societies, without providing an adequate new regulatory and protective framework. Significantly the GLU project involves the implementation of high level university programs on labour policies and globalization, not short in-house courses run for unions.

The revitalization of labour studies in the United States is arguably the clearest evidence of the emergence of a new research agenda in labour studies. Whereas labour studies in the past tended to be located in a separate department in the university, today it is being brought into the mainstream of sociology. Recently a new section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) was created on Labour and Labour Movements with over three hundred members. Fuelling this upsurge is a wave of excellent books on labour especially studies evaluating the attempts at revitalization of the labour movement over the past decade.

In South Africa we have continued to publish research on the labour movement concentrating on the impact of the democratic transition and globalization on the labour movement. In 2000, Glenn Adler and I published a collection of articles on trade unions and democratization (Adler and Webster, 2000). In 2003, Karl Von Holdt published a widely acclaimed ethnographic study of workplace trade unionism in a steel mill (Von Holdt, 2003). Rob Lambert and I have published a number of articles on the new labour internationalism (Lambert and Webster, 2003; Lambert and Webster, 2004). Ari Sitas has recently published his fascinating ethnographic study of Black working class leadership since the Durban strikes of 1973 (Sitas, 2004). Sakhela Buhlungu has edited a volume based on a longitudinal study of COSATU members and had an article in the previous issue of *LCS* on the organizational development of COSATU since 1973 (Buhlungu, 2005a; Buhlungu 2003). Von Holdt and I have produced an edited volume on workplace change where we reveal the growing differentiation within the worlds of work (Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

The Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) is about to embark on an extensive research project that will examine the relationship

between work restructuring and social reproduction in Southern Africa. Our aim is to investigate the beginnings of a Polanyian counter-movement and the possibilities of an alternative development path. While Southern Africa will be our central focus for an understanding of the Second Great Transformation, local challenges cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the Global South. From the start of the project we will build into our research strategy a comparative dimension focussing on three crucial labour traditions in the Global South: the authoritarian tradition of East Asia, the tradition of political unionism in south Asia, and the tradition of corporatism in Latin America. The methodological premise of the study is that workplaces and worker movements which are located within these different traditions in the Global South are becoming more connected, and the linkages are deepening through these globalizing processes and the threats that these pose to their livelihoods.

Elsewhere in Africa there seems to be a revival of interest in labour studies largely in response to the impact of structural adjustment policies on the labour movement and the struggles for democracy. There seem to be three major centres of labour studies in Africa outside of South Africa. Under the initiative of Jimi Adesina and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) headquartered in Senegal, a number of studies on contemporary labour have been published (Adesina, 1989; Adesina, 1992; Adesina, 1994). A second initiative has come from the Politics of Development Group in the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University (PODSU) and the Centre for Research and Documentation (CRD), Kano, Nigeria which has published a number of studies on contemporary labour in Africa (Akwetey, 1994; Andrea and Beckman, 1998). A third centre of labour studies is the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Zimbabwe. Lloyd Sachikonye has published a study on labour and industrialization in Zimbabwe under structural adjustment and a study on the labour movement in post-colonial Zimbabwe, jointly edited with Brian Raftopolous, also from the IDS (Sachikonye, 1999; Raftopolous and Sachikonye, 2001). In 2001 a jointly edited book on liberalization and labour regimes in Africa was published arising out of a joint workshop between PODSU and the IDS (Beckman and Sachikonye, 2001).

Indeed the next Editor of *LCS*, Suzanne Dansereau, is an associate of IDS and has published her research on mineworkers in *LCS* (Dansereau, 2002).

Conclusion: Contesting Knowledge

LCS played an important role in taking our research and our debates in the 1980s out of a narrow circle of South Africans into a wider international community of progressive scholars in all regions of the globe. In particular it opened up African scholarship to a wider audience as well as contributed to South-South links. It was a perceptive political act, as well as one of good scholarship, on the part of Rosalind Boyd.

In an age of instant global communication and openness this act may not seem that important but this would be to miss the significance of *LCS* in the 1980s. The publication of the research by Maree, Lambert, Sitas and I in *LCS* in 1985 was the only time that particular research was published outside of South Africa. All four articles were either part of a completed PhD or were part of PhDs that were still to be completed. Although I published my PhD as a book in South Africa, the other studies were never published and remain on the bookshelves of their respective university libraries (Webster, 1985).

The result is that the impact of this work was limited to South Africa and, through *LCS*, to a small network of scholars interested in Third World workers. But, as argued earlier the new labour studies was linked to area studies, essentially a study of developing societies and this literature did not penetrate into the mainstream of social scientific knowledge. The result is that scholars in the developing world are often isolated from the global system of knowledge production. By fore-grounding labouring people rather than economic models at the centre of development or area studies, *LCS* brought labour studies closer to development studies.

Indeed the ISA has formed a Working Group to study ways of promoting, with their research committees, recognition of sociological research work carried out in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They argue that

The field of sociology has for historical reasons, been widely defined in Europe and North America, and often reflects the problems, cultural models, modes of access, production and

diffusion of knowledge of western countries where Western intellectual traditions dominate. Social issues specific to non-western cultures or developing countries have frequently been marginalised or ignored. Major sociological communities in Latin America or Asia still find it difficult to situate their research concerns and their theoretical developments not only within the framework and discussion of general theories that the West has universalised, but also in international sociological conferences and world congresses. We all know the role major Western philosophical traditions and social science theories have played in the diversification of sociological discourse. Wider access to work from the South or from Asia would also considerably enrich the perspectives of the discipline (Quoted in Webster, 2004: 39).

But to suggest that the publications produced by the new labour studies in South Africa were restricted to a local audience because of the Eurocentric nature of knowledge production of labour studies would be far-fetched. The new labour studies that emerged in South Africa in the 1970s had, from its inception, a close relationship with the emerging labour movement. I have called this, critical engagement; more recently, Michael Burawoy has described it as public sociology, to distinguish it from the inward-looking hyper-professionalism dominant in the United States (Burawoy, 2002). From our perspective in the 1970s and 1980s, publishing locally was a *choice* we made so we could engage in a dialogue with the social movements struggling for the rights of working people, rather than something imposed on us from outside.

It is precisely because of the opening up of our society in the 1990s that we now focus on the core of the production of knowledge in our discipline, namely the International Sociological Association. The World Congress of Sociology Congress in Durban in 2006 provides us with an opportunity to take forward the task of recasting labour studies. As part of this initiative, we intend launching an academic journal that focuses on labour (broadly defined) as an actor internationally/trans-nationally/globally. The provisional title is *An International Journal of Comparative Labour*.

We hope that it will be 'genuinely' global, covering both North and South, and that articles will focus on a comparison of the organizational forms that working people are developing whether they be trade unions, labour service organizations, new social

movements, as well as conventional institutions in the workplace, such as bargaining councils, mediation services, and labour courts, and of course political parties and groupings that have links with labour.

In reflecting on 'labour studies then and now', I could not help being struck by the social composition of the producers of knowledge on labour. With few notable exceptions such as Jimi Adesina, Emmanuel Akwetey, Sakhela Buhlungu, Lloyd Sachikonye and Brian Raftopolous, and among women, Jacklyn Cock, Iris Berger and Gay Seidman, the production of knowledge in African labour studies has been undertaken by white males. There are obvious historic reasons why this is the case especially during the apartheid period in South Africa, but it does raise the question of whether, and how, this has shaped the content, method and theoretical approach of African labour studies.

In a fascinating exchange in *Current Sociology*, Sakhela Buhlungu and Johann Maree address this issue. Buhlungu opens the debate with the results of a study on the role of white officials in the South African labour movement concluding that their involvement in the labour movement was a contradictory one (Buhlungu, 2005b). On the one hand, they were committed to the labour movement and took the risks that were associated with it during the apartheid period but, on the other hand, there was a social distance, a failure to learn the languages of the workers and, in some cases, a lack of respect for the distinctive political traditions and culture of Black workers by these white intellectuals. Maree by contrast, and drawing on research published in the 1980s, argues that the white intellectuals were central to the successful development of a grassroots African worker leadership (Maree, 1989).

I do not want to pre-empt this debate in *Current Sociology* but rather to raise a separate issue, namely the impact of white scholars on the way in which labour studies was shaped. To my knowledge there has been no research on this question, although it has often been suggested that the focus on class relations in the workplace, rather than on race relations, is a result of the social background of the researchers.

I await with interest a serious study of this question. In the meantime our challenge continues; that of producing a new generation of scholars who are willing to engage in sustained

ethnographic research. This means a willingness to learn the languages of the workers and empathize with their life worlds. This is not simply a question of colour, or indeed of gender. If we are true to our research program, we will surely want to do more than redress the racial and gender imbalance in labour studies; our aim must be to construct perspectives on globalization from below, what Michael Burawoy calls 'grounded globalisation' (Burawoy, 2000: 341).

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