

RÉSUMÉ

Divisions chez les militants, possibilités collectives: les leçons pour une mobilisation du mouvement ouvrier tirées du secteur des petits commerçants en Afrique du Sud.

Bridget C. Kenny

Cet article examine les actions collectives et l'organisation des ouvriers de magasin dans l'Est du Rand (Afrique du sud) qui sont engagés dans les débats qui porte sur la "revitalisation" du mouvement ouvrier mondial. Cette étude s'inscrit en porte à faux de ceux des auteurs qui posent le 'mouvements sociaux ouvrier' comme une forme de syndicalisme politique qui vise à renforcer la position de négociation des ouvriers sur leur lieu de travail. D'autres par contre, ceux qui trouvent des espaces d'expression en dehors des relations de production se révèlent plus appropriés à une mobilisation collective se fondant sur la classe.

Me basant sur des travaux de terrain que j'ai mené auprès des ouvriers de trois succursales d'une importante chaîne de supermarché en Afrique du Sud entre 1998 et 2002, mon article montre que pendant que pendant que l'on assiste à une augmentation substantielle niveau des emplois disponibles, l'on assiste en même temps à une re-segmentation du marché du travail en trois catégories d'emplois, ce qui a contribué à maintenir une identification collective des travailleurs ainsi que l'activisme des mouvements ouvriers. À travers ces différentes catégories, les actions des travailleurs se sont centrés sur des questions de justice et dignité ; du respect et de la reconnaissance. Cependant, la mobilisation collective des travailleurs a également reproduit des divisions du travail hors d'un marché du travail en constante restructuration. En plus les actions des travailleurs étaient localisées dans une seule succursale.

En conclusion, les préoccupations communes ayant trait à la baisse de la capacité de la reproduction sociale de tous les travailleurs ne sont pas devenus un enjeu primordial autour duquel les ouvriers pouvaient s'y organiser. Cet article montre que le lieu de travail demeure un endroit plein de signification et d'affect et qui participe à la construction identitaire des ouvriers. Toutefois, on constate que la lutte qui n'aurait que pour cadre l'"industrial justice" ne peut contribuer qu'à accroître des divisions entre les divers compartiments et types d'emplois à l'intérieur du supermarché.

Militant Divisions, Collective Possibilities: Lessons for labour mobilization from South African retail sector workers

Bridget C. Kenny¹

Abstract

This paper examines the collective actions and organization of shop workers on the East Rand (South Africa) to engage with debates on the “revitalization” of labour globally. It contrasts writers who engage with ‘social movement unionism’ as a form of political unionism aimed at strengthening workers’ bargaining position at the workplace from those who find spaces outside of production relations as the most relevant to collective class-based mobilization. Based on fieldwork with workers in three branches of a major chain supermarket in South Africa between 1998 and 2002, the article argues that while the growth of contingent labour has re-segmented the labour market between three categories of employment, collective worker identification and labour activism have abided. Across categories, workers’ actions focused on justice issues of dignity, respect and recognition. However, workers’ collective mobilization also reproduced divisions of labour emerging out of restructuring of the labour market. Further, workers’ actions were localized to the individual branch. Finally, common concerns around declining capacity for social reproduction of all workers did not become an issue around which workers’ organized. The paper argues that the workplace remains an emotive site of collective worker identity for these service workers. However, it also finds that fighting exclusively for “industrial justice” may serve to deepen shop floor divisions of labour in these workplaces. It suggests instead the importance of combining the insights of the two approaches to labour revitalization by recognizing, in this instance, the strength of worker identity in the workplace, but also locating social reproduction in households and communities as integral to workers’ experiences of exploitation.

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Introduction

Restructuring in South African food retailing and the re-segmentation of its labour market has significantly contributed to the decline of union strength in the sector over the past fifteen years (Kenny, 2004b; Clarke, 2006). The growth of part-time and contract labour in South Africa's supermarkets parallels experiences in other contexts. And, debates over new forms of organizing have highlighted the potential of 'social movement unionism', particularly in low wage, contingent service sectors, to fight the erosion of workers' conditions and capacity for social reproduction brought about by such trends (Lopez, 2004; Turner and Hurd, 2001; Voss and Sherman, 2000; Clawson, 2003; Moody, 1997; Waterman, 1993; Webster and von Holdt, 2005).

This article examines collective actions among shop workers in three East Rand branches of a major supermarket chain. During my research between 1998 and 2002², workers in these shops embarked on a number of collective actions and forms of organization. These were generally small-scale and hidden from public attention; however, these acts drew on collective experiences as workers. Still, these expressions of collective resistance were divided among workers in different employment categories. Thus, the three significant categories—casual, permanent, and contract workers—each collectively but separately organized. And, in effect, their actions reproduced divisions of labour on the shop floor. Their increasing precariousness as household providers stood out as the most important cross-cutting dimension of workers' experiences as wage earners in these shops, and yet they did not organize around their common declining social wage.

The paper uses this case study of South African retail workers to engage with current debates on "revitalizing" the labour movement globally. In particular, I consider the divide between those who argue for a broader political unionism in order to strengthen workers' hand at the workplace and those who argue that the workplace is no longer a relevant site of collective organization, but rather that labour should organize outside a narrowing employment relation. I find that neither of these positions

²This paper comes out of my PhD (Kenny, 2004b). Research for it included 242 semi-structured interviews, 24 focus groups, and 59 life histories with retail sector workers from three branches of a corporate retailer as well as interviews with union officials, shop stewards, retail managers and analysts.

is sufficient on its own to provide direction to South African retail workers.

These retail workers offer an example of where strong worker identity abides, and must not be abandoned simply for prescriptive arguments about the changing character of class relations (Hardt and Negri, 1996). In an era of individualized consumerist subjectification, meaningful and resistant collectivities should not be eschewed, even at the point of production. Nevertheless, mobilizing these workers for “industrial justice” (Nissen, 2003: 146) alone may not work to transcend divisions on the shop floor. Rather, workers’ shared concerns of social reproduction seem to be the only means to overcome these divides. Thus, workers themselves must come to understand their common and coincident role as ‘community’ members responsible as remaining wage earners for an increasing burden of social reproduction under broader conditions of commodification of social life. Workers’ commonality rests in this very duality of labourer/reproducer, not as one or the other, and for these South African workers historical weight points to the workplace as the arena in which to recognize this potential collective identity.

What kind of ‘Social Movement Unionism’?

Service sector workforces have inspired increasing interest in ‘new’ forms of organizing. They have become important to debates about the effects of globalization on worker mobilization and on new organizing strategies precisely because they embody a new majority of workers who labour in typically low wage, low ‘skill’, contingent employment, often conducted by socially vulnerable categories of workers. Organizing contract janitors, low waged nursing home workers, or temporary grocery workers suggests a broader political unionism which can link workplace exploitation with experiences of commodification and economic insecurity within households and communities and can potentially mobilize a broader interest base than the specific group of workers affected, what Johnston (2000) calls in its expansiveness, the resurgence of labour as “citizenship movement”.

In these debates about the revitalization of labour, ‘social movement unionism’ has come to encompass a range of perspectives. Simplified, two positions can be outlined. The first one views social movement unionism as a call to broaden the political appeal of workers’ struggles and to democratize unions in order

to enhance the power of workers in the workplace. As Nissen insists, “Unions, thus, may become the job or workplace locus for a broader movement for a wider notion of justice in many spheres. But, they cannot *become* that broader movement, or primarily focus on the many causes beyond the workplace” (Nissen, 2003:147).

Much of this research directly engages the decline of union strength in the United States due to economic deregulation, the tradition of business unionism, and the harsh anti-union regulatory framework there (Lopez, 2004) although writers of South African trade unionism have also engaged with this position (Webster and Buhlungu, 2004). This strand emphasizes how trade unions should build alliances with other community and social movements, use social movement protest tactics, and generally frame workers’ rights in terms of social justice rather than narrow interest politics (Milkman and Voss, 2004; Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Turner, Katz and Hurd, 2001; Clawson, 2003; Robinson, 2000). From important successes with broader political organizing efforts, many analysts have promoted “comprehensive organizing tactics” (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004) which emphasize the importance of worker-led campaigns, dedicated resources for organizing, grassroots mobilization, and alliance-building to revitalize trade unions (Clawson and Clawson, 1999; Turner and Hurd, 2001; Voss and Sherman, 2000).

The second engagement with social movement unionism critiques a workplace/trade union focus. These authors suggest that in the current conjuncture, labour movements need to turn away from narrow trade union struggles and toward the vibrancy of local and global social justice struggles (Castells, 1997). Trade unions are losing their social significance as those in full-time, wage labour decline and as the employment relation is seen merely to discipline labour (Hardt and Negri, 1996). Workers should look elsewhere to link to broader class-based and social justice movements primarily through a more contradictory and complex reading of class subject than the erstwhile industrial proletariat (Waterman, 2003; Aronowitz, 2003). Other researchers show the potential of marginalized and contingent workers to organize through creative forms not based exclusively in the workplace or narrow employment demands (e.g., Tait, 2005; Louie, 2001; Waldinger *et al.*, 1998).

While both these directions provide important assessments of the political potential of workers, in the context of South African retailing, dynamics resulting from divisions internal to the workplace become both an explanation for collective worker identification at the workplace and a rationale for organization around social reproduction. South African retail workers show the effervescence of workers independent of formal union institutions but suggest the necessity of organizational forms *within* workplaces.

Labour Market Restructuring

A number of conditions have changed for these South African retail workers since the early 1990s, which predict the usefulness of new organizing strategies to the sector. The concentration of capital and the centralization of work organization in the firm have diminished workers' power as employees. There has also been a shift to the increased and regular use of multiple forms of contingent employment, which has divided the shop floor and weakened the trade union. With democracy, the institutional role of the trade union itself changed. Finally, increasing unemployment and household members' dependency on wage earners has exacerbated workers' labour market vulnerability.

Food retailing restructuring since the 1980s across different contexts has looked very similar. Indeed, these retailing industry restructuring trends have occurred within globalizing systems of food provisioning (Fine and Leopold, 1993). In the 1980s and 1990s, retailers internationally expanded the numbers and size of chain stores, concentrated capital through mergers and acquisitions, utilized new technologies of supply chain management, reduced inventories, and returned the risk of inventory maintenance to manufacturers and suppliers (Burch and Goss, 1999; Christopherson, 1996; Gereffi, 1994).

A small number of corporate chain retailers achieved increasing national market dominance through price competition and economies of scale and operation (Freathy and Sparks, 1996: 179) and/or through local monopolization (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 239). This strategy became hyperbolized in the "Wal-Mart model" of huge stores and merchandise volumes supported by deep supplier discounts enabling price undercutting, but also involving the geographical saturation of particular local markets (Klein, 2000: 133-135). Ultimately, retailers who could compete

through combined strategies of low prices, high volumes, large size, and extensive market coverage were those with the corporate clout to finance these economies of scale in a “battle of big spenders” (Klein, 2000: 140). As Klein and others have noted, these accumulation strategies have been supported by greater and greater retail capital concentration (e.g., Wrigley, 1993).

In South Africa, by the late 1970s, the biggest chain stores came to dominate the grocery market (*Supermarket and Retailer*, 1980: 29), and by the late 1990s, food retailing capital consolidated further through acquisitions. The top three companies now hold over 60 per cent of the total grocery market in one of the most concentrated food retailing markets in the world (Kenny, 2004b: 157-8). Consolidation not only increased the power of employers over workers as corporate head offices prioritized stakeholder value to individual branch operations (Interviews, former retail managers, 26 June 2000, Johannesburg; 10 May 2001, Benoni). It also led directly to restructuring in the stores where I did fieldwork. By 1998, the subsidiary that I studied had a new owner that cut store-level managerial levels and centralized decision-making to regional and head offices (Kenny, 2005a; Christopherson, 1996:171; Freathy and Sparks, 1996:192). Changing lines and duties of authority affected the trade union’s bargaining relations making it more difficult for branch leadership to negotiate (Interview, SACCAWU national office bearer, 30 March 1999, Johannesburg).

Critically, retail restructuring in South Africa has also centrally involved changing labour utilization. Across the world, with heavy capital expenditure, firms looked to reduce labour costs. Further, with new technologies of supply management came also the ability to refine labour use to cover more precisely peak trading times. Changing store formats also gave the impression of improved service at the same time that firms actually relied on increasing self-service and deskilled work organization. The combination of these features has generally meant an increase in part-time and contingent employment internationally in retailing (Christopherson, 1996: 172; Freathy and Sparks, 1996: 181; Kainer, 1998; Klein, 2000: 232-248; Tannock, 2001; Perrons, 2000; Walsh, 1990).

The South African labour market of corporate retailers transformed during the 1990s. Shifting from a workforce predominantly characterized as permanent and full-time in the mid-

1980s with a minor use of part-time and casual employment (Kenny, 2005b), food retailing has become marked by significant segmentation between permanent, casual and contract labour.

In restructuring from the late 1980s, South African retailers took advantage of the prior existence of casual labour as an employment form (Kenny, 2005b). “Casual” labour, or hourly paid “extra” staff, worked a maximum of 24 hours per week with no benefits and little job security. Retailers increased the use of this form of employment when they began extending store trading hours in the 1980s as part of their drive for greater profits with new formats. But, from the late 1980s, they began to use casual labour regularly throughout departments and shifts. One former retail manager explained, “Casual labour increased in the late 1980s to total flexible hours. Seven days a week. There was a move to staff scheduling....Retailers introduced a system of staffing valleys with permanent staff. Casuals were used in the peaks” (Interview, former corporate retail manager, 6 July 2000, Cape Town). Indeed, the history of trade union bargaining in the sector secured a standard shift for permanent workers, which in effect, led to greater use of casual labour in flexible shifts (Kenny, 2005b).

Official estimates put casual and temporary labour by the late 1990s somewhere between 17 and 20 per cent of the total formal retailing workforce, up from 11 per cent in the late 1980s (Central Statistical Services, 1998; Statistics South Africa, 2002).³ However, independent case study research has found much higher rates of casualization ranging from 45 per cent to 65 to 70 per cent at store levels in specific regions (Rees, 1997; Kenny, 2004a: 488; Clarke, 2004).

Retailers use casual labour to reduce labour costs and to effect temporal flexibility. In addition to the benefits of using casual labour in peak-times, casual labour has been cheaper for retailers. During the period of research, sector wage determinations set a premium wage on casual labour, but in practice casual workers earned the minimum in the sector. Wages constitute one of the largest overhead costs for retailers. A major chain spokesperson said with reference to casual labour, “[L]abour costs are

³Labour Force Survey 2001 (Statistics South Africa 2002) data extracted by Debbie Budlender. This is the lower figure. Thanks to both Marlea Clarke and Debbie Budlender for providing me with this data. This survey is a national household survey.

extremely high....So, we look at various ways of utilizing the system that is available to us [to reduce these costs]" (Interview, corporate retail manager, 13 July 1999, Cape Town).

Furthermore, in a bid to reduce unnecessary costs, retailers also outsourced functions such as shelf packing. Outsourcing reduced the direct wage bill and transferred labour relations and the costs of managing these merchandising workers to external companies. The retailer that I studied outsourced its shelf packers in 1996 (Interview, SACCAWU national official, 4 February 1998, Johannesburg).

Qualitative research suggests an increase in the use of externalized forms of labour within the sector (Clarke, Godfrey and Theron 2003; Kenny, 2004a). Contract labour in retailing is a form of "triangular employment", in which the worker employed by a labour broker carries out a service for the client, the retailer. In the stores that I studied, the retailer contracted out its employed shelf packers to two labour brokers who then supplied workers to provide this service. When this company was bought out in the intensified processes of acquisition described above, the new owner cancelled these contracts. Instead it demanded that suppliers bear the cost of packing their own products on the shelves, which retailers could do as greater market concentration and efficiency of stock management had the effect of channelling costs upstream to suppliers and producers (Mather and Kenny, 2005). In turn, the suppliers contracted labour brokers that provided workers to merchandise the stores.

South African trade unionism had also changed in this period, moving from its own form of social movement unionism, rooted in the specific conditions of anti-apartheid struggle (Von Holdt, 2002; Seidman, 1994), to an agenda of corporatist bargaining under democracy (Adler and Webster, 2000). In this transition, there is evidence of a growing gap between union officialdom and membership (Buhlungu, 2000). In retail, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA)—in 1989 becoming the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU)—organized black retail workers from the mid-1970s and was particularly militant in Rand branches. Retailers could not avoid meeting the demands of organized black workers in the sector, and wages rose dramatically by the 1990s. But, SACCAWU was hit by an economic downturn, by internal political divisions and by increasing

casualization of employment.

It turned its attention to casualization in the early 1990s when it concluded a series of “flexibility” agreements with companies in which the union traded temporal flexibility for job mobility under conditions of increased retrenchments. However, the union was unable to halt the expansion of casual employment. Despite repeated resolutions to organize and represent casual workers, during the period of research, the union continued to be ineffective and most casual workers remained outside of union membership and of collective agreements (Rees, 1997; Congress of South African Trade Unions, 2003). The union was caught between wanting to organize casual workers and wanting to eradicate casualization (South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union, 1999).

Furthermore, building the principle of flexibility into current labour legislation at the same time that protection was defined around the model full-time, permanent worker has meant that growing contingent employment has been *de facto* excluded from the new dispensation (Theron, 2005). Thus, while post-1994 reforms extended the definition of employee to sectors previously uncovered and to part-time workers, it also structured labour protections around an employment relation itself changing. Clarke (2006) argues that in the retail sector, the “re-regulation” that occurred with democratic labour reform has facilitated segmentation and made it more difficult for unions used to organizing around the standard employment relation to respond.

Finally, most of the workers in these shops lived in the same African townships, often the same neighbourhoods. They all faced declining economic conditions generally within their homes. While casual workers earned less individually and had fewer benefits, they were not necessarily categorically more economically vulnerable within their households. All workers’ households included multiple dependents and those more stable households had several income contributors (Kenny, 2001). This situation differed from the 1970s and 1980s, however, when households combined earnings from multiple full-time jobs available in the East Rand economy. Given the increasing difficulty of finding affordable housing as well as the increasing likelihood of unemployment in the late 1990s, rising to 40% nationally, household composition changed as economic conditions altered labour market options (see Beittel, 1992). Often extended kin members

moved into such “stable” wage-earning households, putting increased pressure on existing income earners. Workers across categories expressed worries over their declining ability to provide for children and for families in the local labour market.

Divisions of labour have been the outcome of specific historical processes of capital restructuring, union engagement and state policies. These forms of labour market restructuring suggest that trade unions have not successfully managed to defend workers through traditional interest bargaining for all of these reasons. The effect of restructuring on workers at the shop floor has been fragmentation and declining conditions; however, these processes also produced meaningful collectivities.

Shop Floor Divisions and Collectivities

Through processes of casualization and externalization of employment, by the late 1990s, three main labour market divisions came to define the workforce in the company branches that I studied: permanent, casual and contract employees. Permanent workers toiled throughout the store as cashiers, shop assistants, clerks, and supervisors. They earned a living wage with some benefits. They worked a standard full-time workweek with little variation in their schedules. They were unionized, and covered by national employment law as bearers of a standard employment relation (see Clarke, 2004). They were black women and men in their mid to late thirties.

Through militant struggle in the 1980s, permanent workers had won a strong negotiating position within the company before its take-over in 1997. They used this position to develop branch level relations with managers that allowed some access to decision-making through branch union structures and facilitated by a decentralized work organization where managerial authority rested in branches.

Casual workers were mostly black women in their late twenties and early thirties who were working for lower hourly wages than permanent workers. Most casuals worked at “Cash Bank” (the front registers) as cashiers and bag packers, but they also worked throughout the store in various departments, including receiving, scanning, administration, furniture, and on the floor in both food and non-food departments. However, they tended to occupy lower grade positions in comparison to permanents. They received neither benefits nor basic conditions of employment,

such as paid sick leave. Indeed, their average monthly wage of R575 was above the poverty line, at the time pegged at R353 per month per adult (United Nations Development Program, 2000: 55), but not enough to support multiple unemployed household members and themselves. Their working week varied, but on average they worked just over nineteen hours per week. They were more likely than other categories to work in “unsocial” hours on evenings, weekends, or public holidays. Casual workers did not belong to unions, and in practice they fell out of a number of possible regulatory sets of protections.

Casual workers were in a subordinate position to permanent workers. Permanent workers often treated them as dependents, and casual workers who had joined the union prior in the mid-1990s had begun to leave it by 1998 due to representation failures. Within departments, other black permanent workers or casual supervisors oversaw the majority of casuals, and managers were usually distant figures. This gap was further entrenched when many of the responsibilities for managing casual staff, such as scheduling, were centralized to regional office with the buy-out.

The third category within the labour market was contract merchandisers, or shelf packers. Most contract merchandisers were African men in their early to mid-thirties. Contract workers were directly employed by labour brokers, who had contracts of service with specific suppliers to fill the retailer’s shelf space with their product lines. Employed by many different labour brokers, their wages and conditions of employment varied widely. On average they worked a full-time week and earned barely a minimum living wage per month; some had benefits but most did not. They were not generally unionized. While they technically constituted “employees” of labour brokers under South African labour law, their tenuous situation of employment often meant that, in practice, minimum legal standards of employment were not met. They had no rights to negotiate their conditions with the retailer.

Technically, supervisory staff within the labour brokers managed contract merchandisers. In practice, most contract workers were left to do their jobs in the shops until there was a problem. However, they were monitored and, in fact, supervised closely by retail managers. Indeed, they were treated to particularly close surveillance of their movements and activities within

the stores. Permanent workers also reinforced this exclusion of contract workers within store relations through daily work interactions.

Three categories of employment defined through different relations and conditions, *de facto* institutional protections, and social composition structurally divided the workforce into permanents, casuals, and contract merchandisers. Hence with the growth of casual and contract employment in the 1990s, the labour market had become increasingly divided.

The 1997 buy-out of this company by another major food retailer in the process of acquisitions described earlier destabilized permanent workers relations with branch level management and reduced many of their lesser but important benefits of permanent employment. For casuals, this particular context of restructuring led to reductions in the number of scheduled hours and the hiring of greater numbers of casual workers. For contract workers, the new company cancelled contracts with more stable merchandising firms and threw the responsibility for shelf packing almost exclusively onto suppliers. After 1998, contract merchandisers conditions dropped substantially as more precarious labour brokers assumed their employment. For permanent and casual workers, these changes also occurred in the context of a growing gap between supra-branch union bureaucracy and the shop floor (see also Buhlungu, 2000).

Elsewhere I examine the terms of workers' collective claims against management (Kenny, 2004b). I argue that the three categories made different claims within these conditions. Permanent workers referenced a shared past of built-up respect and cooperation with branch managers facilitated by the union. Through metaphors of adulthood and age, they claimed their status as decision-makers within the workplace and simultaneously marginalized casual workers as subordinate "children" in this order. By contrast, casual workers claimed inclusion in terms of juridical employment relations in the workplace. In their very position as the super-exploited, they saw themselves as the true black workers through explicit contrast with other black permanent workers. Recognizing the tenuousness of their employment relation, contract workers claimed inclusion in the workplace order of their 'client', the retailer, based on an assertion of their skill. They emphasized a masculinized occupational integrity to counteract exclusion by retailers and isolation from the rest of the

workforce.

In the next section, we explore these divisions and collectivities through workers' collective actions in order to explore new organizing strategies.

Collective Actions and Organization

In workers' collective actions, we see how they experienced and made meaningful these structural divisions of labour. Despite the fact that there were no company strikes in the stores between 1990 and late 2003, there were many informal collective actions that occurred during the period of my research.

Permanent workers embarked on numerous informal, technically illegal, wildcat actions in their individual branches. These actions usually took the form of sit-ins, instigated by permanent workers, in which they sat in the canteen one floor above the shop, refusing to go to work until managers addressed their demands. These actions worked outside but not completely independent of formal branch union structures, and took their decision-making authority from shop floor politics, not union policy. In these wildcat actions, we get a glimpse of the terms around which permanent workers constructed their collective identities and the terms of difference circumscribing them.

The sit-ins of which I became aware were all sparked by management infringement of the relations that established permanent workers' status within the workplace. In one branch, permanent workers responded when a new floor manager conducted an additional security search of workers before leaving for the day. The manager's lock-in was illegal, and the workers could have chosen to lodge a formal grievance through the union. Instead, they reasserted their authority in branch-level decision-making by embarking on a sit-in demanding that the unit manager respect a prior informal agreement between them, which had rejected categorically a second search. During the protest, casual workers and managers worked the floor, as did contract merchandisers in their normal capacity.

The fact that casual and contract workers continued to work was irrelevant to permanent workers' struggle. They were aggrieved by the unilateral and humiliating assertion of one manager's power over them; they protested the breach of the informal relationship with management that established permanent workers' as participants in an order of mutual obligation and respect in

the workplace. Indeed, within a few hours of the sit-in the unit manager had worked out an informal agreement based on trust between the manager and the shop steward, which promised that the floor manager in question would be called to order and the practice barred.

In the context of work reorganization with the centralization of power to regional and head offices, security was one of the few remaining responsibilities of branch managers. But, centralization also meant increased head office surveillance over branch managers, and permanent workers understood that their branch managers preferred to handle matters to save face to head office. Permanent workers' wildcat actions, then, could be effective at maintaining relationships between permanent workers and branch managers in a holding pattern. Through wildcat actions, permanent workers chose to reassert their position within long-standing relationships with branch managers.

Thus, as their union held less institutional weight, permanent workers embarked on informal, wildcat actions outside the formal union structure although aided by branch ties. Permanents constructed a collective identity in their workplace relations with other permanent workers and union members. They fought for this collective identity on the terrain of branch relationships, however, not from the terms of their conditions of employment or exploitation.

In this and other wildcat actions, permanents affirmed two things. They asserted a collective identity bounded by branch union relations, if not always formal structures. By focusing on reconstituting their position within branch relationships with managers, permanent workers, secondly, localized their politics to their particular branch. While workers knew of the other branches and while they often had similar concerns, these protests never became inter-branch actions.

Unlike permanent workers, casual workers' actions met with little success, indeed only lukewarm attention from managers. Directed through permanent workers or shop stewards but not the union, these actions and appeals reinforced the privileged role of permanent workers to broker communication with managers on behalf of casual workers. Consequently, their informal yet collective actions underlined their weakness.

In two of the three branches, casual workers instigated their own collective sit-ins over the reduction of their daily shifts

from seven to four hours. When the new owner introduced a four-hour shift from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m., casual workers felt that conditions had dropped too low to be tolerated. A four-hour shift was barely worth the cost of transportation to get to the store. They would be earning R24 for the day, and they would be paying R10 to R15 to get to work. In both branches, casual workers organized a meeting among themselves, and decided to hold a sit-in in the canteen, modeling their action on that of the permanent workers. Neither permanent nor contract workers joined them in the canteen. However, the casuals asked the shop steward in each branch to broker communication with managers, and casuals in one branch felt that the branch union structure was supporting the action. Since it involved casual workers' scheduling, shop stewards insisted that regional office personnel managers be called.

In one branch, the casual workers were roundly defeated: "We tried striking and many were chased away". According to the workers, the shop steward told them that "there is nothing that [the union] could do" to change their shifts (Interview, focus group, casuals, 10 February 2000, Benoni). In the other branch, the shop steward was successful at getting an audience with the regional personnel manager for the casual workers. This manager argued facetiously that the company was only abiding by the law, which limited them to employing casuals for only three days. At the time, the Wage Determination 478 applied and stipulated that casual workers could be employed for no more than 24 hours per week, and 8 hours per day. Thus, the company did have the leeway to extend workers hours up to a maximum of eight hours per day. The shop steward reported, "The next day, they looked at their schedules, and *some* were scheduled for four days. But, they rejected this saying that they wanted to have some consistency [among workers]" (Interview, shop steward, 26 June 2000, Boksburg). In the end, the casual workers lost their demand for longer shifts. Technically, the company was following legal prescriptions allowing them to vary casuals' hours.

In an attempt to engage in collective action over reduced conditions, casual workers confronted their employer, who was not compelled in the least to negotiate with them, unlike with permanent workers. Because corporate restructuring had removed decisions over personnel, such as casual scheduling to regional office, casuals could not make a claim on branch managers to alter their shifts. The reality of their position was that they could

be fired and replaced easily.

Yet despite their weak position, casuals collectively rejected some casuals being given longer hours. They demanded that they be treated uniformly. Casuals formulated arguments of inclusion based on claims to the collective category of exploited black workers. However, this was the only issue which provoked a casual sit-in that I encountered. In another example, casuals organized around uniforms and again felt their subordinate position confirmed through both managers and permanent workers.

Casual workers put forward an unusual collective representation—facilitated by shop stewards—to management to request that they be “allowed” to wear the green and white uniform of permanent workers. In many discussions of their uniforms, casual workers made clear that wearing the green company uniforms denoted inclusion as “employees”. Indeed, countering permanent workers’ discourse of age stratification, casual workers said bluntly, “We are tired of wearing black and white. They make us look like school children” (Interview, focus group, casuals, 5 June 1998, Kempton Park), the very identity ascribed to them by permanents. The colour combination of black pants and white shirt, indeed, looked like the public school uniforms worn by “school children” whereas permanent workers wore company logo inscribed green jerseys, green pants or skirts, and white shirts. Hence, casual workers’ uniforms underscored their secondary status in the store by marking their bodies, by coding them as non-employees, and by increasing their vulnerability by having to pay for their own clothes.

This demand was met by confirmation of their lower status. In the end, the resolution brokered by the branch union representatives was that casual workers could buy permanent workers’ second-hand uniforms, at their own expense. Whereas permanent workers were given uniforms twice a year, casual workers, who earned much less, had to purchase them. Thus casual workers fought for identification as store “employees” in relation to permanent workers, but also ultimately lost their collective battle.

Their attempt to counter an image of secondary status marked through a hierarchy of age by gaining access to generic store uniforms, and an identification as employees, was undermined by what they saw as permanent workers guarding their protected insider status. Casual workers’ claim for inclusion

based on the abstract category of black worker also overwrote their vulnerable, feminized image; it is significant that this rare battle took place over an issue through which they struggled literally to have their bodies re-signified in the form of permanents.

Their fight for uniforms also suggests the contradiction within casual workers' experiences. They appealed to change their visible status within the stores, while they accepted as reality the constraints of the market that defined their material conditions. The fight for uniforms discloses the individualized, embodied experience of casual labour; yet it also represents an articulation of collective subjectivity in their common experience of subordination.

Contract workers also took up different forms of resistance that suggest a specific collective articulation of identity. They organized into their own branch committees to negotiate with store managers around their rules of interaction. Merchandisers felt that forming their own union of merchandisers would be impossible at the moment because they had many different employers and because of the strongly anti-union sentiment of many of the labour brokers. While many knew their legal rights at the workplace, these merchandisers did not organize around demanding their legal right to association.

These workers instead explored other means of organizing extending beyond the employment relationship. They organized to protect themselves *vis-à-vis* the retailer. Contract merchandisers in all three branches had organized themselves into committees to deal with problems in the shops. These structures operated as issue-based negotiating teams when contract workers felt compelled to approach store management. The committees operated completely independently of the branch union.

The committees operated to establish clear rules of procedure in relations between contract merchandisers and retail store managers. Merchandisers reported problems to the committees that would then take up the issues with store managers. Labour brokers were not to know about the committees for fear of dismissal. Thus their organization was unable to negotiate on their behalf with their individual employers over wages or conditions, partly because of their drastically eroded employment security. They organized outside the context of employee-employer relationship, outside the normal purview of South African trade unions. Indeed, some told me that the organization had in fact be-

gun to hold regional East Rand meetings to bring contract merchandisers together to discuss common problems within stores.

The contract merchandisers' organization limited their grievances to those concerning their movement and treatment within stores. A common issue for which the committee was mobilized was the "chasing" of merchandisers from store premises by managers. Their organization was relatively successful at getting those merchandisers who were thrown out of stores by managers allowed back in. They also approached management to establish rules around tea times and breaks, and to clarify rules governing their movement into and out of stores. Unlike permanent workers, the merchandisers did not instigate dramatic sit-ins, but worked through calling formal meetings with branch managers to air their concerns.

At other times, merchandisers collectively embarked on go-slows or boycotts of auxiliary services. Rather than embark on full collective actions, consistent with their weaker position within shop relations, merchandisers used informal collective forms of resistance to give muscle to their organization.

They physically stood in supermarket aisles next to their trolleys unloading and packing goods on the shelves. Customers came into regular contact with merchandisers, often easier to locate for assistance than shop assistants, and they assumed that merchandisers worked for the stores. In response to a contract worker being thrown out of the store by a retail manager, contract merchandisers collectively refused to assist customers. Merchandisers did not refuse to pack shelves, the job they were paid to provide the retailer. Instead, they focused on boycotting a service that they provided regularly to branches without acknowledgment.

Focusing their action on customer service, technically they could not provoke store complaints to their labour brokers for not carrying out their packing duties. As customers' questions and irritation began to filter back to branch managers, however, managers became cognizant of the awkward situation in which the merchandisers put them. The contract workers succeeded in getting the store management to allow the worker to return. Further, merchandisers' claims for procedure within stores centred on wanting recognition of their skill and contribution, including, in this case, for the level of service and emotional labour involved in the job.

Contract work was often fragmenting and individualizing, especially where many different labour brokers and sets of conditions operated. However, contract merchandisers organized, acted, and represented their actions as a collective enterprise, claiming inclusion as the respect-worthy male skilled worker in a rules-bound bureaucracy. Merchandisers, then, expected to be able to use their own collective organization to negotiate within the “workplace” (but not the employer) for inclusion on the basis of formal depersonalized rules protecting them from arbitrary, personalized, often despotic, interactions with managers. In a weaker position within stores than permanents, they did not embark on militant collective action, but rather used informal collective pressure to force store managers to listen to their demands.

Finally, in these examples of collective actions, we see how in acting from their particular collective identifications, each group of workers also reproduced divisions among themselves. Even where casual workers obtained the assistance of permanent workers, they felt their collective subordinate position reaffirmed. Nor did workers expect support from each other in their particular struggles. Thus, meaningful collectivities and divisions became simultaneously reproduced within these branches. What do these forms of actions signify for the potential for unified organizing?

Future Possibilities: New Organizing Lessons?

With high unemployment and company restructuring, low wage labour, including all categories of workers, clearly had relatively little labour market bargaining power vis-à-vis the employer. Thus, permanent workers and shop stewards tangibly felt the erosion of the power of their union to fight for improvements or even to maintain their existing levels of conditions of employment. It is significant that in the context of the codification of labour rights in South Africa’s democracy, in fact, even workers who were the ideal around which rights of association were constructed felt unable in practice to claim these abstract rights. Partly a result of servicing problems within the union, the tentativeness to make claims to juridical procedure and substance also resulted from the increasing (and more distant) power of a corporate employer more concerned with stockholders and the cost efficiency of branches than industrial relations.

In fact, workers in all three categories showed a greater ease of mobilization around “justice” issues of dignity and re-

spect, inclusion, and proper procedure defining interactions within the workplace than they did with contesting their declining social wage. Thus, permanent workers focused on maintaining informal relations with branch level managers. They protested around actions of management that infringed on negotiated and established informal agreements and relationships within branches. They did not, for instance, hold wildcat sit-ins around the reduction of staff loans and death benefits, the erosion of training and overtime, the removal of canteen services and subsidized lunches. Their declining social wage was precisely the arena around which they experienced powerlessness as labour.

Notably, then, growing economic vulnerability and a declining social wage did not reflect prominently in workers' claims or actions. Casual workers did make isolated attempts to contest the four-hour shift which would reduce their incomes almost below the cost of transportation for the day, but these struggles were not framed in broader terms by workers as fighting the deepening of their marketization. More generally, casual workers' subordination within the workplace led to claims and actions for inclusion and recognition within the category of "employee", as we saw with their struggle to get uniforms.

Contract workers also found it increasingly difficult to contest their conditions of employment. They realized that their fragmentation as employees of many different labour brokers made it difficult to organize within a trade union. They also faced the reality of anti-union sentiment of their direct employers in a context where legal protections would be difficult to enforce and fear of dismissal was great. Many of these men had longer histories of trade union involvement and knew their rights to association, yet were not willing to risk their scarce jobs. As important contributors to their households, they had a rare full-time job bringing in at least R800 to R1000 per month, and were loathe to lose it. Further, because of their outsider status in the stores, they were less likely than the other categories to find support from other workers. Contract workers, then, were in a particularly weak position. Yet they too organized collectively for "justice" against despotic control by retail managers. These examples show that regardless of employment category and structural fragmentation, workers similarly exhibited their willingness to mobilize collectively around social justice issues in the workplace.

Embedded in a broad and militant tradition of unionism, these retail workers have maintained strong identities as workers on the shop floor despite their fragmentation into various categories of vulnerability. Thus, permanent workers' collective identity grew out of their histories of fighting for rights to negotiate on equal basis with management within the workplace. A strength of casual workers was their reinforcement of a collective worker identity, formulated through the idiom of exploited black worker, despite the fragmentation and individualization experienced daily. And, the potency of contract workers struggles was their occupational identity (see Cobble, 1996) in the face of downgrading of their jobs through labour broking, which enabled them to organize across employers to defend themselves within stores. Therefore, the workplace must be seen as a location of potential power for workers with these local histories. This conclusion suggests the potential for mobilization of workers on the ground, indeed, possibly bypassing existing union structures unless the trade union comes to think more expansively about its role. Thus, despite, or perhaps because of, the re-segmentation of the labour market, collective worker identification and labour activism in the workplace have abided. Sustained workplace organizing remains important.

Yet the union's responses have been limited and fairly staid, focused on securing better employment conditions in a context of low bargaining power. The union negotiated annual basic wage increases for their permanent members but did not address losses to other benefits. The union also did not address concerns of contract workers, who were excluded as non-employees in a situation of limited resource capacity of the union. The union resolved to organize casual workers, a direction which became more urgent as at least two major companies cancelled recognition agreements in the period of research when union membership fell below 51 per cent because casual employment increased without the union organizing these workers. Most significantly, SACCAWU embarked on a strike in the company in October 2003 over the conditions of casual workers. It was a long-awaited union effort to address criticisms of marginalizing casual workers. Casuals went out on strike nationally, and the union ultimately won recognition of minima conditions of employment stipulated in existing labour statutes in the industry. Legal recognition of casual workers under the category of "employee", albeit

with important protections, nevertheless upheld their subordinate status in the workplace.

Furthermore, in the stores that I studied, the company had contracted out all casual workers to a labour broker in 2001/2. As a result, in the 2003 strike, in these stores, the former casuals were not protected against dismissal in the strike, and worked during it as, reportedly, did most of the other workers. The company showed dynamic capacity to play on workers' labour market vulnerabilities. Under current conditions, in aiming solely to campaign around casuals' conditions of employment, SAC-CAWU may unintentionally be reproducing and exacerbating divisions of labour on the shop floor. It remains to be seen whether workers and the union can build on the strike to construct a more transcendent worker politics, at least involving permanent and casual workers. These observations seem to lend credence to the focus of social movement unionism on political organizing and social justice framing to improve workers workplace bargaining position.

On the other hand, a focus solely on justice in the workplace also belied the limitations of workers' grievances and deepened divisions among them. A focus on industrial justice—in this case basic dignity—itself was not enough to break down divisions, for the moral legitimacy of 'dignity' in the workplace came to have different interpretations according to position within the labour process. What was tenuous fair treatment for contract workers was not respect for permanent workers. Secondly, workers' concerns of winning justice in workplace relations had the effect of localizing actions to the individual branch.

On the other hand, workers expressed common difficulties in the realm of social reproduction around which they did not organize. In so far as 'social movement unionism' pushes shop floor demands into the realm of broader political campaigns that inhabit but may extend beyond the workplace—a living wage, a forty-hour week, free primary and secondary education, better and cheaper transportation and other public services—unions begin to address the single most important commonality of these workers, their declining capacity for social reproduction. Here, labour works beyond the ultimate goal of bettering its bargaining position with the employer. It becomes a "citizenship movement" defending local communities and the public good (Johnston 2000). However, for East Rand retail workers such pur-

suits cannot rely on alliances with other social movements only. For workers to transcend deepening divisions they must be able to identify themselves as community members and workers. This direction may require exploring difficulties and anxieties around gendered subjectivities as mothers, fathers, partners, and family providers. It also points to facing the complexities of what it means to be one of the “lucky” few to hold a job. Thus, issues of social reproduction lie at the heart of a reconceived worker identity.

There are several lessons to be learned from South African retail workers collective actions. Place is important (Wills 2005). Locating processes of restructuring and giving content to workers’ experiences of divisions of labour help us to understand and to theorize different outcomes where similar union adaptations seem obvious (see e.g., Wills 2005; Wills and Simms, 2004; Peck 1996). Indeed, South African retail workers confirm how not only union structures, but also “legacies” of trade unionism (Lopez 2004) provide obstacles but also opportunities to new organizing. We are reminded of enduring questions too: what are the abiding divisions of labour; how do workers express and act on developed collectivities in relation to these divisions of labour; and, how do union mobilization strategies serve to transcend or reinforce these divisions? There can be no prescriptive decision to prioritize workplace or community. To invoke Raymond Williams, it is in the contradictions that new possibilities emerge. At the current conjuncture, commonalities in experiences of social reproduction may enable workers to transcend local divisions of labour; however to realize common cause as workers/providers, existing collective action in the workplace (not necessarily employer) may be an important starting point. Hence, we need to look beyond the shop floor without also abandoning it.

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