

Reconstruire le modèle politique? Les comités de centre commercial et les travailleurs précaires d’Afrique du sud

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Résumé

Cet article examine le comité de centre commercial, un nouveau modèle organisationnel introduit par le SACCAWU (South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union) pour faciliter l'accès aux employées précaires du secteur des commerces de détail et leur représentation. Les comités de centre commercial devaient fonctionner comme lieu de rassemblement permettant aux employées de ces centres de discuter de questions dont la portée dépasse le lieu de travail. Dans la pratique, là où ces comités (ou les réseaux informels opérant sous ce nom) ont opéré, ils ont fonctionné selon les structures hommes/femmes traditionnelles au sein du syndicat. Cet article est basé sur des entrevues préliminaires menées auprès d'employés et de délégués syndicaux à Ekurhuleni, près de Johannesburg. Il interroge les politiques de cette nouvelle stratégie, en termes de modèle organisationnel, de portée géographique, et de l'agence et de la subjectivité des employées. L'auteur révèle les efforts persistants de travailleuses) militantes pour confronter les conditions au sein de leur contexte élargi, mais soutient que dans la pratique, le mode d'émergence de ces réseaux peut aussi signaler la reproduction de hiérarchies marginalisantes pour les travailleuses précaires. L'article conteste l'argument normatif selon lequel il faut chercher des solutions de syndicalisation dans des modèles de forme ou d'échelle.

Reconstructing the Political?: Mall Committees and South African Precarious Retail Workers

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Abstract

This article examines the 'mall committee', a new organizational form introduced by the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union to facilitate accessing and representing precarious, women workers in the retail sector. The mall committees were intended to function as a space to bring together workers employed in a mall to discuss issues that extended beyond the workplace. In practice, where mall committees, or informal networks operating under this name, have operated, they have been carried by gender structures within the union. The article is based on preliminary interviews with workers and shop stewards in Ekurhuleni, near Johannesburg. It interrogates the politics of this new strategy in terms of organizational form, geographical scale, and worker subjectivity and agency. It finds an enduring movement by worker activists to confront conditions within their broader context, but it argues the way in which these networks emerged in practice can also indicate the reproduction of hierarchies which marginalize precarious workers. It argues against a prescriptive argument for finding solutions to organizing in models of form or scale.

Introduction

This article discusses a new organizational form among South African retail workers, the 'mall committee'. The South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) mall committees emerged out of concern and discussion within the union over how to improve representation of casualized, often marginalized, women workers in the sector. The mall committees, implemented in practice through the gender structures of the union, are designed to bring workers employed by different stores in the same mall together to discuss common problems and to provide a space where workers can raise issues that extend beyond workplace demands (see Kenny, 2009). The article is based on preliminary research into mall committees conducted in two malls in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan

Municipality, one in a regional urban mall and the other in a local township mall, east of Johannesburg. The article poses questions about the extent to which this scalar organizational form enables precarious workers to connect broader concerns, frequently relating to household security or to citizenship, with workplace issues, and it interrogates theoretically how we might understand the political implications of this incipient organizational form in these contexts.

There has been a recent and growing interest in consumption and mall development in South Africa (Beavon, 2004; Tomlinson and Larsen, 2003; Posel, 2009). The story of mall development in South African urban centres is similar to the expansion of shopping malls witnessed globally. Decentralization of shopping occurred in the 1960s as retailers expanded from the central business districts of towns to ‘white’ suburban residential areas. This process of decentralization continued in the 1990s as retailers increasingly relocated to new malls built in the wealthier northern suburbs of Johannesburg, and along the axis of the highway of the East Rand region into Ekurhuleni (Beavon, 2004). In this period, retailers “sought out the white consumer” (Tomlinson and Larsen, 2003: 44). More recently, and to great fanfare, mall development has spread into formerly black townships (Beavon, 2004; Posel, 2009) in recognition of the expanding ‘black middle class’ although since the 1980s marketers have recognized that retailers would have to begin to tap the so-called ‘black’ township market in order to grow (e.g., Bureau of Market Research, 1988).

For some observers of South Africa’s magnificent malls, the fluidity of consumption enables new repertoires of identity and carries the potential to undercut past rigid racialized or class divisions (Nuttall, 2008; de Vries, 2008; Nkuna, 2006). For others, deepening inequality is implied in these postmodern forms and marked in spatial distinction (Murray, 2004; see Harvey, 1989; Merrifield and Swyngedouw, 1997). According to this view, the mall is one symptom along with other “dreamworlds of neoliberalism” (Davis and Monk, 2007; see also Hall and Bombardella, 2005) in which “sanitized security zones” (Murray, 2004: 155) protect prosperous urban residents while excising the poor (e.g., Murray, 2004; Smith, 1997; Caldeira, 1999; Lipman and Harris, 1999; Marks and Bezzoli, 2001).

In South Africa, malls have been proven to be cultural productions, embedding aesthetic, symbolic and economic relations,

through encouraging consumption and privatizing space, but few studies examine how people actually use malls. This article explores how union mall committees may provide alternative spaces of sociality (see Miller et al, 2008: pp. 35-54), which could begin to define a politics unable or unwilling to deny class, yet also one which entwines multiple realms of subjective experience in the heart of neoliberal consumption.

Literature examining trade union organization and mobilization often advocates that unions represent workers' experiences in terms of the broader concerns of civil society and examines union capacity for alliances to social movements as a solution to the 'revitalization' of the trade union movement (e.g., Clawson, 2003; Milkman and Voss, 2004; Moody, 1997; Webster and Buhlungu, 2004; Webster et al., 2008; Chun, 2009). Some have interrogated forms of organization which encourage workers to be recognized as having multiple political subjectivities cross-cutting realms of wage labour and home. They examine women workers, service workers, and contingent workers organizing through community unions, workers' centres and workfare coalitions (Collins, 2006; Tait, 2005; Fine, 2006; Krinsky and Reese, 2006; Krinsky, 2007; Cobble, 1996). This research suggests that organizational forms dealing with categories and situations of non-traditional workers can often be more successful in providing a political voice to these workers.

Finally, the 'mall committee' raises questions which relate to broader political and theoretical debates on the changing character of the working class and its political form under conditions of 'neoliberalism' (Harvey, 2003; Hart, 2006; Hardt and Negri, 2004; Burawoy, 2003; Silver, 2003; Harvey and Williams, 1995; Naidoo and Veriava, 2005). From different perspectives, scholars have raised doubts about whether wage labour continues to produce a vanguard agent (such as the industrial working class), and if not, as the character of work and labour changes globally (Standing, 1997; Beneria, 2001), how a broader and more 'informalized' working class takes political form (Standing, 2011; Harvey, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 2004; Burawoy, 2003; Munck, 2004). Thus, in the heart of a mall, a neoliberal (privatized, commodified, casualized) cultural space, we have an opportunity to examine how contingent workers themselves may be reconstituting their politics. My work attempts to bridge the theoretical discussions outlined above. Mall committees

have the potential to generate new sites of solidarity within the privatized space of the mall. They have the potential to bring more contingent, women workers into the union and interject a renewed energy around broader political concerns, which in turn could serve to heal stark divisions among workers in the sector (Kenny, 2007). The committees may inspire emergent political imaginations that extend worker politics beyond workplace and employment dynamics. In the end, however, this article raises more questions which confront and challenge these hopes.

The article first outlines the basic dynamics of the retail sector and the context out of which mall committees emerge as an organizational form. It then describes the structures as outlined in union policy and as they exist in practice. It interrogates what mall committees may indicate in relation to organizational form, scale and worker subjectivity. By way of conclusion, we redirect our attention to exploring how this form may also reproduce notions of what is considered to be political and who is considered to have agency.

This article is based on preliminary observations from ongoing research on mall committees in Ekurhuleni beginning in June 2010, and is primarily comprised of interviews with several shop stewards. The project has been approved by SACCAWU, and contact with shop stewards and access to stores were facilitated by the union. Interviews have been conducted on site in the store, during workers' break times or in workers' homes in surrounding townships. This has been combined with informal discussions with ordinary workers from the malls. The project has developed out of my longstanding work with the retail sector around the casualization and externalization of labour. I have argued that divisions between categories of employment and investment by workers inclusion within work relations functioned to undermine political potential. I advocated shifting to regional organizing strategies to bring together contract, casual and permanent workers and ones that would articulate the commonality of their precarious situation over the status and hierarchical differences reproduced at work (Kenny, 2005; 2007). Thus, I was excited by the potential raised through mall committees. This article offers my reflections from initial research findings. The experiences of the Gauteng mall committees have also been broadened through examination of other mall committees in other regions based on SACCAWU presentations and worker educational literature.

Retail workers and union representation

While the retail sector in South Africa is composed of myriad small retailers, large corporate chains dominate the urban market (Bezuidenhout, Godfrey and Theron, 2003). In the food sector, for instance, the marketing firm AC Nielsen affirmed in 2010 that four main companies (Pick n' Pay, Shoprite, Spar, and Woolworths) compete for virtually the entire formal market share (*Trade Tatler*, 20 January 2010). These companies serve as anchor tenants in malls with long-term exclusive leases which potentially operate to keep out smaller competitors (Crotty, 2011)

The wholesale and retail trade sector has been one of the largest contributors to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the last ten years. In 2007, it ranked third after finance and real estate (19.6%) and manufacturing (16.3%) at 14.1% of the GDP, and it continues to be the largest employer in the economy, producing some of the largest gains in job creation (Ndungu and Theron, 2008: 19-20). While disaggregated data on the sector is difficult to trace historically, analysts have provided figures up to the early 2000s when part-time employment was calculated separately to show clear increases in part-time and casual employment as a percentage of total employment (Ndungu and Theron, 2008: p. 20; Kenny, 2005). Further, national statistics indicate that a large proportion of new jobs created in the sector are informal. By 2007, total employment recorded in the wholesale and retail sector had reached 3 million workers, with some 48% counted as informal (Ndungu and Theron, 2008: 68). In the context of persistently high unemployment rates, averaging 25% over the past ten years, contingent retail jobs are one of the few employment 'opportunities' available to job seekers.

Monthly wages for retail workers are low. While total earnings for individual workers depend on the number of hours worked, which can vary considerably according to the category of employment, a national cross-company qualitative study found in 2007 that part-time workers earned between R1500-R2000 per month, while supervisory, full-time workers—those shop floor workers likely to be earning in the highest bracket—made between R4000 and R5000 per month (Ndungu and Theron, 2008: 69-70; Kenny, 2005).

A rough calculation of union density in the sector based on the Labour Force Survey for 2007 indicates that about 13% of the total labour force belongs to unions (Ndungu and Theron, 2008:

73). In major chains these figures are reported as closer to 20-30%, although the figures are often disputed between management and SACCAWU (see e.g. Ceruti and Kenny, 2009). Union membership is highest among full-time employees, with casual and part-time employees experiencing poor representation from the late 1990s through the 2000s (Kenny, 2007).

In contrast to public sector or manufacturing unions, retail unions confront the realities of dynamics in the sector. While capital mobility does not carry the same threat as it does in manufacturing, low wage and low skill retail workers have little labour market and workplace bargaining power, particularly in a context of high unemployment; casualization, externalization and informalization of work has fragmented the workforce and spread workers throughout the economy. Moreover, a history of industrial unionism and a post-apartheid industrial relations regime centred on rights of 'employees' has reinforced union organizing at the workplace and in large chain stores, defending the representation of some workers while marginalizing others (Kenny 2005).

The combination of concentrated capital and powerful employers within malls and low wage, unevenly unionized workers in different employment contracts has made the retail industry a poster child for the effects of 'labour market flexibility' within the South African labour movement. Generally speaking, SACCAWU has been critiqued for its inability to organize 'casual' workers. The casual retail worker became iconographic of all casual workers in South Africa's labour market; it became a well-known figure, servicing everyone—middle class and working class—at the supermarket till, and has become synonymous with low wage, insecure employment. Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi (strongly) encouraged SACCAWU on numerous occasions to sort out its commitment to this workforce. At SACCAWU's 7th National Congress, Vavi advised the union that it needed to address its organizational difficulties, relating it to urgent concern within the Federation over the union's status:

For the first time ever, SACCAWU is 13 months in arrears on its affiliation fees. ... The inability to pay your affiliation fees reflects deeper and broader organizational problems.... The figures on membership of the union tell the story... [R]etail trade has one of the lowest levels of organization in the economy, at only around 20 per

cent of all workers. In contrast, union density in mining, government services and manufacturing is at least 50 per cent. The failure to grow the union in itself points to deep-seated problems...[T]he retail and hospitality industries have particular difficulties because of the shift to casual labour.... Clearly, this situation calls on us to develop new strategies both to drive recruitment of casual workers and to confront management about restructuring in the workplace (Vavi, 2002).

Debate within SACCAWU has raged on how to organize precarious workers. With its core membership in a declining yet active segment of the workforce, SACCAWU has struggled to organize and represent part-time workers (Kenny, 2007). Nevertheless, it has made efforts to overcome its difficulties organizing this segment of the workforce. It introduced recruitment of casual members and ‘casual’ shop stewards, lobbied the state against labour broking, and waged company specific strikes to defend and improve conditions of part-time workers. While gains have been won, the union remains relatively weak and the workforce divided. SACCAWU’s difficulty addressing the emergence of so-called flexible forms of employment, mirrors changes within the broader South African labour market after 1994, and it focused attention on how unions and workers could respond to effect organizational renewal (September Commission, 1997; Webster and von Holdt, 2005; Buhlungu, 2006; Buhlungu, 2010).

Secondly, SACCAWU has a long history of fighting to represent women workers’ concerns (Mashinini, 1991; LACOM, 1991; Appolis, 1998; Forrest, 2005). It has engaged in difficult discussions around the lack of women leadership within the union. The union’s gender work and union education point out ongoing discrimination and oppression against women workers in the workplace and home as well as deep-rooted sexism within the union against women members and leaders (Benjamin, 2009; NALEDI, 2006; Orr, 2003; Tshoedi, 2008). Indeed, SACCAWU’s gender activism and fiercely dedicated activists have played a central role in invigorating and influencing COSATU structures, policy and action. The issue of women’s leadership in unions is a longstanding one within the federation (Orr, 1999a; September Commission, 1997). Gender structures vary in unions, but generally have forums

at local, regional and national levels which adopt programmes, conduct political education, and advocate representation by women (Orr, 1999b). Gender co-ordinators sit as union officials. Gender representatives within affiliates also serve on COSATU gender structures to bring forward campaigns or resolutions. In practice, gender activists have reported there have been difficulties with implementing programmes being taken seriously within their unions and they have not had the time to prioritize their gender work within the union and their households. SACCAWU has led South African unions with its strong commitment to integrating gender into its politics, and much of this work has relied on the commitment of its gender activists (Orr, 2003; Forrest, 2005: 75-86; Tshoedi, 2008; see also Tshoedi and Hlela, 2006). Mall committees must be understood in this broader context, then, of organizational debates around how to include precarious workers and a separate but not unrelated conversation on how to empower women workers.

The Mall Committees

SACCAWU began discussing the idea of mall committees in the early to mid-2000s. This model of organizing was linked to historical geographical models of organizing in the 1980s in certain union regions, like the East Rand. In a document discussing the committees, the union recalled, “[t]his innovation is a reminder of the 1980’s call for the building of industrial area committees across the unions, which sought to build solidarity and unity” (SACCAWU, 2009: 2). In the 1980s, industrial area committees brought workers in one region in an industry together to discuss common grievances and mobilizing tactics. Linking mall committees to this legacy of organizing facilitated the adoption of mall committees as an idea within the union. However, not much concrete organizing transpired until 2007, when committees in several malls were launched. This happened through the initiative of activists within the gender structures of the union. In several malls across the country, the unionists brought a variety of stakeholders, including government departments, social movements, in particular the Treatment Action Campaign², and ward councillors together around particular social welfare concerns. Mall committees were bolstered when unionists took the project into an organizational change process facilitated by an international NGO working with a number of partners around gender and participation. In these workshops, gender activists

clarified political goals and received support for pursuing their strategies (Gender @ Work, 2008; Labour Research Services, 2009; Interview, 8 July 2010). However, in the malls on which the study focused, the committees no longer function as envisioned when launched. Having said this, this does not mean that the work of some activists has not continued informally. And, how it has continued is interesting to consider.

The mall committees were initially understood as a mechanism for better servicing union members, building solidarity among members and organizing new members. The union wanted to publicize itself as a conduit of mobilization, and as suggested above, mall committees became one strategy in a larger effort at union ‘renewal’. Formally, the structures were defined to consist of between five and ten members elected among “eligible shop stewards” within the mall. The size of the committee was to be determined by the size of membership within the mall. There was a limit placed on the representation of larger companies. As a union document explains, “no single establishment can have more than three members within the committee”. The committee was to be led by a co-ordinator and a recording secretary who would both be elected from the committee members (SACCAWU, 2009: 2). The committees were not established as constitutional structures, and some unionists were concerned that they not “create [a] life of itself outside of the Union” (SACCAWU, 2009: 2). As well, shop stewards serving on the committee were not meant to represent their mall committee in local shop steward councils. Thus, formally, the mall committees were to be made up of a limited number of members, a sample of already existing shop stewards from a pool of already-signed up union members.

Historically, SACCAWU has operated with two main constitutional structures: company councils and geographic regions. Of these structures, power resides within the company councils. Thus, a particular company will have a variety of structures ascending to national bargaining structures. This provided the basis for sound company organizing in the 1980s, but has meant that union structures are now firmly embedded in relations within each of the major chains. Arguably, it has reinforced a focus on organizing within major firms and a difficulty with organizing smaller companies. Mall committees were intended to cross-cut company bounded organizing – the intention being to enable organizing of

all shops within a mall. Hence, structures of mall committees were carefully (and politically) negotiated. The tensions within the union around the purpose of the committees are obviously an important part of this story, and remind us of cautionary discussions of the importance of internal trade union politics and structural dynamics to union ‘renewal’ efforts (see Lopez, 2004; Milkman, 2006; Fletcher and Gapasin, 2008; and Buhlungu, 2010 to view the broader South African context).

Nevertheless, the official mandate of the committees was defined to include recruitment, particularly of casual workers, workers in franchises and smaller businesses (SACCAWU, 2009: 3). Committees were to be used to generate solidarity for workers during strikes, and to assist the union to mobilize around SACCAWU and COSATU campaigns (SACCAWU, 2009: 3).

In practice, in those mall committees which do function, the gender activists within the union have convened meetings. Through these processes a very different vision has emerged. The meetings have occurred in ways that differ from the formally constituted structures. One gender activist explains her practice at a mall committee in the Western Cape: “[e]veryone is invited to the mall meetings *not just union members or shop stewards*. Committee members do not have to be shop stewards, opening the space for more women to take on some form of leadership role in the union” (Labour Research Services, 2010: 3; italics added). She put it this way: “[t]he Mall Committee offers a space for building worker solidarity across companies but importantly can be a comfortable space for women workers who can pop out during lunch times to attend a meeting or activity at the workplace” (Labour Research Services, 2010: 3). Thus, while formal structures along the lines outlined by union policy documents may not be operating within many malls, individual activists – many self-consciously gender activists – have done the informal work of convening meetings or providing assistance for workers around community concerns.

At the Ekurhuleni malls at the centre of the study, meetings do not take place, but shop stewards assist workers with community concerns under the name of the mall committee. One shop steward explains her role:

“My work...involves counselling, and I often assist workers with problems they experience in their private lives. I see my role as assisting in both the private and

work lives of workers. I also assist workers in accessing grants, birth certificates, and ID books by referring them to the relevant authorities” (Labour Research Services, 2007: 27).

This worker was trained as an HIV/AIDS ‘peer educator’ in one of the major chains (see Dickenson, 2010, for a broader discussion of peer education in South Africa). She used her training in that capacity to define the work of the ‘mall committee’ to include what she was already doing with peer education. Thus in her mall, she brought together the Department of Health and ANC ward councillor to host events on World Aids Day (Interview, 5 June 2010). Other unionists have focused on their role as educators. They have seen their role as one to develop young women workers politically.

One of the more concrete examples of assistance provided, involved the shop steward from an anchor chain in a mall in the Western Cape who entered into negotiations on behalf of the committee with the Mall Management for child care arrangements for workers involved in late trading. In this case, as in most cases of late shifts in retail, all these workers were part-time (colloquially still called ‘casual’) workers. The shop steward realized that most workers required childcare, so she took the issue up with the mall committee and began to organize with her company to give workers a donation and the mall management to provide them with the space. A compromise was reached: the mall management offered a venue, and her employer provided meals for the children during the shift that the worker was on duty. Workers were responsible for finding and paying for a child care worker. This model, however, has not been replicated at other malls, including those in my study (Labour Research Services, 2009: 15-16).

In an example from Ekurhuleni, workers at one company were concerned about a homeless boy they saw often in the parking lot of the mall. They approached the shop steward, and she used her political network within the Department of Social Welfare to investigate what could be done for him. The shop steward took the child to a social worker. In the end, she negotiated with her company to give him chips in return for bringing the trolleys back to the shop from the parking lot. Workers reportedly took turns having him sleep at their houses. As the shop steward said, “[w]e are parents. We can feel the pain” (Interview, 5 June 2010). Another issue which workers

raised as a concern in the area was an abandoned farm just beyond the township on which twenty families were living. There was no water, electricity, and or toilets. The families could not access social grants because no one had identity documents, and the children did not have birth certificates (Interview, 5 June 2010). In this case, the shop steward arranged for the local African National Congress ward councillor and a COSATU regional official to accompany her to the farm to speak with the families and assist them with registration.

Thus, diverse activities operate in the name of ‘mall committees’. Some of these have been implemented through meetings of shop stewards and workers, and others, as those in the research sites, occurred through informal discussion and networking. None of these activities seem to be functioning through the formal structures mandated by the union. While the reasons for this are still being explored, it appears through the preliminary investigation to be related to the overburdened work routine of active shop stewards, to the priorities of existing branch structures—for example, when company bargaining or strikes took precedence—and to the continued difficulty of getting workers from unorganized shops to take interest and ownership of the organizational space offered. Nevertheless, individual activists continued to understand and frame their actions as being part of the work of ‘mall committees’.

Reconstructing the Political?

What can mall committees tell us about our questions surrounding organizational form, scale, and worker subjectivity and political imagination? Does the organizational form, which cross-cuts company-based union branches, facilitate access to the union and participation by precarious women workers? Does regional organizing bring more workers together and broaden their demands? Do mall committees offer a space to bring together workplace concerns with problems of survival, daily living and providing for families? Do they allow workers to imagine alternative notions of freedom and belonging? In fact, we are left with ambivalent answers to all of these questions. This article suggests that rather than explore the ‘mall committee’ as a new form of organization or an ‘innovative organizing strategy’, in other words, as a cure, we may rather see it usefully as symptom of a political moment.

Organizing literature emphasises the importance of the trade union form to facilitate the organization and representation

of precarious workers. For instance, those advocating occupational unionism emphasize how it enables workers to belong to a labour market rather than a workplace (Cobble, 1996; Standing, 2009). General workers' unions recruit broadly from a place, and thus structure membership beyond particular workplaces and industries. Milkman (2006) discusses the key relevance of different organizing traditions between the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to their success in recruiting immigrant workers decades later. Others pinpoint the benefits of organizing in 'community unions', which function through recruiting and servicing workers explicitly as people having needs both at work and outside of work (Tait, 2005; Fine, 2006; Collins, 2006). Indeed, Tait (2005) argues that 'poor workers' unions' are more inclusive than either craft or industrial unionism because both have the tendency to set artificial boundaries between workers. Studies of workfare unions locate success partly in a form of organizing centring on a relationship (or lack of a formal one) of employment and bring workers from various occupations together (Krinsky, 2007). In this light, mall committees certainly offer an organizational structure that reintroduces a form meant to extend solidarity beyond the chain store or branch. In fact, 'mall committees' or work in the name of mall committees seem to function by relying exclusively on already existing branch-level formal structures, the strong branches within anchor chains, to provide most of the impetus for activities, including in some cases direct resources. In other words, 'mall committees' do not seem to have an independent organizational form. In this case, it may very well be the organizational form of mall committees introduced into traditional industrial unionism that makes it *more* difficult to bring workers together because it exposes internal union tensions and in practice, works best for already organized union branches and members. In a critique of the application of the concept of 'social movement unionism', Barchiesi and Kenny (2008) argue that models of unionism can close down what in time and place is actually contingent and fluid worker politics.

In the space opened by introducing the 'form' without real structural foundation, shop stewards have redefined the terms of membership and participation in these committees/networks. Through informal relations enacted by gender activists, workers support community members and more precarious workers in their

social concerns. Their political energies are neither directed toward interest politics nor immediate instrumental aims. The concerns raised seem to arise organically out of the everyday experiences of workers and community residents. Like other organizations of informal workers, their targets shift by issue: mall management, the local state or major chain managers. As one shop steward argued, “[s]ometimes you need to be creative. There are obstacles” (Interview, 5 June 2010). Worker activists have persisted in calling for meetings or in facilitating discussions around issues that emerge out of their experiences as community members. In fact, it is the non-work issues that have led to concrete actions by (what can really only be loosely called) mall committees. Thus, activist shop stewards continue to assist precarious workers, as workers and as community members. Workers engage broader political and social concerns regularly, without ‘revitalizing’ the union or adding these workers as members. A focus on the centrality of organizational form as an abstract object, then, may direct attention away from the more messy and incomplete politics of the everyday.

If mall committees really are ambiguous forms, what can we say about how these practices have related to the question of scale? The scale of mall committees was to be regional, enabling workers from a shopping centre to come together and to propel mobilization through a focus on commonalities beyond the workplace. Harvey and Williams (1995) note that the scale of efforts toward mobilization is crucial in determining whether workers will abstract from their particular interests to build movements which transcend localities. Yet ironically, with mall committees, workers and shop stewards have become ever-more focused on local communities while *workplace* structures lead out of the locality to national and sometimes global meetings for select shop stewards from anchor chains. Hart (2008) suggests that presuming the natural transcendence of scale from small to large, where all things ‘global’ are superior to local misreads the relevance of scale to politics (see also Gibson-Graham, 2002; and for extended debate, Tufts and Savage, 2009; Herod and Wright, 2002; Marston and Smith, 2001; Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000; Swyngedouw, 1997; Peck, 1996; Smith, 1984). Recognizing that scale both is produced and is productive is a very important insight of human geography. Much debate has ensued over how to conceptualize scale, and how scale itself can serve as a strategic praxis for labour movements responding to globalized capital

(Herod, 2001). Discussions around ‘labour’s geography’ have held as their context, then, efforts at union revitalization with a view to restoring agency to workers and unions. Service sector workforces have provided evidence of the conflicting and multi-scaled strategies of unions (Walsh, 2000; Savage, 2006; Tufts, 2009).

The issues raised in these theoretical discussions of scale, and pushed further in Hart’s intervention, do not suggest an assessment of one scale or another as the most effective way to strengthen unions. Instead they point us to the intersecting, mutual and contradictory production of multiple scales simultaneously, rather than a prescriptive narrative of ‘up-scaling’ or of localization. In these areas, mall committees reinforced the relations of shop stewards to some community members, some precarious non-unionised workers, and some local power brokers. Yet, this local embedding can be viewed as reflecting and refracting political priorities and repertoires suffusing other scales, particularly national ANC politics.

In the malls that I am studying, activity is mainly due to the energy and activism of one or two shop stewards. Workers and community members come to these women shop stewards with problems. The individual activist utilizes her political and resource networks to assist workers and residents. In these local areas, the networks tend to centre around the ANC ward councillor or regional or municipal state officials to deliver temporary assistance for immediate needs. Thus, mall committees suggest that the issue of scalar organization is not as simple as it may seem, but also confirms the relevance of scale for understanding the reproduction and transformation of power relations. In this case, a regional effort can ‘localize’ politics and yet be consistent with and, indeed, reproduce hegemonic (national) political directives: for instance around notions of the centrality of work for political inclusion (Barchiesi, 2011), consent to self-discipline through registration for social services as a means of entry into ‘the nation’ (Veriava, 2009), and the celebration of the cultural capital of communities through privatized social welfare facilitated by ‘volunteer’ community members (Samson, 2007).

This leads us to another issue which mall committees raise. Buhlungu (2003) has argued that South African trade unions have undergone competing pressures toward ‘organizational modernization’ since the 1970s. In particular, in the post-apartheid

context, unions have become more institutionalized and union leaders often more individualistic and careerist. In part, this trend emerged as unions had to engage in technical and technicist bargaining around restructuring, which meant that more highly educated officials were hired into the organizations. It also resulted from more insecure members feeling less inclined toward militancy, turning instead to trust in officials to represent them (Buhlungu, 2003:19). Union officials became ‘deal makers’ (Buhlungu, 2003: 20). In our case, I am not suggesting at all that SACCAWU shop stewards are ‘careerist’; these are highly committed individuals who genuinely want to work to improve conditions for those around them. However, following Buhlungu’s insights, we must ask whether (full-time) shop stewards in already-strong union branches unintentionally reinforce their authority (and a hierarchical authority structure) by becoming the access point to resources. Potentially, what is reproduced in this process is the power of the individual shop steward to leverage her connections. We must pay attention to how locally embedded networks may reproduce a politics that affirms the role of the state as protector, and the union as an access point rather than a collective voice. As Hart’s critique of Harvey argues, part of the hegemonic framing of South Africa’s ruling party is the idea of the state as protector and resource holder, accessed through the political leverage of trade unions,.

This caution leads us also to ask what kind of collectivities these forms of assistance create or whether they engender collectivities at all. What kinds of publics are built? What spaces for political imagination are opened? This examination of mall committees provides us with a sense that such forms may not only be framing concerns as ‘social justice’ in order to assert recognition for precarious workers as a category demanding inclusion, a point which Chun (2009) emphasises by introducing the ‘symbolic leverage’ of precarious worker organisation. While mobilizing workers, through their broader political concerns and by asserting the vital participation of precarious workers in defining these framings, is absolutely relevant, in the case of SACCAWU, it may be ignoring the underpinning semiotics. To put it another way, how a union generates the symbolic leverage of justice is as critical. SACCAWU has peaked interest in mall committees precisely through the recognition of the potential to incorporate precarious women workers into the union, but in its ambivalence, informality,

and contradictions, retail worker mall committees reveal that we have to ask other questions. They lead us away from a directed pursuit of a model, a prescriptive solution.

What is ‘political’?

The boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ shift in specific contexts and how these come to define legitimate realms of political imagination and action for contingent, women service workers participating in mall committees is instructive. Arendt (1958) makes what I have found to be a useful distinction between the political realm of public action and the private realm of ‘necessity’. Where public defined the realm of “action in a community of peers” (Pitkin, 1981: 328) with her image being the Greek *polis*, the household was the arena of economic reproduction. In her formulation,

“[t]he distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men [*sic*] lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs....The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom in the *polis*” (Arendt, 1958: 30-31).

For Arendt, political agency could not operate in the realm of necessity because it is burdensome and never-ending; it produces no lasting testimony to action. All that happens in this realm is consumed for use, for survival (Arendt, 1958: 13, 25). For her, the public realm of deliberation is that which is political. The public is that which is both common and visible: open to assessment (see Benhabib, 1996: 127-129). Politics is public debate and action, and it must be unencumbered by concerns of necessity (Arendt, 1958: 28-37). The French Revolution turned in on itself when the hungry masses became preoccupied by demands for survival (Arendt, 1963). As Pitkin explains, “Arendt is not protesting against our generic human helplessness but fighting against illusions of helplessness, the spurious naturalization of matters that are in fact subject to human choice and action” (Pitkin 1998: 192). Hence the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, by contrast, represented for its brief moment a pinnacle of political action and possibility because workers were not motivated by “their own nor their fellow-citizens’ material misery”

(Arendt, 1958[1951]: 494) but remained concerned with the broader political realm of democratic process, deliberation and action (specifically through the Revolutionary and Workers' Councils) (Arendt, 1958[1951]: 497-502).

Arendt's division is useful not because of the bifurcation it produces. Here there are a host of feminist critiques of her separation of public and private spheres and discussions of whether she really meant that 'action' was not possible in private or whether matters economic could not become political (Benhabib, 1996; Pitkin, 1998; 1981; Fraser, 1989; 1997; Butler and Scott, 1992; Brown, 1995)³. Rather, it is useful in how it alerts us to the symbolic logic of what is deemed to be 'political'. In gender activists' politics, we can see a political logic operating. Those freed from the degradation of survival can move and operate as political agents. They bring into public discourse and awareness, the needs of precarious workers beyond the workplace. But what are the consequences for those who remain tied to these needs, whose main action is to request assistance from the shop stewards? These workers appear, using Arendt's equation, as dependents, not peers. This form of 'assistance' does not seem to activate those seeking assistance.

Thus while engaging with concerns extending beyond work, do mall committees reproduce the notion that the workplace remains the space of agency alone (see Kenny, 2007)? Casual workers remain the vulnerable poor, located at the margins of inclusion; the state, the employer or the union, the source of all power to be lobbied. And, as Brown (1995) might remind us, by engaging in these relations we reproduce embedded divisions of subordination, of subject and agent. In this case, the full-time, 'permanent' worker remains the active agent bringing help vis-à-vis her own security to the casual worker, desperate in her need.

Mall committees raise important questions. Rather than simply prescribing specific form, scale, or political demands to claim social justice organizing, we are instructed to pay attention to the political logics of the actually existing relations. Union renewal efforts themselves produce tensions which may reinforce old ideas about organizing at the same time that they open new potentialities. This is a complex tale, of which only one element, mall committees, is discussed here. But rather than oppose form to agency, I want to suggest that the immanence of organizational form can be examined through scrutiny of how workers define what is political. These are

also the logics of agency and of need. Thus, forms of organizing and worker political repertoires may presume agency to be located within one constituency, while subordinating other constituencies. In two dimensions, then—the limits set by the formal model of mall committees within the union *and* in the informal daily work of gender activists—may we see the potential disciplining of precarious workers as political actors. The unintended consequences may be to reproduce the divisions that have been reinforced over a longer history of the union’s inability to accommodate precarious workers. To reconstruct the political requires us to look for the potential openings and shifts within workers’ and unions’ efforts even as relations are reproduced. In the case of mall committees, it lies in where precarious workers seize opportunities and how and whether shop stewards and the union enable new networks to emerge from and within organizational forms, directions this research will follow. These malls, indeed, become more than arenas of alienated consumption; they may very well be the territory over which political imaginations are fought, re-inscribed and expanded.

Endnotes

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2. The TAC is a social movement focusing on campaigning around issues of relevance to people with HIV/AIDS and TB.
3. As Brown (1995: 50) puts the impossibility of separating the public and the private, “[u]nlike Arendt, these spaces [the ‘political space’] cannot be pristine, rarified, and policed at their boundaries but are necessarily cluttered, attuned to earthly concerns [i.e., those of ‘necessity’] and visions, incessantly disrupted, invaded and reconfigured”.

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