

Informality and Casualization as Challenges to South Africa's Industrial Unionism: Manufacturing Workers in the East Rand/Ekurhuleni Region in the 1990s

FRANCO BARCHIESI

Abstract: The paper addresses informalization processes driven by layoffs, casualization, and outsourcing and their implications for workers' agency. The empirical focus is on the metal engineering, glass, and paper industries in the East Rand, South Africa's industrial heartland. The author argues that growing job precariousness, the expansion of casual work, the increasing stratification of the labor market, and steadily high unemployment rates represent a hollowing out of an earlier promise of liberation politics, which posited wage labor as the vehicle of social citizenship—i.e. decent living conditions, protected jobs, and social provisions—in a democratic South Africa. Present realities rather suggest an erosion of the socially integrative role of waged employment. It also questions the common binary opposition between “formal” and “informal” sectors that associates the former with inclusion and the latter with marginality. Furthermore, in the author's view the reconfiguration of the meanings of waged work has eroded the socially emancipative role of organized labor. The possibilities and prospects for collective organizing on the basis of wage labor identities are limited to the extent that casualization and informalization undermine workplace-based organizations. It is, therefore, important to consider forms of social emancipation that transcend an exclusive focus on waged employment. The disarticulation of the working class, in fact, is not merely weakening work-based identities, but also creates new spaces for social agency and contestation. The paper stresses that focusing on the strategies and discourse of ordinary workers is more politically productive than mainstream definitions of informality that emphasize capitalist domination or state rationality. Rather than simply representing disempowerment and vulnerability, informality also creates conditions for political possibility.

Introduction

The labor movement was a protagonist in the South African liberation struggle. Hundreds of thousands of black workers saw in trade union militancy not only a tool to improve wages and working conditions, but a promise to redeem wage labor from injustice and abuse. Under regimes of racial segregation, African workers had in particular experienced waged employment as a precarious condition underpinning managerial despotism in the workplace and the denial of social and political rights in society at large.¹ Coercive systems of labor migration, insecure contract occupations, racially defined residential spaces of inferior quality,

Franco Barchiesi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of African-American and African Studies at the Ohio State University. From 1996 to 2002 he has taught in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. His latest book (co-edited with Tom Bramble) is *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the 'New South Africa'* (2003).

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/pdfs/v11i2-3a5.pdf>

and the lack of social benefits defined wage labor as a reality of indignity for the black majority of the South African working class. Trade union struggles announced a radically alternative meaning of employment, turning working for wages into a vehicle of solidarity, social stability, and claims for socioeconomic rights seen as necessary complements to a new democracy.²

After the first democratic elections of 1994, however, the redemptive promise of wage labor has continued to confront an uncomfortable reality of persistently high unemployment rates and a growing casualization of jobs. The intrusion of an illegitimate state in the everyday lives of workers no longer determines, as in the past, employment precariousness. Nonetheless, the economic liberalization that, under the government of the African National Congress (ANC,) has accompanied political liberation, did not prove conducive to the creation of stable jobs with benefits, and has indeed often expanded insecure occupations. The precariousness of waged employment has negatively affected the identities and strategies of the labor movement, undermining collective solidarity, and citizens' access to social provisions.

The post-apartheid labor market appears as highly stratified: approximately one third of South African workers are still in permanent formal jobs, one third are in casual, intermittent, self-employed, and informal occupations, and one third are long-term unemployed.³ Among the unemployed, particularly difficult is the position of residents in the rural areas and the former "homelands," who lack meaningful economic opportunities and survive through remittances from employed relatives or very limited, means-tested government grants, which by now cover 25 percent of the South African population.⁴ In South Africa's tradition of industrial unionism, formal employment is required to belong to labor organizations. Many unions, however, are reluctant to deploy resources to organize casual and informal workers, whose shifting occupational fortunes do not make them reliable dues-paying union members.⁵

In this paper I examine how South African workers have experienced the hollowing out of the post-apartheid emancipative promise of waged work by focusing on the East Rand, the country's manufacturing core. During the 1990s, the region, reorganized in 2000 into the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, has experienced rapid productive and labor market changes in an increasingly competitive scenario. Large conglomerates, which have historically dominated the area, used layoffs, outsourcing, and contingent employment in response to the pressures of market liberalization. In the 1980s, the East Rand had been a stronghold of black union militancy as part of widespread opposition to apartheid. Support for unionization mostly came from migrant workers, the most exposed to the oppressive and precarious realities of the apartheid workplace. The economic restructuring of the 1990s impacted, therefore, on a class composition that specifically embodied the hopes and expectations of wage labor in the "new South Africa."⁶ In the 2000s, the East Rand somehow bounced back, experiencing a renewed industrial growth that was, however, premised on a more dispersed and unstable geography of production, where a growing number of workers are employed in small-medium enterprises, often with limited benefits, insecure employment, and no contractual protections. They often constitute a gray area where the boundaries of formal and informal production become hazy and undistinguished. As a result, the region reflects a broader reality where employment is hardly conducive to social inclusion and citizenship. Rather, it produces new forms of poverty and inequality. A study by the Human Sciences Research Council found that two thirds of employed workers in South Africa can be defined as "poor."⁷

The paper is based on research I conducted between 1999 and 2001 in East Rand plants with histories of African grassroots union organizing dating back to the anti-apartheid struggle. I visited three metal-engineering, two paper, and two glass factories, and interviewed in a semi-structured format a total of 140 workers, almost all blacks, the vast majority of which were African males.⁸ My choice to focus on core, relatively stable working-class communities, rather than workers already employed in informal jobs, allowed me to evaluate casualization and informalization as processes that develop over time across transformations affecting what are usually considered full-time, regular occupations. The study also indicated that workers do not merely suffer the degradation and fragmentation of waged employment as disempowered victims. Instead, they are able to strategize within South Africa's changing world of work and autonomously signify the contrasts between wage labor's old promises and its present uncertain realities.

At the time of my research, the three metal-engineering companies were undergoing deep restructuring processes that, largely driven by changing market conditions, led to job losses and an increasingly contingent workforce. One of the companies, Kelvinator, an electric appliance manufacturer in Alrode (Alberton) employing about 1,200 workers, eventually shut down. The glass and paper companies in the study were also facing increasing market competition. These two sectors are historically dominated by a few large firms, which restructured largely through technological innovations that adversely impacted on employment conditions. All the industries investigated are mostly organized by unions belonging to the ANC-allied Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a labor federation with deep roots in radical mobilization under apartheid. Respondents for this study were usually members of the Chemical, Energy, Print, Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU) in the glass and paper companies, and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) in the metal and engineering plants. During the 1990s, both unions have suffered from organizational difficulties and membership losses, which leave current prospects of recovery uncertain.

In the first two decades of post-apartheid democracy, South African mainstream academic conversation and policy debates have looked at issues of poverty and social inequality with an emphasis on the country's labor market and waged employment scenarios. Various analysts and observers have constantly argued that unemployment is a primary determinant of poverty and, consequently, access to waged jobs is a necessary, albeit not always sufficient, condition for effective social inclusion.⁹ Their recommendations are often phrased in terms that morally praise individual industriousness and initiative, stigmatizing "dependency" on public spending "handouts."¹⁰ This argument has gained authoritative institutional recognition in President Thabo Mbeki's image of "two economies," one formal and one informal, uneasily coexisting and underpinning social inequality. Mbeki's two economies thesis juxtaposes "an advanced, sophisticated economy, based on skilled labour, which is becoming more globally competitive" to "a mainly informal, marginalized, unskilled economy, populated by the unemployed and those unemployable in the formal sector," which "risks falling further behind, if there is no decisive government intervention."¹¹ Such scholarly and political interventions reflect a post-apartheid official discourse that has come to privilege binary oppositions between categories like "formal" and "informal" sectors, "typical" and "atypical" workers, "employed" and "unemployed" citizens, social "inclusion" and "exclusion." In each coupling, the first term

normatively denotes virtue and normality, while the second characterizes social pathologies and policy problems. The government's discursive articulation of South Africa's "two economies," therefore, serves to characterize the second one—being the target of "decisive government intervention"—as a maladjusted residue of market-based modernization.¹² The "two economies" thesis, however, does not problematize the fact that decent, secure jobs with benefits are by now limited to shrinking enclaves, while the proliferation of informal occupations is powerfully connected to strategies of corporate restructuring and decentralization of production. A policy discourse that premises social citizenship on labor market participation, rather than on the need to find alternatives to growing household reliance on low-wage unprotected jobs, contributes to such omissions.

The idealization of wage labor in the post-apartheid policy discourse aimed to resonate with the promise of working-class emancipation in past labor and popular struggles, but in the end, it did not reflect a reality where, throughout the democratic transition, stable waged employment with benefits has steadily declined. In mid-2009, the country's official unemployment rate as measured by Statistics South Africa stood at more than 23 percent of the economically active population (EAP). Since 2004, however, official statistics have conveniently excluded discouraged jobseekers from the EAP. Should they be counted, the unemployment rate would easily climb to more than 30 percent. In the mid-2000s, 65.8 percent of the unemployed aged 25 to 34 and 37.9 percent aged 35 to 44 had never worked in their lives.¹³ But South Africa's problems with waged employment are not confined to joblessness; they are also reflected in the growing share of temporary and casual occupations. Aided by the fact that social grants do not cover working-age unemployed or underemployed citizens, casualization is swelling the ranks of the working poor. Buoyant economic growth in the mid-2000s has not reabsorbed the permanent jobs sacrificed to industrial restructuring in the previous decade, and new waves of layoffs have accompanied the deep recession of 2008 and 2009, the most serious since the end of apartheid. The stratifications of the South Africa labor market no longer reflect institutional racial segregation, but are reproduced through a wide variety of non-standard employment contracts, which, under the pretenses of impersonal market objectivity, amplify the precariousness of most workers' lives. As the relations between wage labor and social inclusion have become frail and hollow, labor market inequalities are particularly affecting the African majority of the economically active population. For them, the concept of informality reflects both a degradation of existing jobs on offer in the labor market and a range of alternative coping strategies developed in response to poor employment prospects. The next section will explore the intersection—vital to grasp what "informal" means in the post-apartheid world of work—of these two aspects, one of which refers to productive restructuring while the other pertains to workers' agency.

Informality, Precariousness, and the Fading Promise of Wage Labor in Post-apartheid South Africa

After 1994, the alliance between the ruling ANC and COSATU expressed ambitions for a "developmental" state, embodied in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), in response to widespread expectations for socioeconomic justice and redress. Integral to the

post-apartheid project were corporatist-styled policymaking institutions—especially the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC)—for tripartite bargaining among representatives of the government, business, and labor. The system envisaged a participative social compact aimed at job creation, the protection of workers' rights, and inclusive social security.¹⁴ Labor representation was, however, confined to trade unions and therefore tended to exclude casual and informal workers. Moreover, working-class influence on state policies found a further barrier in the government's program of economic liberalization and public spending thrift contained in the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. GEAR foreclosed radical redistributive options, encouraged labor flexibility as an avenue to job creation, and left the expansion of formal employment to the operation of market forces.

Policymakers indeed shared the priority of restoring macroeconomic fundamentals and private investor confidence undermined by international isolation, socioeconomic disruption, and low productivity under apartheid.¹⁵ Analysts and politicians argued that most unemployed workers had poor skills that made them unsuitable for the competencies required in high-end globally competitive productions.¹⁶ The only occupations they saw feasible for most jobseekers in South Africa's "labor surplus" economy were, therefore, low-wage positions with reduced security and limited collective bargaining protections.¹⁷ COSATU rejected GEAR as "neoliberal" and clung onto its collective bargaining protections, but economic liberalization nonetheless envisioned the informalization of work as a policy response to the country's employment crisis. It also made clear that the social pact based on the creation of decent jobs would apply only to a minority of workers, becoming therefore an increasingly feeble echo of old struggles to redeem wage labor. In view of the government's responsibilities in reproducing a hierarchical world of work, finally, Thabo Mbeki's lamentations on the state of the "second economy" sounded rather paradoxical.

In 1995, 69 percent of the EAP was employed full-time; by 2001, the figure had declined to 49 percent. Over the same period, part-time, casual, and informal occupations rose from 14 to 31 percent.¹⁸ Up through about 2005, employment in "informal" enterprises was hovering between 13 and 17 percent of the total workforce.¹⁹ The economic weight of businesses defined as "informal" has kept growing throughout the 1990s decade of liberalization and deregulation, coming to encompass—precise figures on the matter are notoriously hard to come by—between 16 and 40 percent of the gross domestic product.²⁰ Massive job losses in the second half of the 1990s had different impacts across racial groups, but they revealed the particularly low absorptive capacity of formal occupations for low-skill African entrants. In fact, according to Haroon Borat between 1995 and 1999 African employment has grown by 9.94 percent, compared to an African EAP growth of 25.5 percent, resulting in an employment absorption rate of only 25.07 percent.²¹

As low-skill African workers found it exceedingly difficult to land in regular jobs, corporate outsourcing and subcontracting provided alternatives in myriads of non-union small and micro enterprises that operated along an increasingly uncertain boundary between formal and informal. Equally important in the decentralization of production was the shift of labor recruitment towards temporary employment agencies ("labor brokers"), which bring their own employees to work in companies that no longer employ them directly, thus further fragmenting

employment contracts and collective bargaining coverage inside workplaces.²² Under the impulse of labor brokerage, casual, fixed-term, part-time, and “homework” arrangements are on the rise across the whole occupational spectrum, as shown by studies that also emphasize the disparities between temporary and permanent workers in wages, benefits, and working conditions.²³

The South African evidence, therefore, seems to indicate that changing corporate strategies, a business-friendly policy environment, and growing working-class poverty are decisive features in the expansion of the informal economy.²⁴ The scenario contrasts to some extent with what scholars often observe in the rest of Africa, where informality is a tool with which communities—which may or may not be captured in the production cycles of domestic or international capital—respond to macroeconomic adjustment.²⁵ South Africa seems rather to reflect the reality of older industrial societies where informality is shorthand for the growing precariousness of waged workers made profitable at the cost of growing vulnerability and exploitability.²⁶ Rather than eliciting the entrepreneurship and the resourcefulness of the poor, therefore, the informalization of production underlies daily socioeconomic duress, deepened by inadequate social grants and the governmental injunction that virtuous and empowered citizenship requires economic activity rather than claims for “handouts.”

According to Devey, Skinner, and Valodia, if “informal” work is defined not in terms of the nature of the employer (registered or unregistered) but according to the types of jobs and whether they come with legal provisions, statutory benefits, and protections, in South Africa formality and informality tend increasingly to overlap.²⁷ In fact, 44 percent of “informal” workers (80 percent of whom have no written employment contract) are in permanent relations with their employers, while 16 percent of “formal” employees are not. More and more “informal” workers are hired as casuals and subcontractors by registered enterprises, even in manufacturing sectors where the externalization of functions was once limited. While almost 90 percent of informal workers have no company-based retirement coverage (and in South Africa there is no national state-subsidized retirement system), this also applies to one third of formal employees. Finally, 44 percent of formal workers, but only 8.4 percent of informal ones, are members of trade unions.

The South African case ultimately points at the limitations and quandaries of definitions of formality and informality that primarily rely on the economics of the firm or on the sociology of labor markets. It also provides a much broader view of informal work than in mainstream definitions centered on its “extra-legal” juridical status.²⁸ The informalization of work is rather revealing of the erosion of the “centrality of the labour contract as the foundation of the social order” in a context where, nonetheless, work remains central to the official imagination of what being a full citizen means.²⁹

The profound and complex connections between formal production and informal work also belie the dualistic view expressed in the “two economies” thesis, as well as exposing its simplistic, ideologically biased understanding of social exclusion. Scholars inspired by the “chronic poverty” paradigm reject the idea that a clearly defined line separates the included and the excluded depending on whether they have a real job or not.³⁰ Such a paradigm can surely have normative implications as it teaches the poor to conduct themselves as workers-in-waiting, accept corporate power and the labor market as naturally objective sources of value,

direct their desires towards job seeking, and stigmatize claims for redistributive social grants. Dualist arguments ignore, however, the role waged employment and labor market inequalities play in reproducing the exclusion and poverty of those for whom a job in the unstable divide between formality and informality amounts to a precarious social existence.

The East Rand Working Class in Flux: Employment Change and Industrial Restructuring in the 1990s

Since the mid-1970s, the East Rand (now the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality) has been a stronghold of the South African labor movement. The unionization of a rapidly growing African working class, largely made of contract migrants from apartheid's rural "homelands," accompanied the rise of the region as the country's manufacturing core. During the 1980s, workers' struggles in the East Rand tended to transcend workplace-based demands, a terrain privileged by early black trade unions, and join community movements fighting for housing rights and basic social services and against apartheid local governments and the political disenfranchisement of the majority.³¹

The economic crisis of the apartheid system during the 1980s also contributed to the gradual decline of manufacturing. In the 1990s, layoffs became generalized: approximately eighty thousand manufacturing jobs were lost in the East Rand between 1988 and 1999.³² The decline of waged employment undermined hopes and expectations for comprehensive social change woven in earlier labor struggles and dealt severe blows to workers' organizations. For example, the country's main industrial union, COSATU-affiliated NUMSA, lost 45 percent of its East Rand members between 1989 and 1999. The downturn in the local industrial economy became more pronounced with the post-1994 economic liberalization, which facilitated further factory closures, workforce downsizing, and casualization.³³ Service sectors, especially retail, conversely, expanded: by the early 2000s, up to 65 percent of East Rand retail workers were hired on a contingent basis.³⁴ By 1999, 44.3 percent of the East Rand workers were employed in services, while manufacturing had plunged to 32 percent from the above 50 percent figures of the 1970s.³⁵ Unemployment, which soared from 32.2 percent in 1996 to 40.4 percent in 2001, facilitated the spread of precarious jobs.³⁶ Throughout the 1990s, downsizing mirrored the outsourcing of production in sectors like metal, engineering, chemical, glass, and paper. Small companies, largely non-union, have proliferated especially in production segments that do not require substantial capital investment and overhead. The use of "labor brokers," finally, played a significant role in the casualization of employment.

The companies I researched reflect the type of challenges faced by stable, unionized working-class constituencies in the area. Union Carriage and Wagon (UCW) is a manufacturer of railroad transport equipment that has seen its headcount fall from 800 to 150 employees between 1997 and 1999, largely as a result of the exhaustion of short term contracts for overseas markets and the government's continuous neglect of domestic public transportation. Kelvinator, a manufacturer of electric household appliances, was liquidated in 1999, which meant the loss of twelve hundred jobs. In June 2000, a competitor, Defy, bought the company's physical assets and decided to transfer production to the largely rural Ladysmith area, once an "industrial decentralization" point subsidized by the apartheid government and now a low-

wage labor reservoir amidst massive unemployment. Defy hired approximately 250 workers there, with remunerations as low as one third of the old Kelvinator levels.³⁷ Companies in the glass industry (Consol Glass and MB Glass) and in paper products (Nampak Corrugated, Sappi Enstra) are largely subsidiaries of vast conglomerates that, in a highly vertically integrated production process, have also heavily suffered the impact of layoffs.³⁸ In these cases, however, management met renewed competitive pressures, for example due to the diffusion of plastic containers, through determined, aggressive technological innovation and organizational changes involving the outsourcing of “non-core” business.

Employers have used the decentralization of labor recruitment across the local urban economy as a powerful weapon to stratify the labor force and generalize its vulnerability. The combination of temporary contracts and labor brokerage can ensure workers’ compliance and flexibility while minimizing the obligations of the companies towards their employees, which are legally employed by the recruiting agencies. At UCW, layoffs have accompanied the hiring of contract workers, often the very ones who had been previously retrenched, via a local labor broker. Brokered workers received higher cash remunerations than UCW employees. The employment agency had in fact to pay higher wages because it mostly hired artisans, who are harder to retain, but it could also afford to raise the monetary pay by cutting medical insurance, which UCW workers enjoyed by virtue of their union contract. Workers hired through the labor broker were, quite unusually, organized by NUMSA, which allowed them some benefits like retirement pensions. The duration of contracts, however, could be as short as three months, terminable at a one week’s notice.³⁹ Even if they undermine the position of permanent employees, labor brokerage and fixed-term contracts are seen by some workers—especially qualified ones who can negotiate higher wages with the employment agency—in a positive light. But overall, labor brokerage indicates that jobs have become insecure, long-term career orientations are almost impossible, and workplace identities have grown weaker. Most employees saw non-permanent contract employment, no matter how remunerative, as a short-term survival strategy in a precarious environment, rather than an investment in waged work as a force of social emancipation:

You see, if you are unmarried and are not a husband your problems would be less than mine, especially on the finance. For those years when I was a permanent, I really did not benefit anything, but I started to benefit when I started to become a contract, then I saw an improvement at home and in my life. I could save something like R500 a month while I am giving my wife enough money to support herself and her children, I could pay an equal share of the telephone bill and the electricity bill, and we still suffer. But before, when I was a permanent, I used to suffer more, I had lots of debts behind my back, I couldn’t even afford to pay everyday expenses with the money I used to have in my pocket. . . . Now I am just thinking that I have got a job here, I am just like a horse who’s got now enough grass, I don’t look at the outside and after that maybe I’ll get another job. I have been in this situation for a long time, when the job is finished, I have to sit down and wait for another one.⁴⁰

At the same time, many UCW employees resent the presence of the labor broker in the plant. Their condemnation has not only to do with competition from contract workers. It also evokes a need for stability, commitment, and fairness, which they mobilized to reinforce claims to permanent work against casualization:

I am permanent and I care for my house, my children, everything. These guys [brokered workers] come only to get the money and they are told they are going to stay for two months, after which they must go. But I am permanent, I am working here more than two months, and those guys don't care about what is going on here in the factory, they're only here to take their pay and they cannot look three-four years from now, they just say "*ek weet nie*" —I don't know—but here I have to do my best for the future of the factory, because I worry about my children.⁴¹

The moral economy of the workplace and attachment to full-time worker identities come, however, under heavy pressure in a situation where a job through a labor broker can mean a wage 50 percent higher than regular company employees, albeit at the cost of reduced benefits. In general, labor brokerage conveys the impression that standard conditions of employment, applied across the board, give way to informal interactions between specific groups of workers and an elusive employer, which does not coincide with the management actually running the workplace. Workplace-based collective responses therefore prove of limited power in a production milieu that extols strategies of survival and adaptation relying on individual initiative and skills. My respondents generally recognized the importance of defending waged employment as a source of livelihood. Many did so, however, with a certain instrumentalism that led them to keep all options open, instead of soldiering on with union identities and a collectivist working-class ethos. They cherished, most importantly, the possibility of escaping one day from a workplace that no longer guarantees social stability and the satisfaction of household needs. Workers' fantasies of self-entrepreneurial alternatives sometimes took the form of starting individual businesses in addition to an insecure and unfulfilling factory job. Among respondents, 19.3 percent of metal-engineering workers and 9.7 percent of glass-paper workers had a second job, almost always on an unregistered, self-employed basis. The average income from second jobs in the case of metalworkers was R588 per month, compared to an average net monthly wage of R2202. Lack of capital, crime, and difficulties to access further training are the reasons most often cited as impeding self-employment options. Many workers, moreover, presented individual strategies of escape as a matter of basic survival:

The income for the workers is far too little to allow them to go out and buy what they may sell. On Friday they get their money, do grocery shopping for the family and on Sunday they are left with only five or ten Rand, only enough to pay to come back to work on Monday, and on Monday they are borrowing money from other people. That's the life we are living in this company. . . . My intention is to have enough money to run a business, but around here, *ek se* ["I

say,“] you are taking a risk if you open a business because you don’t sleep when you have got a business; too much crime, especially in the township.⁴²

Some workers who lost their jobs at Kelvinator planned to collect their retirement benefits and pool them with retrenched colleagues or neighbor to start small unregistered businesses. The others, however, usually needed the money to provide food, clothing, and utility payments for their families, repay company borrowings, or settle debts with “loan sharks.” Economic necessity drives insecure workers into all sorts of parallel occupations, which may well be more exploitative than their own official jobs. At UCW an important source of additional income is provided by seasonal employment in the oil refineries of Secunda during their annual shutdown and cleanup, when permanent local employees are on leave. Cleaning the plant from oil and chemicals is an extremely dangerous job, for which UCW workers are hired as scarcely trained casuals, a practice the unions have blamed as a major cause of deadly accidents. The informalization of once stable jobs creates, therefore, in this case a floating reservoir of cheap, unprotected labor to satisfy the demands of corporations with intermittent employment requirements.⁴³

Survivalism unquestionably remains the main motivation of individualized strategies of response to the crisis of waged employment and allows little idealization of the entrepreneurial spirits allegedly unleashed by informality. Workers’ strategies to escape the factory and their disenchanting commentaries on the workplace environment, however, also denote an embryonic critique of work and productivism. They voice a sharp awareness of the contradictory post-apartheid location of wage labor, torn between its glorification in official policy discourse and its grim, degraded material realities. The informalization of work opens therefore possibilities for alternative modes of workers’ signification and agency. In few cases among my respondents, second jobs are indeed conducive to actual self-valorization, which workers oppose to the dullness and meaninglessness of the industrial shopfloor. A shop steward and electrical fitter at UCW grew disillusioned with the company as a consequence of frequent retrenchments followed by intermittent contract employment. For him, the frustrations and deprivation arising from workplace life contrasted markedly with the satisfaction derived from his parallel career, built entirely on self-taught skills. For three hours after clocking off at UCW and before going home in the township of Duduza (Nigel), this worker tended to his business as a self-defined “architect” in an office rented in downtown Nigel, where he drafts—without holding any formal certificate but “just a talent for drawing”—plans for all sorts of buildings.⁴⁴ One of his colleagues, an electrician, has indeed no qualms about sabotaging his factory tasks for the sake of his self-employed weekend activity as an electrical repairman. For him, the “informal” activity explicitly takes priority over his waged occupation:

Sometimes I can take a day off here at work. Before there was no pay for sick leave, now it is paid so I can just take one day and bring back a fake doctor’s note to cover up. Many people do it, even if one must be careful, they notice when someone brings doctor’s notices three times a month.

Q: So working at UCW for you is mainly something like...

A: To improve my life, but the main thing is that I can really stand alone, I can work alone, the electrician job is what I really care about.⁴⁵

Many workers indeed told me that they would not mind being laid off, if that allowed them to collect severance packages and retirement contributions to fund some new self-employed enterprise. Therefore, even if waged work is weakened as a site of identity and life strategies, workers do not necessarily consider unemployment as a reality of mere victimhood but can also seek in it new opportunities. The fact that workers volunteer for layoffs faces the unions, whose collective solidarity is already undermined by employment fragmentation, with fresh challenges. For shop stewards, this is a major cause for concern:

[Workers] volunteer when they hear the company wants to retrench, they know that under packages they'll get lots of money to pay for their accounts. . . . Even when we as shop stewards told them, 'No, you mustn't do this, let's wait what the company is going to do.' They say, 'No, the company told us they want to retrench, now you have to remind the company about that,' and I say, 'No that's not my job, to remind the company to retrench people.'⁴⁶

The ability of workers to signify their own precariousness and use informality as a life strategy critically questions the centrality of waged work in South Africa's policy and scholarly discourse. But choices to escape waged work also reveal that the entanglements of survivalism and self-realization in informal employment can be quite problematic. On one hand, informality and precarious employment are not only conditions of disempowerment, but also indicate workers' quest for emancipative alternatives to waged work. The ambivalent meanings of informality in workers' lives and imagination, on the other hand, is a warning not to confuse informality with its progressive possibilities and raise the question of how such alternatives are articulated politically.

Respondents for this research displayed a set of contrasting attitudes towards employment. They mostly saw their actual jobs—with their low wages, demeaning tasks, oppressive routines, unsustainable work rhythms, and widespread insecurity—as removed from ideas of a dignified life. The prospect of a meaningful human existence lay for them elsewhere, in a place often fantasized through dreams of individual market empowerment. Yet, when asked what they regarded as the best solution to South Africa's problems of poverty and inequality, "job creation" was the overwhelmingly dominant response. Such ambiguous attitudes towards work were reflected in conflicted approaches to the ANC, to which one third of respondents belonged, while a further fifth identified themselves as party "supporters." Workers' allegiance to the ANC surely reflected their COSATU membership and deeply engrained political traditions. When it came to evaluating the policies of the ANC government, however, 48 percent expressed a bitter disappointment and argued that post-apartheid job losses and precarious employment had betrayed the promises of political liberation. The ANC emerged therefore contradictorily as a responsible for the jobs crisis and the force expected to fix it through job creation policies. It was, finally, remarkable that job creation occupied such an important symbolic place among workers so disillusioned with the ability of their own jobs to

build decent lives. Such contradictions were partially explained by the fact that, when questioned on why job creation was a priority for them, many workers did not signify employment as a mere economic transaction. Male respondents in particular represented “proper” jobs as the imagined foundation of a social order — alternative to the precarious occupations they held — that could restore family respectability, household authority, traditional values, and power relations along gender and age lines. As one worker put it:

As in our customs, you are responsible for your family, I must make sure everything is in order, that my children and my wife have enough food. Even if she’s working I shouldn’t rely on her money.⁴⁷

Conversely, respondents considered high unemployment and occupational insecurity as conducive to all sorts of social ills, from rampant juvenile crime to the disintegration of the family as women’s need to earn wages allowed claims to independence from male household authority. A social order hinging on stable jobs represented an alternative where male breadwinners could keep disorderly youth in check and confine women to tasks of reproduction and care. The symbolic centrality of job creation, in other words, revealed workers’ longing for a conservative masculinity whereby images of ideal jobs conveyed lingering resentment at the decay of the actual ones.

The political possibilities opened up by the informalization of waged work remain, therefore, a contested terrain. The workers who imagine informality as the possibility of an entrepreneurial escape from their own employment predicament are often the same who desire job creation policies as a commitment by the state to restore a lost world of male working-class respectability. Conservative family values can, however, also interact with radical public discourses conveyed by union militancy to originate a different set of responses. A minority of workers I interviewed tried to articulate the critique of wage labor made possible by informality not in the sense of individual strategies and conservative imagination, but by arguing for a renewed progressive activism. They blamed the degradation of work on the decline of union membership and solidarity, and advocated COSATU’s independence from, and critical engagement of, the ANC. They continued to see the unions as workers’ representatives on bread-and-butter issues, and even desired their greater involvement as service organizations and legal advice structures. Outside the workplace, however, about one fifth of respondents saw labor organizations as having limited value in dealing with the social consequences of the employment crisis. To face the growing poverty of the working class, the rising costs of basic necessities, the inadequacy of housing and municipal utilities, they argued that the unions should act as community-based structures, possibly joining social movements critical of the ANC’s macroeconomic agenda. As one summarized:

The union has to engage the government, because the government has been voted by us. The previous government was oppressing us but now we are in a democracy so now if we have some complaints those people must hear us. . . . Every night I am always dreaming about whether I will lose my job, where will I go? What will happen in ten years time in our country if people are not working?

The union needs to be more militant in engaging the government, because in the present day I can't be happy that I am working. If the union says, hey, let's go and fight the government and I say no, I can't go there because I am working, then I will be killing myself, at the end of the day I will lose my job. *The union must fight both for the unemployed and for the people which are working.*⁴⁸

Various social and community movements, like the Anti-Privatization Forum, have, since the early 2000s, interrogated the inadequacies of the labor market in relation to social marginality, and demanded universal social protection and a decommodified social wage, including free basic services and basic income grants, for the majority of South Africans who cannot enjoy a dignified living through employment.

The informalization of jobs has, in short, reopened the question of the relationships between work and social emancipation, after the disappointments of wage labor in the post-apartheid era. Contrasting desires crisscross the unions' rank and file and shake collective identities and loyalties, while workers' dreams to escape jobs that have become frail and embattled seem to enable radically different political imaginations. My research, however, indicates that progressive political subjectivities are more likely to emerge from a rapidly informalizing world of production if work loses its centrality in the ways ordinary people imagine life in a democratic society. Assuming—as governmental rhetoric and the mounting resentment of sections of the working class tend to do—that despite its material degradation wage labor must remain the normative foundation of society and citizenship, is by now at risk of feeding a conservative and chauvinist political discourse. It is also likely to reflect the material conditions of only the shrinking minority of workers with stable and decent jobs while leaving the precarious majority voiceless and invisible.

In this contestation, it is the politics of working-class resentment that is for the moment gaining the upper hand. At the end of 2007, a rank-and-file worker insurgency, led by COSATU's leadership, caused a historic change at the top of the ANC. The new party leader, Jacob Zuma, proceeded to become South Africa's president following the national elections of 2009. The movement that propelled Zuma's rise (called a "tsunami" by his supporters), crucially expressed workers' disappointments with high unemployment and casualization under Thabo Mbeki's government, and it amounted to a rejection of GEAR's neoliberalism.⁴⁹ Zuma has, however, articulated such feelings in a public discourse that with renewed strength emphasizes hard work, deprecates welfare "dependency," condemns young women claiming social grants, and resonates with the new leader's masculine persona, allegiance to family values, and toughness on crime. The informalization of work and the anxieties it generates played a decisive role in such momentous shifts. Whether they will have a progressive political outcome will also depend on the ability of workers, social movements, and ordinary citizens to articulate a political imagination of liberation from, and not only of, wage labor.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that informality is not, as the "two economies" thesis indicates, a separate social realm of backwardness left behind in the post-apartheid globalized economy. It rather

represents an aspect of capitalist modernization as it increasingly relies on a hierarchical world of work and makes occupations precarious and insecure. Yet, the erosion of waged employment as a condition of decent life for the majority is accompanied by arguments that, from the government and rank-and-file workers alike, continue to imagine wage labor as the foundation of respectable families, social discipline, clearly defined gender roles, and economic initiative. On the workers' side such a conservative imagination of work seems all the more paradoxical considering the disillusionment most respondents expressed with their jobs. Desires to escape waged occupations reveal nonetheless workers' reluctance to be disempowered by employment precariousness and their desire to use informality as an avenue for alternative possibilities. Such possibilities, however, remain predominantly couched in the languages, often mutually reinforcing, of individual entrepreneurship or working-class resentment. Only in a minority of cases does informality enable a progressive imagination of union and social activism.

The most important political implication of this paper is, in the end, that the reconstitution of a progressive linkage between work and emancipation, after the disappointment of the post-apartheid promise of wage labor, greatly depends on how workers will signify informality. Does an increasingly informalized world of work enable demands for a universal social wage and basic income independent from employment status? Or are, conversely, the anxieties of precarious employment and dreams of individual empowerment contributing to the hegemony of new conservative work-centered paradigms? To address such questions scholars and activists will have to think of informality politically, rather than confining its analysis within the parameters of the workplace and the labor market. Perhaps useful insights can come from the history of labor struggles in Africa, where workers have often chosen informal and precarious occupations as ways to resist capitalist work discipline and the attempts at labor cooption by colonial and postcolonial regimes alike.⁵⁰ Escaping the necessity to work for wages remains also crucial, especially in contexts of neoliberal attack on labor under structural adjustment programs, to keep multiple livelihood networks and social interactions alive.⁵¹ Amidst the suffering and uncertainties it generates, the precariousness of work in South Africa has the merit of raising the question of whether formal wage labor should still be the obvious, indeed desirable, driver of social integration and citizenship, an issue that profoundly interrogates what until now has appeared as an unassailable post-apartheid consensus.

Notes

-
1. Von Holdt, 2003.
 2. Friedman, 1987.
 3. Webster, 2006.
 4. Posel, 2003; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005.
 5. Hlela, 2003; Appolis and Sikwebu, 2003.
 6. Barchiesi and Kenny, 2002.
 7. Altman, 2006.

8. 140 interviews were conducted between July 1999 and May 2000. They are here numbered according to their position in the author's database. The interviews were conducted in the following companies: 1 to 20: Baldwin's Steel (Brakpan); 21 to 40, plus 45: Union Carriage and Wagon (Nigel); 41 to 60, minus 45: Kelvinator (Alrode); 61 to 80: Paperlink (Germiston); 81 to 100: Nampak Corrugated (Wadeville); 101 to 120: Consol Glass (Wadeville); 121 to 140: MB Glass (Leondale).
9. May, 2000; Bhorat et al., 2001; Seekings and Natrass, 2005.
10. Meth, 2004, provides an insightful discussion of these ideological debates.
11. RSA, 2003, p. 97.
12. Hart, 2006.
13. Bhorat and Oosthuizen, 2005.
14. Adler and Webster, 2000.
15. Hirsch, 2005; Cassim, 2006.
16. Bhorat and Hodge, 1999.
17. Natrass and Seekings, 2005.
18. Altman, 2003.
19. Bhorat and Oosthuizen, 2005.
20. Hlela, 2003.
21. Bhorat, 2003, p.6.
22. Theron, 2004.
23. Mosoetsa, 2001; Bramble and Barchiesi, 2003; Kenny, 2005.
24. Lund, 2002.
25. Meagher, 1995.
26. Critchlow and Tabak, 2000.
27. Devey, Skinner and Valodia, 2006.
28. See Hansen and Vaa, 2004.
29. Offe, 1997, p.82.
30. Aliber, 2003; Du Toit, 2004.
31. Ruiters, 1995.
32. Barchiesi and Kenny, 2002.
33. Rogerson, 2004.
34. Kenny, 2005, p.164.
35. Barchiesi and Kenny, 2002.
36. Development Bank of Southern Africa, 2005.
37. Bezuidenhout, 2004.
38. Rosenthal, 1999.
39. Interview 45. Male, 46, carpenter, UCW. Nigel, October 20, 1999.
40. Ibid.
41. Interview 27. Male, 33, Machine operator, UCW. Nigel, August 7, 1999.
42. Interview 4. Male, 39, sales representative, Baldwin's Steel. Brakpan, July 19, 1999.
43. Desai, 2002.
44. Interview 21. Male, 47, electrician, UCW. Nigel, July 24, 1999.

-
45. Interview 39. Male, 39, electrical tester/wirer, UCW. Nigel, September 22, 1999.
 46. Interview 1. Male, 45, sales representative, Baldwin's Steel. Brakpan, July 12, 1999.
 47. Unnumbered interview. Male, 29, truck loader. Norwood Municipal Waste Depot. Johannesburg, February 23, 2000.
 48. Interview 137. Male, 37, general worker, MB Glass. Leondale, May 16, 2000.
 49. Ceruti, 2007.
 50. Cooper, 1987; 1996.
 51. Simone, 2004.

References

Adler, Glenn, and Eddie Webster. *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000.

Aliber, Michael. "Chronic Poverty in South Africa: Incidence, Causes and Policies." *World Development* 31, no.3 (2003), pp. 473-90.

Altman, Miriam. "The State of Employment and Unemployment in South Africa." In *State of the Nation. South Africa 2003-2004*, ed. John Daniel, Adam Habib and Roger Southall (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 2003), pp. 158-83.

_____. "Low Wage Work in South Africa." Paper presented at the IZA/World Bank Conference on Employment and Development, Berlin, May 25-27, 2006.

Appolis, John and Dinga Sikwebu. "Pressing Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement: An Interview with John Appolis and Dinga Sikwebu." In *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the 'New South Africa'*, ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 205-25.

Barchiesi, Franco and Bridget Kenny. "From Workshop to Wasteland: Deindustrialisation and Fragmentation of the Black Working Class on the East Rand (South Africa), 1990-99." *International Review of Social History* 47, Supplement (2002), pp. 35-63.

Bezuidenhout, Andries. "What Happened to Kelvinator: The Road from Alrode to Ezakheni and Matshapa." Paper presented at the Wits-Ekurhuleni Symposium on Sustainable Manufacturing, Johannesburg, June 10-11, 2004.

Bhorat, Haroon. "The Post-Apartheid Challenge: Labour Demand Trends in the South African Labour Market, 1995-1999." Working Paper 03/82, Cape Town: University of Cape Town, Development Policy Research Unit, 2003.

_____ and James Hodge. "Decomposing Shifts in Labour Demand in South Africa." *South African Journal of Economics* 67, no.3 (1999):, pp. 348-80.

_____, et al. *Fighting Poverty. Labour Markets and Inequality in South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2001.

_____ and Morne' Oosthuizen. "The Post-Apartheid South African Labour Market." Working Paper 05/93, Cape Town: University of Cape Town, Development Policy Research Unit, 2005.

Bramble, Thomas and Franco Barchiesi, eds. *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

Cassim, Rashad. "Reflections on South Africa's First Wave of Economic Reforms." In *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006), pp. 55-85.

Ceruti, Claire. "Sowetans Say, 'Zuma for President.'" *South African Labour Bulletin* 31, no.4, (2007), pp. 46-48.

Cooper, Frederick. *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.

_____. *Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Critchlow, Michaeline A. and Faruk Tabak. "Under the Shadows of Capital." In *Informalization. Process and Structure*, ed. Michaeline A. Critchlow and Faruk Tabak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp.166-86.

Desai, Ashwin. *'We are the Poors': Community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 2002.

Development Bank of Southern Africa. *Overcoming Underdevelopment in South Africa's Second Economy*. Development Report 2005. Halfway House, South Africa: Development Bank of Southern Africa, 2005.

Devey, Richard, Caroline Skinner, and Imraan Valodia. "Definitions, Data and the Informal Economy in South Africa: A Critical Analysis." In *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006), pp.302-23.

Du Toit, Andries. "Social Exclusion' Discourse and Chronic Poverty: A South African Case Study." *Development and Change* 35, no. 5, (2004), pp. 987-1010.

Friedman, Steven. *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987.

Hansen, Karen T. and Mariken Vaa. "Introduction." In *Reconsidering Informality. Perspectives from Urban Africa*, ed. Karen T. Hansen and Mariken Vaa (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), pp.7-24.

Hart, Gillian. "Post-Apartheid Developments in Historical and Comparative Perspective." In *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006), pp.13-32.

Hirsch, Alan. *Season of Hope. Economic Reform under Mandela and Mbeki*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005.

Hlela, Kenneth. "Dilemmas of Collective Action in the Informal Economy: How the Other Quarter Lives." *Policy: Issues and Actors* no.4, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 2003.

Kenny, Bridget C. "Divisions of Labor, Experiences of Class: Changing Collective Identities of East Rand Food Retail Sector Workers through South Africa's Democratic Transition." Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2005.

Lund, Frances. "Social Security and the Changing Labour Market: Access for Non-Standard and Informal Workers in South Africa." *Social Dynamics* 28, no.2, (2002), pp. 177-206.

May, Julian, ed. *Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Meeting the Challenge*. London: Zed Books, 2000.

Meagher, Kate. "Crisis, Informalization and the Urban Informal Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Development and Change* 26, no.2, (1995), pp. 259-83.

Meth, Charles. "Ideology and Social Policy: 'Handouts' and the Spectre of 'Dependency'." *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, no.56, (2004), pp. 1-30.

Mosoetsa, Sarah. "The Manchester Road: Women and the Informalization of Work in South Africa's Footwear Industry." *Labour, Capital and Society* 34, no.2, (2001), pp. 184-206.

Offe, Claus. "Towards a New Equilibrium of Citizens' Rights and Economic Resources?" In *Societal Cohesion and the Globalising Economy*, ed. Wolfgang Michalski, Riel Miller, and Barrie Stevens (Paris: Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 1997), pp.81-108.

-
- Posel, Dorrit. "Have Migration Patterns in Post-Apartheid South Africa Changed?" Paper presented at the Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective, Johannesburg, June 4-7, 2003.
- Rogerson, Christian M. "From National Industrial Workshop to 'Rustbelt': Restructuring the Manufacturing Economy of Ekurhuleni, 1980-1999." Paper presented at the Wits-Ekurhuleni Symposium on Sustainable Manufacturing, Johannesburg, June 10-11, 2004.
- Rosenthal, Tanya. "Forms of Worker Incorporation and Resistance: A Case Study of the South African Glass-Packaging Industry." In *Globalisation and Patterns of Labour Resistance*, ed. Jeremy Waddington (London: Mansell, 1999), pp.131-59.
- RSA, Republic of South Africa. *Towards a Ten Year Review. Synthesis Report on Implementation of Government Programmes*. Pretoria: Government Printer, 2003.
- Ruiters, Gregory. "South African Liberation Politics: A Case Study of Collective Action and Leadership in Katorus, 1980-1989." Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1995.
- Seekings, Jeremy and Nicoli Nattrass. *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Simone, AbdouMaliq. *For the City Yet to Come. Changing African Life in Four Cities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Theron, Jan. "Employment Is Not What it Used To Be: The Nature and Impact of the Restructuring of Work in South Africa." In *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace. Studies in Transition*, ed. Edward Webster and Karl von Holdt (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004), pp.302-23.
- von Holdt, Karl. *Transition from Below. Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2003.
- Webster, Edward. "Trade Unions and the Challenge of the Informalisation of Work." In *Trade Unions and Democracy. COSATU Workers' Political Attitudes in South Africa*, ed. Sakhela Buhlungu (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006), pp.21-43.