Workplace orders and worker struggles in post-apartheid SA: Dunlop workers

Sithembiso Bhengu,
University of KwaZulu Natal

Introduction
This paper is part of an ongoing research I am trying to conclude, which investigates the reproduction of African working class in post apartheid South Africa. The research examines the relationship between wage income and mobilisation of livelihoods of working class households across the rural-urban divide. Through an ethnographic study with Dunlop workers, my research examined rural-urban linkages of African workers, interrogating how these linkages are maintained and how they play out in mobilisation and struggles for livelihoods in everyday life. Based on literature on workers and livelihoods in South Africa, my research hypothesis argued that wage income remains the main pillar and main source for reproduction of life, mobilisation of livelihoods of working class households, both rural and urban. To interrogate my proposition three areas of evidence needed to be developed into key questions. Firstly, the centrality of wage labour in the mobilization of livelihoods in extended familial households across the urban-rural divide. Secondly, establishing the degree of the rural-urban linkages and networks and the form they take. Lastly, examining how working life, struggles and everyday life of African workers and their households play out.

There are two key arguments this paper seeks to make. First, the paper asserts that data from Dunlop workers ostensibly show that the vast majority of workers at Dunlop have and continue to service dual (and some instances) multiple familial networks across urban-rural divide. These familial networks are serviced through visits, remittances, supporting of adult children to find accommodation in the city when looking for employment and through performance of traditional rituals. The paper will also argue that despite contradictions and contestations Dunlop workers continue to identify NUMSA as their bona fide voice. The research also showed that workers are neither oblivious nor passive to challenges and contradictions within their organisation.

Wage income, livelihoods and rural-urban linkages
Organised labour has not only been faced by challenges in workplace, but also at the level of policy formulation over the last ten years. Increasingly, organised labour is labelled as representing the privileged few, stealing from Castells (2000), 'Islands of prosperity, oblivious to the sea of unemployed masses and their plight' (Seekings and Nattrass 2002, 2005, Webster and Von Holdt 2005, Buhlungu 2006, Buhlungu 2010). While most of these arguments point to obvious shrink in formal employment, even the resulting decline in trade union membership (Webster and Von Holdt 2005, Buhlungu 2006, 2010); others even go so far as arguing that not only is organised labour a privileged few, but organised labour continue to push for their interests at the expense of the economy and employment in South Africa (Nattrass 2000). They assert that organised labour today is in a semi-privileged position and resists reforms to labour market and other policies that would steer the economy down a more labour-absorbing growth path (Nattrass 2000, Seekings and Nattrass 2003). They also critique Kenny and Webster (1998) in their analysis of re-segmentation of labour market and the creation of an insecure, lower paid and unprotected workforce. While Kenny and Webster attribute this
shift in employment to employers’ search for lower labour costs in the context of globalisation and neo-liberal government policy, Seekings and Nattrass assert that they give very little attention to labour legislation and the role of unions in accentuating divisions in the workplace, as they protect the interests of permanent workers against those of casual workers (Seekings and Nattrass, 2003:16). They also critique Gelb and Webster (1996) who argue that incomes of the working class as a whole would be maximised through wage increases. Seekings and Nattrass assert that this is a utilitarian approach, which only looks at interest of employed workers, but neglect the working class as a whole. They propose that priority should not be on wage increases, but on increasing the numbers of unemployed who are inserted into the economy, through a more flexible oriented labour market framework (2002:19). They propose that labour market legislation and policy should be modified to not just secure the interest of organised labour, but of the unemployed. They assert that the employment Conditions Commission in sectors without collective bargaining should be tasked with balancing the need for acceptable minimum wages with job creation for the unskilled and unemployed. Other option they propose is modifying centrally-bargained agreements from industry-level bargaining to firm-level bargaining. They assert that the economy should be geared more towards employment creation, even if that means fall in average wages, in order to achieve overall reduction in wage inequality by creating more jobs for the unemployed.

Table 1
Do you have a secondary household?

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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My work at Dunlop enables one to engage with these claims, both at the level of analysis as well as methodological influences that give rise to claims we make from research. At first, while Seekings and Nattrass (2002, 2005) provide extensive analysis of the economic trends in post-apartheid South Africa and correctly show statistical evidence of accentuated inequalities in the labour market, their claims and argumentation leave much to be desired. I want to argue that firstly, at the level of method localised studies enable us to find complexity of workers and workers lives beyond national statistical data. While statistical data correctly show increasing gaps in labour market and household incomes, it doesn't explore the actual construction and configuration of workers households, nor does it explore household and familial networks of workers beyond rural-urban divide. It also cannot tell us much about actual lived experiences of workers, the distribution of their incomes in everyday life.

My study of Dunlop workers follows work by Sitans (1984, 1996, 2000 and 2004) and Bophin (1987) in the 1980s, which looked at migrant labour and everyday work life of workers, workplace struggles and everyday life of being a worker under apartheid. It is interesting that my findings show a persistence of rural-urban linkages, patters of migrant labour still prevalent in Dunlop workers’ lives fifteen years into democracy. Table 1 shows that 80% of workers still have and maintain household networks across rural-urban divide. For some of these workers, while they have established households and families in the city, continue to maintain rural family networks, which they service by making quarterly visits annually, others monthly visits and some even weekly (and/or fortnightly) visits.
Graph 1

Workers Who Send Remittances to Secondary Household

Do you send remittances to your secondary household?

Graph one show that almost 78% of workers with rural-urban household networks send remittances to these households and family networks in countryside. For most of these workers family networks in countryside are with paternal homestead, a place of origin of a worker. There is also a sizable amount of workers (mostly, older workers, i.e. 45 years and older) who have dual functional (conjugal) households. Most of these workers are in polygamous relationships, with the first wife in the countryside and a second wife in the city. Others within a similar category have an official wife in the countryside with children and a common-law wife (spouse) in the city. There are also a few cases of workers with spouse and children in the countryside and a live-in partner (but not regarded as wife) in the city. Polygamy and/or multiple partner relations are part and parcel of everyday life of workers as well as their identity construction. During conversations with workers and shop stewards, it became clear that masculinity stakes and claims relate to a man’s access and/or ability to manage multiple sexual relationships. I found it interesting that only one shop steward has children from one woman. A significant number of workers and shop stewards have children from variable partners, some of which were conceived after marriage.

The full-time shop steward who is also a union trustee indicated challenges and problems he has encountered with several workers because of these polygamous and/or multiple partner households. Most of these complications relate to spousal benefits and insurance benefits. He told me stories of sad and painful experiences of dealing with families of deceased workers in the seven years of being a union trustee. There are two main instances that befell some spouses of deceased workers. He told me that there are a few workers who came to Durban for work, having left wives and children in the countryside. As they continued working and living in Durban, they found new love in the city, resulting in separation from rural wives (without official divorce). He told me he has dealt with three such cases of workers, who eventually became ill and were cared for by the urban common-law spouse. When these workers died, it was the urban (non-official) spouse who mourned with worker’s family and wore traditional mourning attire, while the separated wives attended the funeral with ordinary people. But a few days after the funeral, the rural (official) wives came to the Shop Steward’s office with a marriage
certificate, in full mourning attire to process life and death benefits. As a result he found himself having to give the official (separated) wife death and life benefits of the deceased worker, while the live-in spouse and children lose out completely. Another case was of four (older) workers, who had polygamous marriages. Their older wives from the former Homelands did not have official marriage certification. These workers married second wives from the city (who keep an official marriage certificate). When these workers died both wives mourned with families, although the first wives were regarded as senior by family relatives. It was the city wives (with official marriage certification) who claimed life and death-cover benefits at the loss of older wives and children.

The shop steward trustee indicated that the root cause of these tragic stories is the unwillingness of workers to learn and educate themselves about anything regarding benefits, schemes and insurance. I also noticed during the visits at Dunlop factory and shop stewards office that workers came continuously to the shop stewards office to ask the trade union trustee to help them regarding their respective benefits, insurance and health scheme. He even warned me during my research not to have high expectations of questionnaires being returned because workers he said, “Dunlop workers don’t like filling forms, let alone a questionnaire”. Indeed, of more than four hundred questionnaires handed out, only 97 were returned filled. Pertaining workers health, life and death insurance schemes, he indicated that he was trying his best to educate workers, especially workers in polygamy as well as training workers about instituting their financial records and their determination of allocation of their benefits and estate in case of death.

Graph 2

Findings clearly show that wage income is the main source around which livelihoods of households are mobilised across rural-urban divide. Almost every worker at Dunlop indicated that income is the main source of livelihoods. Almost every worker at Dunlop also sends remittances to family members in countryside. A closer examination of this
rural-urban linkage shows that different workers have different relationships to the countryside. For some workers the countryside represents their primary homestead, in which the first wife and children live. This close knit relationship of the worker to the countryside is reflected in amount of times he visits the rural homestead as well as in the remittance amount to the rural homestead. Graph two shows the reciprocal articulation of urban-rural households networks in the lives of workers and livelihoods of their family networks. While workers contribute a myriad of services for households through wage income, other household network members bring a myriad of non-monetary support to household livelihoods, also a key finding by Mosoetsa (2011) who argues that old women have become pillars of survival of poor households through their pooled social grant income as well as through a myriad of community services they render towards household survival.

There are a myriad of other factors that affect the actual nature of rural-urban linkage. Firstly, the relationship of the worker to both the urban and rural households determines the allocation of resources between urban and rural households. I also found that the location of the rural household is a factor in how rural-urban household struggle and tussle for resources play out. One shop steward has a house in KwaMashu and lives an on-an-off live-in partner (without children) and two of his older children going to tertiary and FET in the city. Their rural homestead is at Nyoni (next to Mandini). In the rural homestead there is his wife and two younger children. On average the shop steward goes to the rural homestead every weekend, except when there are trade union activities in the city or away from Durban. Once in a while the rural wife also visits the KwaMashu house with the younger children. I got a sense that KwaMashu house is his space, his rural wife ‘visits KwaMashu’, signifying that she is almost like an outsider. Even the two older children at first felt like visitors in KwaMashu, but when I had conversation with the shop steward a couple of months later, the language had changed pertaining children. They had encroached and claimed KwaMashu space as theirs as well, but their mother is still a visitor. It sounds like the contestation for space in KwaMashu was resolved through a compromise involving children acknowledging the city home as their father’s space (with whomever he is living with), while rural home belonged to their mother. The rural wife is a professional, a teacher in a rural high school. This shop steward doesn’t send remittances because he and his wife supply their family during his weekly visits. While the shop steward supports the extended homestead, he refused to call his support to his brother’s household as remittance because they practically live in the same yard. His wife on the other hand sends remittances to her family in Nongoma, although not every month. He always reminisces about his childhood shepherd days, when he used to look after his grandfather’s livestock and always talks about possibilities of livestock farming as opposed to being a factory worker.

Another shop steward lives in KwaMashu hostel with his two sons, one of which works at Dunlop. His wife is also a professional, teacher working and living in their homestead in Mangethe (outside Stanger). In the hostel they live as men with his sons, and would engage in ‘manly’ activities from time to time, but he always returns to Mangethe every weekend, unless he is on shift. He also doesn’t send remittance home because he travels home every weekend. His brothers also live in Mangethe, whom he supports, especially their children and seldom travel to their original homestead in Mahlabathini, because his grandfather left running away from clan dynasty conflict. This shop steward spends very little in the city because most of his life still remains in the countryside, especially because of living in a hostel. The extra income from his working wife and what he calls
generational entrepreneurial attitude has made his wife to begin an agricultural (gardening) cooperative with local women and they sell their harvest to the local community as well as local retailers. He stated on one occasion that his wife wanted to rear chickens as well for sale and for egg production, but he forbid her, saying that kind of business activity would attract unwanted attraction and would make his household susceptible to criminals, especially because he is known to be a trade unionist as well as to be living in Durban.

Another worker lives in a make shift (RDP like) one bedroom house in Umlazi. His rural homestead is in Mpaphalala, not far from Nkandla. Although I was not able to confirm, he has a rural wife with grown up, but mostly unemployed children. His extended family network is in Mpaphalala and lives very poorly as a result of several factors including land seizure by during the reign of IFP, loss of livestock due to disease and lack of education. Throughout our conversations, this worker lamented lost opportunities especially for his children to get education. He particularly laments that his youngest son (whom he argued was given a very good brain) wasted his chances at education. He also lamented that both his daughters could not further their studies because of getting pregnant after high school. He visits the countryside alternatively sometimes once a month and sometimes once in two months. He sends remittances, but because of the demand to support himself, his unemployed children and their children. Upon my other visit to his place during the rough economic climate of late 2008, he indicated the harshness of the financial crisis on him and his family and even mentioned his struggles for survival because they were made to work on short time at Dunlop, which at times became one day work a week. The financial crisis and its negative effect on workers and their households were reiterated by the full time shop steward who was also the trade union trustee. Because he was responsible for various benefit and insurance schemes for workers through NUMSA, he was aware of the dire conditions under which workers lived and how the financial crisis compounded survival problems of numerous workers. He indicated that because of dual and sometimes multiple households, workers even under normal circumstances face the pressure and challenge of supporting more than a single household with their wage income. For workers who are single income earners in their households, their wage becomes overstretched and many end up failing to honour their insurance, benefits and health insurance premiums. Others find themselves caught up in the vicious debt cycle in order to survive. He indicated that many workers were heavily indebted and the impact of short time during between second half of 2008 pushed some workers to the brink, of which other will never recover from financially. He indicated that part of the problem is lack of education (lack of interest in workers to educate themselves) on financial matters.

Different stories of workers indicate that while for the majority of workers their wage income is the main source for mobilisation of livelihoods of households across rural-urban divide, detail of workers’ wages and constitution of their households varies from one worker to another. This indicates that workers households vary depending on number of sources of income per household, the nature of a worker’s relationship to both rural and urban households, the location of the rural homestead in relation to the city and employment status of extended household members. This means there is not a single (uniform) urban and/or rural experience for workers and their households. There are workers that rent a room in the city and built a house in the countryside. There are workers who own a house both in the township and in countryside. There are workers who own and extended a house in the township and have a traditional homestead in
countryside. These variations depend either on relationship both a township house and a rural house, employment status of household members in each households. There are also variations what we call the rural. These variations of the rural households range from location and distance of the specific rural place to the city, distribution and availability of social services and amenities to a rural place.

**Graph 3**
**Household income sources**

![Bar chart showing household income sources](image)

**Critique of Labour Aristocracy Thesis**

The case of Dunlop workers' wages and livelihoods present a critique to the labour aristocracy thesis (Seekings and Nattrass, 2003, 2006). Workers’ wages and livelihoods are spread across rural-urban divide. An income of one worker supports multiple of individuals and households. The notion of semi-privilege presupposes that workers’ income and wages are used for singular livelihoods and neglects the fact that a sizable number of African working class have a wage that is stretched in its use for livelihoods of networks of households. Graph three indicates that a sizable amount of workers are the only source of income into their household networks. Almost 72% of these workers either have no other contributor to household income or only have one other contributor. In most of these cases the other contribution is temporary employment or social grant income. South Africa also has an anti worker consumer market, controlled by colluding monopolies, resulting in extremely high cost of living (Barchiesi 2011). While assertions are made about the imperative to adjust our labour market regulations in line with other middle-income economies, we ignore glaring disparities in the cost of living between South Africa and these middle-income economies.

Barchiesi (2011) has just published a ground breaking work on the work and lives of workers (and working class) in the East Rand area of Gauteng in post-apartheid South Africa. His work makes a critique of the thesis that presents permanent and unionised workers as the semi-privileged (Maree, 2008; Seekings and Nattrass 2003, 2006). Barchiesi found that organised labour constitute what he calls ‘precarious labour’, even under conditions of permanent work, many African workers and their households barely
have enough to constitute and to give them options for emancipator options and activities. He then asks, ‘if permanent workers work and live under such precarious conditions, how are the conditions of ‘atypical workers’ (Barchiesi, 2011)? He also asserts that workers did not recognise their work as ‘decent jobs’, just as they did not consider their lives in post apartheid South Africa as a ‘decent life’. Barchiesi asserts that South Africa does not have a labour market rigidity problem or a trade union problem, but an economic problem.

Another area of consideration is a presupposition that flexible labour market regulations and concessions by organised labour on wages will translate to more employment. Most research at firm level does not support this claim. In the initial stages of my research, I also visited the NUMSA and shop stewards at Dunlop factory in Ladysmith to speak to them about my research. It came to my attention that at the end of 2003 shop stewards had agreed to a different shift pattern, which entailed a cut in workers’ wages on the basis that the employer would employ more local youths into the factory. While factory employment increased by end of 2004 from just under a 1000 workers to just over 1200 workers, by 2007 workforce had shrunk to just above 800, but wages and shift pattern was not reversed. Research show that most concessions by workers alone to making sacrifices towards productivity, and employment never translate to those intended aims, but instead employers use flexibility to rid themselves of workers. The assumption that a flexibly modified labour regulatory framework will encourage and stimulate employment is as same as what Ugarteche (1995) said, “taking an oven and putting it in the sun will heat it up”.

An assertion which labels full-time (permanent or unionised) labour as semi-privileged is reminiscent of IFP mantra during the 1980s and 1990s. One such assertion was invoked by an IFP councillor and the council resolution and attitude towards workers in Isithebe, Ladysmith and Newcastle, when workers were protesting against slave wages from Chinese and Taiwanese industrialists. The councillor said, “Half a loaf is better than no bread”. While this mantra sounds reasonable at face value, it neglects the fact that the half workers are told to accept is never determined by them. In essence, half is a metaphor for an elastic scope of determinations made by management. Research also indicates that workers’ agreement to flexible working arrangement with management always end badly for workers, in their reduced wages as well as retrenchments (Von Holdt, 2003; Masondo, 2005; Phakathi, 2005; Webster, Lambert & Bezuidenhout, 2009).

Trade union struggles, contestations and contradictions
I began a process of setting up contact with Dunlop workers, through their trade union NUMSA. After a couple of months of visits to Dunlop workers, they told me that my decision to access the shop floor through NUMSA office and shop stewards has been the main reason why workers received my presence and accepted me as one of them, as opposed to a case if I would have gained access to the shop floor through management. Actual concrete experience of gathering data was simultaneously planned and coincidental. While, I had initially intended to conduct ethnographic study, the actual undertaking of my ethnographic research was more a result of fortunate coincidence than planned exercise. I was fortunate that when I got a break from lecturing and began in earnest to visit Dunlop workers in May/June 2007, I found them having just finished balloting for a strike, which lasted five weeks. The strike provided me ample opportunity to engage with workers throughout the strike action as well as for seven months of visits,
conversations, interviews and observations with Dunlop workers and shop stewards on shop floor, in their households, in their meetings and attending funerals, family rituals, weddings, etc, with shop stewards. I also administered a questionnaire aimed at asking specific questions on workers, their work, and wages and households networks. While, I encountered numerous problems with workers filling the questionnaire and did not manage to secure initially intended figure of 200 questionnaires (but only 102 questionnaires filled and returned to date), I have been able to verify the reliability of data during my seven months of interaction, observation, interviews and interaction with workers and worker leaders on shop floor.

Throughout the duration of the strike, as well as in its aftermath, it became clear that workers still viewed collective action through trade unions as their primary weapon in their daily workplace struggles. Furthermore, trade unions continued to be viewed by the vast majority of workers as the most viable mobilising force for worker collective consciousness. Workers mentioned during our informal conversations that becoming part of a worker collective through a trade union is a natural response. One shop steward said:

No worker can survive alone here. The strength and power of each worker lies with the collective of all other workers. You see, comrade, employers can fire a single worker at any time they feel like, but they cannot fire all of us together, even if they want to.

From responses and observations at Dunlop, there are three things to consider when trying to understand trade unions and their continued force in South Africa today. First, workers continue to believe that, without a strong trade-union presence on the shop floor, workers would become “easy meat” for employers. The conditions under which workers work and live precipitate an atmosphere in which collective worker formations thrive. Workers at Dunlop articulated the constant fear that an individual worker would be “easy meat” for employers; this is why only collective formations gave them hope to fight. Some workers were bold enough to assert that employers cannot abuse (touch) them if they are organised in a trade union because “no employer can afford to fire and hire four to five hundred new employees at any time during the active production season.” Second, trade unions, especially those affiliated to COSATU, have a wealth of what Sitas (1996: 225) calls popular memory. Stories and narratives of workplace struggles and heroism of workers and trade union strength are told and retold to remind workers of the potency of trade unions in workplace struggles. During the second week of the strike, workers were visited by a member of the National Parliament, who used to be a worker and subsequently an organiser at Dunlop. During his visit he motivated workers, reiterating that their power lay in collective action. He asserted that workers will never be given anything; on the contrary, every gain workers make is as a result of struggle. He also spoke to workers about continuing to build a strong NUMSA and about becoming part of broader working class struggles through aligning themselves with and joining the South African Communist Party. Third, at Dunlop militancy and collective consciousness are probably the most carefully guarded jewels. Older workers induct the younger, new workers into this militant collective worker consciousness. In meetings many statements are made along the lines of:
Here at Dunlop Tyres, we have been in worker struggles for a long time. Even our sons and nephews who come to work here after us, they join the struggle. Even the new workers, they learn and grow to appreciate that the success of every individual worker depends on the collective struggle and consciousness of workers.

At Dunlop workers are socialised and acculturated into militant collective worker consciousness and identity. Strikes and other forms of confrontation with management are rites of passage towards becoming a mature and cultured worker. Workers seem to be of the view that their destiny and their struggle for a better life for their families are inextricably bound together and that the trade union is the social formation through which they mobilise themselves and each other.\(^5\)

Notwithstanding the militant collective worker consciousness and the centrality of trade unions in their mobilisation, it is clear that trade unions face structural and organisational contradictions, mostly stemming from changing balances of forces and the hegemony of variable political interests of union officials vis-à-vis the rank and file.\(^5\) While it is implausible to label trade unions as labour aristocracy, one must concede that there are contradictions in them, contradictions of interests between those of officials, shop stewards and the rank-and-file workers. Interests seem to be at the heart of cohesion and contradictions in most worker and trade-union formations. The rank-and-file workers are not ignorant of these contradictions. They are familiar with trade-union structures and governance. It also came to my attention that sometimes the mistake of both management and trade-union officials is to undermine the intellect of workers and their ability to gather information and to gauge situations in the workplace in relation to the trade union.\(^7\).

During the strike action some of these contradictions and workers’ discontent with particular regional leaders of NUMSA came to light. Workers had serious problems with and took offence at the regional leadership of NUMSA. They expressed their disappointment with the Regional Secretary of their trade union who failed to make a single visit to the plant to support them during their five-week-long strike. These workers (and their shop stewards) complained about what they regarded as ‘a regional office out of sync with workers’. Workers were even further incensed when the Regional Office of NUMSA failed to organise a public march for workers at the Durban and Ladysmith Dunlop plants to highlight their grievances. During informal conversations, one of the workers made this comment on the regional NUMSA office:

These NUMSA comrades have a CEO mentality and are running NUMSA like it is their business to make cut costs and profit. They forget that they are actually our employees as workers; without us they are nothing, but they want to tell us what we should do. This is not how things should happen; we are the bosses and they are our employees because we are the ones that make weekly contributions to their salaries.

Some of these contradictions and tensions reflect the systemic and organisational dynamics of trade unions. At Dunlop, the disjuncture between workers and their shop stewards against the NUMSA regional office reflects the dynamics of the balance of forces in trade unions and how power is wielded and used by various constituencies to advance their interests. The NUMSA Regional Executive, most of whom were not re-elected at the NUMSA Regional Congress held earlier in 2008, came predominantly from the Auto manufacturing/assembly and Auto component sector as opposed to the Tyre
Sector. As a result, workers at Dunlop who constitute a powerful worker base (historically and presently) felt that the current political leadership of the region does not give them the attention they deserve.

This signifies a victory on the part of Dunlop workers against tendencies of what workers considered as in-accountability on the part of their regional leadership. An example of such unaccountable behaviour on the part of union and worker leadership at Dunlop and in the Durban region is the manner in which both the grading system and the newly introduced four-shift system were handled. Dunlop has always operated on a three-shift system. The Durban-based factory still uses the three-shift pattern, while the plants in Ladysmith and Zimbabwe already work on a four-shift pattern (see the 2006 NUMSA and Dunlop Factory Annual Reports). The reason why the Durban-based plant is still using the three-shift system is as a result of resistance on the part of the workers to the proposed four-shift arrangement. On my probing the reasons for this rejection, one of the workers responded that the problem with the four-shift pattern is that it will result in a reduced hourly pay rate and in the number of working hours.

The four-shift pattern was introduced at the Ladysmith factory after employers promised shop stewards that this pattern would open more job opportunities for workers and for the community. Indeed, by 2004, coupled with increasing demand for the Dunlop 500 tyre, employment did increase by 400 workers. In 1998, Dunlop joined the Tyre Industry Bargaining Council, compelling it to introduce and implement in 2002 a grading system in order to comply with the Tyre Industry standards. In 2003 the shop stewards, led by their chairperson who is presently NUMSA's organiser for the Durban Dunlop plant, signed a three-year agreement on the new grading system without proper consultation with the workers. The agreement resulted in a large number of workers suffering relegation to Grade 1 as they were considered to have already been at the higher-than-minimum level of this grade. Those in Grade 2, who were already at the maximum of this grade, had to be lowered with the provision that their income would not be reduced and that they would receive training in order to qualify them to move to the higher Grade 3, Grade 4, and above. This later became an issue of great contention among workers because Dunlop is presently the only Tyre Manufacturer that has workers on Grade 1. In other firms, Grade 1 is an entry level. At Dunlop more than 40% of workers are in Grade 1, 30% in Grade 2, and only a small percentage are to be found in Grades 3 and 4 or even higher (Goodyear Tyres Employment Records, 2006; Firestone Tyres Employment Records, 2006 and Dunlop Tyres Employment Records, 2006). Workers demoted to Grade 1, complain that management has breached the Grading Agreement because they have not given workers training and competency testing that would enable them to be promoted to the higher grades during the three-year agreement. Furthermore, workers who were de-graded earning above the grade’s maximum complained that they have not received annual wage increases since 2003 because employers claimed that they were already above the maximum.

**Conclusion**

The study on workers, wages and livelihoods is a significant and necessary to explore reproductive capacity of capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa and possibilities for class struggle on shop floor and in communities. My research claim is that wage income is the locus around which livelihoods (forms of reproduction) are mobilised across rural-urban divide. One would argue that the crisis in South Africa is not a crisis of accumulation, but a crisis of reproduction (subsistence and survival). This research
furthermore shows complexities in how concrete economic, political and social conditions of workers and their households and concrete class struggles play out on shop floor in everyday life. Recent research on work and livelihoods of African working class households in post apartheid South Africa paint a bleak picture for both employed and unemployed households (Barchiesi, 2011; Kenny, 2004, 2005; Mosoetsa, 2011). While Mosoetsa (2011) shows struggles for survival of unemployed households in townships of KZN, Kenny (2004) highlights the plight of livelihoods of retail working women and the inability of trade unions to protect workers and their households from the onslaught of flexibility. Barchiesi (2011) revisits the East Rand, once bastion of manufacturing in for most of the 20th century, he shows how both permanent (unionised) workers and flexible workers and unemployed working class experience precariousness in post apartheid South Africa.

The research also shows that 15 years into the transition many things remain unchanged, or at least workers perceive things as unchanged, especially their conditions of work and their relations in production. The factory regimes in Dunlop have not progressed from what Von Holdt (2003) and Webster and Von Holdt (2005) call apartheid workplace regimes. The research shows that these factory regimes explain worker valorisation which precipitates militancy and antagonism towards factory management. This militancy and antagonism are further accentuated by a perceived lack of transformation in management in line with national equity priorities. Worker militancy is constructed by invoking the popular history of trade unions and through shop-floor socialisation of new and younger workers by their older familial networks (Bhengu, 2010b). While these recruitment networks were initially used to entrench a traditionally docile workforce, they have now been transformed by workers to socialise new workers into collective worker consciousness.

The paper also develops a discussion of the role of trade unions and the ensuing contradictions in trade union. These contradictions reflect a diversion in interests of the various stakeholders, especially within these centralised trade-union structures. Some of the contradictions represent struggles and contestations for power within trade unions and within the broader scope of progressive movements in post apartheid South Africa.

Lastly, the research shows the complexities in presenting workers’ narratives (Bhengu, 2010). This paper agrees with Sitas (2004) that the narratives of workers’ lives and their struggles are not simple, neat, straightforward and predictable, as generalist theorists would argue. Instead, they are complex and articulated with class, race, gender, rural-urban milieu, culture, struggle, violence and identity-making meaning in everyday life. This paper reflects on a research process that attempts to revisit and engage with the local in order to generate an understanding of the general.

1 A migrant labour identity constitutes both objective conditions of workers at Dunlop as well as subjective consciousness and identity that workers invoke in everyday life.
2 Besides the Tyre Industry, NUMSA-led strikes almost brought the entire Auto supply-chain (including Car manufacture and assembly industry, Motor parts and components industry, Tyre manufacture industry and Engineering industry) to a standstill. Between June and September last year, the Auto supply-chain was reeling from deadlocked wage negotiations, threats of industrial action, and industrial action. Furthermore, there were strikes in the Petrochemical sector as well as the Petroleum retail sectors. Last year saw protracted strikes in the public sector and the security sector. All these strikes were organised through trade unions, obviously with varying levels of organisation and/or success.
Popular memory is an endless construct of narratives of working-life grievances or *ukuhala* (pain) among workers, using mainly accounts from senior workers. He argues that, whether particular events recounted are true reflections of experiences or not, whether these narratives are informed by rumour and/or exaggeration, nonetheless these accounts are woven into an array of expectations over time to taint the fabric of every worker.

During his brief speech this former worker narrated popular memories of struggles they had waged as workers and the specific role MAWU and later NUMSA played in waging war on the exploitation and oppression that workers faced at Dunlop. In the process of doing this he kept mentioning names of older workers and shop stewards who were present in the meeting, almost as if to confirm that the narratives he told were real.

One would postulate that this socialisation into militant identity and consciousness is further accelerated at Dunlop by the internal labour-market dynamics in the firm. Sitas (1986, 1989, 1996 and 2002) gives accounts of a long history of migrant labour and a specific history of recruitment of workers through traditional authorities in various regions of the former Province of Natal. Furthermore, Dunlop has well-entrenched familial and intergenerational recruitment patterns of its workforce, resulting in a significant number of current workers at Dunlop becoming second-, some even third- and fourth-generation Dunlop workers within their families. Even today, a significant number of older workers have sons, nephews, younger brothers and sons-in-law working with them. One finds that the same system is used by workers to reproduce militant workers.

My conversations with Dunlop workers and with NUMSA officials helped me understand some of the dynamics about centralised and national trade unions in general. For example, NUMSA’s regional office as a centralised trade union represents an array of workers from Metal and Steel industries, to a wide range of Auto-related industries, to a range of Rubber industries, especially tyres as well as engineering industries. Furthermore, the regional office is constituted by a range of local representatives spreading across the KZN province. Some local unions, by virtue of their size, wield an influence in the regional office, but also some industries and even firms may wield an influence on the priorities of overstretched union organisers.

At the end of October, Dunlop workers reached their cycle of electing new shop stewards for the 2007–2011 cycle. At first, a number of workers wanted these elections to be postponed until all outstanding issues from agreements not yet implemented by the employer to grading problems and problems of labour brokers were honoured. Eventually, when the regional organiser laid down the law, workers went ahead with elections, which were administered by the local organiser, who used to be a chairperson of shop stewards in Ladysmith. There was controversy over the election process, the counting process as well as the leaking of results to management before they were given to workers. The leaked election results claimed that some of the shop stewards whom management wanted removed had indeed lost the election. The workers were infuriated and they banned the organiser from entering Dunlop’s premises forever. In one of the meetings during this fracas the organiser insisted on coming to the workers’ meeting despite a warning that workers had said categorically that they never wanted to see him. I asked a few workers why workers are so angry with this organiser? They told me a long story, relating to the activities of this organiser while he was still a shop steward at Dunlop at Ladysmith. In these conversations workers even related to me that they have their own forms of intelligence and are aware of workers within their ranks who report proceedings of their meetings to management, and workers who collude with management on various issues.
References


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